



Wild Globe Travel Consultancy

Tailored Wildlife, Wilderness and Adventure Travel Across the Globe.

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ITALY AND SWITZERLAND

Date - August 2020

Duration - 20 Days

Destinations

Turin - Gran Paradiso National Park - Valsavarenche - Pont - Stelvio National Park - Trafoi - Swiss National Park - Zerne - Bolzano - Ortisei - Pontives - Val di Funes - Cortina d'Ampezzo - Bologna - San Marino - Siena - Grosseto - Alberese - Maremma Natural Park - Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise National Park - Pescasseroli - Opi - Bisegna - San Sebastiano dei Marsi - Ortona dei Marsi - Villetta Barrea - Alfedena - Rome

Trip Overview

As I continue to revisit Europe's premier wildlife destinations, as well as a few new ones, this tour was originally due to take place in early June, but by then coronavirus had ravaged much of the continent and I had no choice but to postpone this and a number of other research trips. With the death toll rising and the pandemic accelerating across most of the globe, I did at one stage consider that it may not be possible to travel at all this year and I was already making plans for 2021 when the situation began to improve in Europe and I realised that we may have a short summer window in which to operate. As the disease continued to spread further afield and countries rushed to close their borders, it was going to be almost impossible to travel much further afield than Europe, but this was still a wonderful opportunity during an extremely challenging time and I started to look at the possibility of adapting some of the tours I had been forced to delay. Italy was one of these and although I would never generally visit this or any number of European countries during the busy summer months of July and August, when tourist numbers peak across much of the continent, the vast majority of the



tour was already in place and I did not have a great deal of time to plan much of an alternative. Obviously the success or otherwise of the tour was also of only partial interest to me by this stage and I was instead far more interested in just getting back to what I do and spending time in the field again. That said, the fact remains that timing is often an essential element in scheduling a wildlife tour and that was certainly the case on this occasion, partly due to the heaving crowds, which will always significantly lessen your chances of finding an animal, but more because some of the main target species are less likely to be observed later in the summer. In June, for example, alpine ibex and northern chamois are still feeding at lower elevations and are very easy to watch at several well known destinations within both the Italian and Swiss Alps. However, by August much of the high mountain snow has disappeared and these alpine specialists are now able to graze undisturbed at considerably higher altitudes. This can be the difference between a great close view or a poor distant one or, to put it in some perspective in terms of being able to actually locate an animal, a twenty minute drive in comparison to a seventeen-and-a-half hour hike, which would be the case for me in order to take the photograph that appears at the beginning of this trip report. Given the global crisis and how fortunate I was even to be travelling again, these concerns were less important to me than would normally be the case, but the tour was certainly far less successful than it would have been in its original June slot and I had to work considerably harder for most of my sightings. It was certainly a small price to pay for such freedom after a more than testing few months and in reality there is never really a bad time to visit Italy, which remains a stunningly beautiful country, not only regarding its numerous natural wonders, but also in terms of its historic buildings and charming medieval towns, many of which are walled and fortified. If you can somehow look beyond the posturing young men, most of whom appear to transform into senseless Latin caricatures as soon as they get behind the wheel of a car, then Italy is undoubtedly one of Europe's gems and I would have preferred to spend far longer than the three weeks I had available. Certainly the tour was a little rushed at times and I was not able to include all of the destinations I had originally hoped, particularly Sardinia, which I will now add to my next visit. As I was on my own throughout, the tour would also suffer somewhat at night, as it is very difficult to drive safely whilst spotlighting and almost impossible in these driving conditions, with people driving like maniacs even within the national parks. In just the last year, two Marsican brown bears have been killed by speeding motorists within Abruzzo and when the drivers were not actually driving too fast, they were trying to and would flash their lights and blast their horns in an attempt to get the car ahead to go faster, which more often than not would be me looking for wildlife. I did spend time searching for minor roads that were likely to be



fairly quiet in the evening, but every region was overflowing with relieved visitors escaping quarantine and even the rural roads were busy well beyond midnight. Entirely understandable of course and a few brief night walks aside, I largely concentrated my efforts during the day. Whilst this undoubtedly reduced any chances of encountering various nocturnal species, I did have some limited success at night and was still able to spend long periods in the field, as I was always out before first light and never returned until well after dusk. The tour itself was split into three main sections, ten days or so in the Alps followed by a short interlude in stunning Tuscany and then almost a week at the famous Abruzzo National Park or, to give it its full name, Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise National Park. My initial stay in the mountains would include two main destinations in the Italian Alps, Gran Paradiso National Park and Stelvio National Park, and one in the Swiss Alps, rather imaginatively entitled Swiss National Park, which happens to be the only national park in the entire country. Italy has 25 by way of comparison and the United Kingdom fifteen, although they are national parks in name only in the UK and little concession is made to the wildlife that inhabits them. For those who are not aware, the Alps are the foremost mountain range in Europe and stretch for around 1,200 kilometres across eight countries, rising from France in the west to Slovenia in the east. At 4,808 metres, the much celebrated and equally breathtaking Mont Blanc is the highest mountain in both the Alps and Western Europe and in all, this dramatic range includes a staggering 537 mountains that tower above 3,000 metres. My time among these eternal massifs would commence with views of Mont Blanc from Gran Paradiso, indeed, there is a well known hiking trail that connects these two behemoths, and conclude with a short stay in the Dolomites, which I knew would be as much about exploring the region as looking for wildlife, given the inevitable throngs at one of Italy's most popular tourist destinations. To be fair, although two or three treks were completely ruined by literally hordes of visitors, I was largely able to avoid the madding crowds that gathered at almost every location by beginning all of my hikes early in the morning and by generally choosing the more difficult trails that most tourists would never think to explore. Of course the real hikers, Europeans raised in these exacting alpine conditions who traverse these steep trails as a way of life, would often make my efforts appear tardy and would soon overtake me, particularly on the demanding sheer ascents. However, there were relatively few of these committed and almost professional hikers and even these were not prepared to spend as long on the mountains as I was. Time was not overly a factor for me and as such I was usually able to outlast more or less everyone else and search for wildlife quietly on my own. It was still not ideal, as a great deal of time was lost on almost a daily basis and obviously animals are far harder to observe in areas where there is a lot of human activity and the inevitable accompanying noise, but it was unquestionably better than the alternative and I was able to enjoy a reasonable amount of success despite the various restrictions. Whilst there are several hundred kilometres between Gran Paradiso and my next two destinations, I would be searching within similar terrain at each and could expect to encounter similar species. Indeed, my main targets for this entire first section of the tour were alpine ibex and northern chamois, as well as the alpine marmots that I was more or less guaranteed to see at every major location. How close I would get to either at this time of year remained to be seen, but I was particularly keen to photograph the ibex, as these resilient mountain specialists endure in some of the most inhospitable conditions imaginable and over the years I have spent time among all five distinct species in the high places of the world. This specific type only occurs in the Alps and I already knew that by this stage of the summer these supremely adapted creatures would have returned to the rugged higher elevations they are known to favour and that I was consequently about to undertake at least a few fairly strenuous hikes. This certainly proved to be the case and at both Gran Paradiso and Stelvio I spent almost every daylight hour dragging myself up steep mountain paths and scanning the distant peaks for any sign of life. I have stopped using a spotting scope entirely now, as I have very little interest in watching something perhaps two kilometres away and instead prefer to scan with just my binoculars. Depending of course on the situation and the species involved, I generally try to get as close as possible to an animal, but binoculars are okay and if I can initially pick a creature up using these, I can also usually see them with my naked eye, which is always my aim. In this sense I

was moderately successful at both national parks, as hours of scanning were rewarded with distant views of small herds of ibex and closer views of chamois, which I also encountered at lower elevations, occasionally within the forest as I descended each evening. Sadly, although I could see them well enough, the ibex were never accessible, at least not without actual climbing equipment, and were too far away for even reasonable photographs. As long as I am confident that I am not disturbing their natural behaviour, I will always try more or less anything to reach an animal if I can see it, but I just had no way of getting to these remote herds and knew that my last realistic opportunity would occur when I crossed the border to spend a couple of days in Switzerland. Meanwhile, I had slightly more success with a few other species, including marmots, which could definitely be described as ubiquitous, although even some of these were less relaxed than normal as a result of the massively increased visitor numbers. There was no escaping the fact that



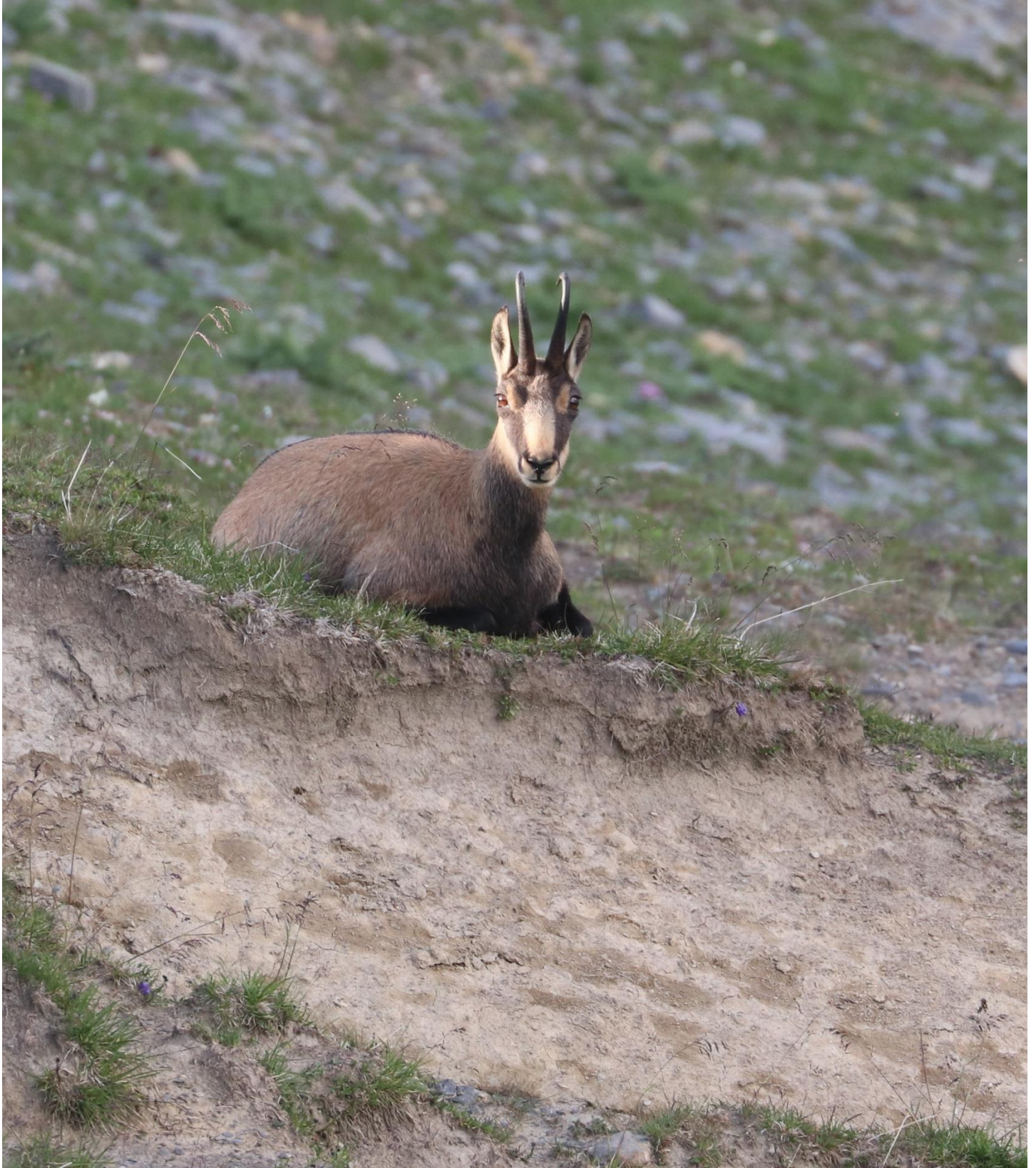
the corresponding disruption was impacting my tour and including the three main alpine targets, I was destined to observe just seven different species during my entire ten-day stay in the mountains, adding both red and roe deer to a solitary red squirrel sighting and a similarly lone red fox encounter. It would have been somewhat disappointing in normal circumstances, but life had long ceased to be normal and, in any case, nature constantly finds ways of surprising you. For every minor frustration there is always an unexpected wonder just waiting to be discovered and sometimes it is just a question of appreciating what you have been fortunate enough to experience. At Gran Paradiso it was a striking asp viper and at Stelvio a majestic bearded vulture, soaring more or less directly beside me as I stood at the very summit of the spectacular pass. Having said that, I was still extremely keen to try for a better view of the ibex and when I moved on, a helpful guide at Swiss National Park advised that one particular hike would provide me with the best opportunity. Apparently it was a fairly demanding climb and I would need to get to the top early in the morning, before the ibex moved beyond the area where they were normally spotted and could possibly be approached. I therefore set out before dawn and began a rather breathless ascent in the dark. I was acutely aware that the entire exercise could easily prove to be unproductive, as I only had a general idea of where the ibex might be found and an even vaguer notion of when they were likely to disperse, which I had been informed constantly varies. I therefore probably spent more time scanning as I approached the summit than I should and this delay could have been disastrous, as two hikers passed me a short distance before I reached the top and when I finally arrived at what looked to be the right area, there was no sign of any ibex. I will never know if the hikers scared them off or if I would have missed them anyway, but after exploring the plateau for several hours, I had to finally accept that they were gone. I now had the choice of either giving up and trudging all the way back in defeat or waiting at the top for the entire day in the not unreasonable hope that the ibex would return that evening to graze. This is relatively common behaviour for many mammal species, particularly in open areas

where they feel vulnerable during the day, and as such I was confident that if I could choose the right spot, I had a more than realistic chance of still finding the ibex. The problem was, I had no real idea where the right spot was and spent several hours assessing the various options on a myriad of mountain trails. Ultimately I selected a sheltered patch with a 360 degree panoramic view, which provided the best possible visibility of the largest possible area. If they appeared elsewhere I would almost certainly miss them and with that in mind I settled down to wait. After more than three hours of patiently scanning and countless chamois and red deer false alarms, I eventually noticed a stick on the distant horizon that I could not remember seeing previously. This is one of the ways that I always find animals, as the landscape itself rarely moves and you immediately notice when something is suddenly out of place or just looks wrong. Having stared at the same setting for so long, this stick clearly did not belong and as I zoomed in on the monitor of my camera, I could see that it was actually an ibex horn jutting up above the rocks and that at least the first part of my plan had paid off. The second was to get close enough for a great view without binoculars and hopefully a decent picture, but the one animal that I could see was still a distant speck and I knew that if I moved now, I would almost certainly ruin my chances. Instead, I waited silently and



even resisted the temptation to move when the ibex I had been watching disappeared for several minutes. There were still around two hours of good daylight remaining when it returned and over the next hour or so another five ibex emerged and began grazing their way slowly in my direction. Ideally I would have waited for them to come to me, but I could tell that I would lose the light well before they arrived and consequently made the decision that I would finally have to gamble and begin moving towards them. As always, I did so by initially backing away and taking a longer route round, as I rarely approach animals directly and never before I have been able to assess how nervous they are. I was fortunate on this occasion, as the ibex appeared to be calm enough and even ignored the few departing chamois that I had to carefully navigate in order to reach them. Having tried for more than a week and with the light now fading, I was able to get to within twenty metres of these magnificent creatures, which were clearly as aware of my presence, as they were undisturbed by it. These are the exhilarating moments that make all of the effort worthwhile and with lightning flashing in the distance and a storm rapidly approaching, I knew that I would now have to attempt to traverse my way off the mountain in the dark. As it was, I barely noticed the three-hour trek down and instead remember thinking how wonderful it was to be doing what I love doing again. In stark contrast, wildlife was largely conspicuous by its absence during my brief interlude in the Dolomites, which is one of the most popular holiday destinations for Italians and was by far the busiest area I would visit. The abundant marmots aside,

I did see a few chamois and one resplendent ibex, perched dramatically and in time honoured fashion at the very pinnacle of one rugged peak. However, these were on a helicopter flight that I had taken to get a better idea of the region and my only significant sightings on foot were of golden eagles. Still enchanting of course, to be able to watch these remarkable raptors dancing on the thermals amid such spectacular scenery and although most of my long hikes were not productive in terms of wildlife, it was important that I refamiliarised myself with at least part of such a renowned destination, particularly as clients often want to combine wildlife viewing with other activities and interests. In Europe this will often include prominent cultural sites and as such Italy is officially second to none, not only on this continent, but across the globe, at least according to UNESCO, which credits this ancient realm with an incredible 50 cultural World Heritage Sites, far more than any other country on the planet. With its fabulous architecture, mind



blowing art and fascinating historical sites, Italy provides more cultural opportunities than it would be possible to do justice to in a lifetime and almost everywhere you drive you encounter elaborate churches, evocative hillside castles, grand manor houses and impressive fortified towns. Rome is obviously one of the cultural centres of the world, as is Florence, the birthplace of the Renaissance, and other equally notable options include Milan, Venice, Padua, Verona, Pompeii, Palermo and of course the region of Tuscany, which is popular with Italians and foreign visitors alike. The Dolomites is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site, but a natural site as opposed to a cultural one, which you immediately understand as soon as you arrive at what is a truly breathtaking destination. As part of the Alps, the Dolomites actually covers a far larger area than most people realise and than I would have time to visit, hence my exciting aerial jaunt to get some idea of the scale of this natural masterpiece. The rest of my time was devoted to far



more prosaic activities, as I explored the mountain trails on foot and visited a few of the spectacular alpine lakes that the area is famous for, as well as Tre Cime di Lavaredo or the Three Peaks of Lavaredo, one of the most photographed landmarks in the region. There are several hikes around these three imposing massifs, some more interesting than others and I probably should have chosen one of the shorter trails considering I had arrived late in the afternoon and was consequently pushed for time, particularly as the weather was increasingly volatile during my stay and there had been a violent storm the previous evening. As it was, and as I always tend to do, I took the more adventurous option and decided that I would take a longer looping trail in order to see as much of this dramatic landscape as possible, even if it meant having to complete the last section in the dark. I set off with the thought that only an



idiot begins a long mountain hike at this time of day and in such unsettled conditions, but it was intermittently sunny at the time and any negative considerations were soon forgotten as I lost myself amid the thoroughly beguiling scenery. Three hours later, as the light began to fade, I was starting to question the wisdom of my decision and an hour further on, with no end in sight and the rain starting to fall, I possibly accepted that my initial optimism had perhaps been a tad rash. With forks of lightning now illuminating the night sky and claps of thunder crashing overhead, the trail unexpectedly divided in two and I had to guess which path would lead me back as quickly as possible. I made a decision based entirely on instinct and thankfully it was the right one, as I was soon able to make out the distant light of the visitor centre and after about six hours in all I was back in the comfort of my car. This was just as well, as the storm that followed was one of the most severe I have experienced and at one stage the rain became so torrential that drivers were pulling over at the side of the road to wait for it to ease. When Italian drivers are doing this, you know that the conditions must be bad and I have to admit I was relieved that I was not still attempting to brave the elements out on the mountain. That said, it was at least a



fittingly momentous way to conclude my time in both the Dolomites and the Alps and the next morning I began the long drive south to Tuscany, stopping in San Marino for a leisurely lunch at the three fortified towers of Monte Titano, or Mount Titan as it translates. My sojourn in Tuscany would be all too brief, as I had only included this astoundingly beautiful region in order to visit Maremma Natural Park, which I had two full days to explore before I moved on to Abruzzo. This area is probably the best in Italy for fallow deer, as well as an introduced population of coypu, and I was also hoping to encounter a crested porcupine, as they are apparently fairly common here. If time allowed, I would also get to the small Orbetello Nature Reserve, which protects the important lagoon of the same name and is managed by the World Wildlife Fund. My original intention was to only visit during the day, but the roads were too busy to spotlight around Maremma and I therefore also spent a couple of hours walking here at night, although without any substantial success. In fact, whilst Maremma is certainly a gorgeous park and I enjoyed three fabulous hikes there, neither of these reserves were overly productive and most of my encounters occurred beyond the officially protected areas, including four on my first evening in the area, before I had even reached Maremma. Having spotted a fine male fallow deer at the side of the road within minutes of leaving the motorway, I quickly located a colony of coypu and spent the last of the daylight watching them swimming and



feeding around their burrows at the side of the river. It was a wonderfully relaxing way to end the day after a long journey and within just a few metres of the coypu, I chanced upon my first hare of the tour, having unfortunately, and I must admit rather unexpectedly, failed to see a mountain hare in the Alps. There are obviously no mountain hares in Tuscany, but in addition to the common European hares found all over Italy, the Corsican hare also occurs in this region. In fact, Maremma is believed to be roughly the most northerly extreme of its range, which extends all the way south to the coast and beyond to Sicily. As far as I was concerned, this particular animal was a European hare and whilst I saw a lot of hares at both Maremma and later on at Abruzzo, some of which were too far away to positively identify, I honestly cannot say that any of them looked any different to the normal European variety. It may well be that I did observe the Corsican species at distance without realising it, but even the experienced guides I discussed the matter with at Abruzzo are unable to tell them apart and it would probably make sense to visit Sicily if you want to be entirely certain you have seen a genuine Corsican hare, as the European version does not exist on that captivating island. Having seen both species previously, I was just happy to have added another new animal at that late stage and did consider that this was likely to be my last sighting of the day, at least until I went spotlighting later that evening. However, as the light finally ebbed and I drove towards my hotel, I was thrilled to spot a herd of ten wild boar emerging from the vegetation. I have always had a high regard for these splendid and hugely significant creatures, both as tremendous ecological engineers and as a vital food source to a huge variety of predators across the globe, but they have been persecuted across much of Europe since the outbreak of African Swine Fever in 2007, unnecessarily so it must be added, and they are now far more difficult to observe in a number of countries. Fortunately they appear to be thriving in at least certain parts of Italy and I would go on to see many more at Abruzzo. Whilst four new species in little more than an hour at a new destination was certainly a superb start, Maremma itself was just too busy to be productive and over the next two days the sightings would basically consist of a few fallow and roe deer, more hares, a solitary wild boar and two red foxes, including a very young and awfully sweet cub. The majority of these were again viewed beyond the actual park, which was a shame in many ways, as Maremma is an incredibly picturesque reserve and is unlike any I have visited before. I thoroughly enjoyed exploring its diverse landscapes and the dramatic change in temperature from the mountains was particularly welcome, as Tuscany was swelteringly hot during my stay and on one hike I was unable to resist the temptation and dived into the Mediterranean for a refreshing swim. Given how pleasant the days were, even without an abundance of wildlife, the biggest disappointment was probably at night, as even the small rural roads remained busy until late and it was impossible to search for nocturnal mammals with any confidence or, if I am entirely honest, a great deal of enjoyment. I would have been unbelievably fortunate to have encountered a porcupine in these conditions, especially without any local knowledge or specific guidance, but my efforts were ultimately rewarded with a characteristically furtive beech marten on my final night, so a fifth new species for the area and the twelfth in all of the trip. Slow going in many ways, but I always knew that I had saved the best for last and that I now had almost a full week at Abruzzo National Park, which protects some of the last tracts of Europe's medieval beech forest and is probably the premier wildlife destination in all of Italy. Whilst I was unquestionably looking forward to exploring such a significant and enduring ancient ecosystem, I was also hoping to observe the two species that Abruzzo is renowned for, the Marsican brown bear subspecies, which is the symbol of the park and is alluded to throughout, and the southern or Pyrenean chamois, which only occurs elsewhere in northern Spain and the Pyrenees mountain range on the border between France and Spain. A wolf would have also been most welcome and they are observed at least reasonably regularly here. Indeed, part of the 2019 BBC documentary series 'Seven Worlds, One Planet' was filmed at Abruzzo and featured a pack of wolves hunting and killing a red deer, only to be chased away by the sheepdogs used to guard the local flocks. As the doyen of wildlife filmmaking David Attenborough explained, much of Europe's wildlife has been pushed into tiny fragmented pockets and in many cases is now forced to share habitat with burgeoning human populations, usually to the detriment of the wildlife. This is certainly the case at Abruzzo, which

has several villages scattered throughout its protected area, including Pescasseroli, the park headquarters and home to a celebrated fountain featuring two strikingly handsome bronze bear heads. Of my two main targets, I knew the bear was likely to be the most difficult and would probably dominate my time, as there are very few Marsican bears remaining, estimates range between 40 and 60 depending on the source, within a relatively big area. That said, Abruzzo is not sufficiently large to support a greatly increased bear population and the only way to guarantee the survival of this national treasure, which many people consider to be a unique species, is to extend its protected range well beyond this one national park. The chamois would be far more straightforward, if scaling the



summit of Monte Amaro can be considered straightforward, as sightings are more or less guaranteed towards the apex of this fairly demanding hike. At 2,793 metres Monte Amaro is the highest point of the vast Maiella plateau and the second highest peak in the Apennines, a mountain range that stretches almost the entire length of Italy from the Alps in the north to the southern coast and now thought to also incorporate the mountainous northern regions of Sicily. Abruzzo is nestled within the Central Apennines and although there are now estimated to be more than 2,000 chamois in the general region, the species was almost hunted to extinction by the end of the Second World War. Thankfully, the handful of animals remaining were protected within the park and later a conservation initiative was launched that is sometimes referred to as 'Operation 2000', given that the intention was for at least 2,000 chamois to be inhabiting all local peaks above 2,000 metres by the year 2000. I understand that this was achieved and in all there are now thought to be in the region of 50,000 southern chamois across the three major territories in which they occur. I had reserved a full day to hopefully photograph at least a few of those on the Monte Amaro hike and the rest of my time would be spent exploring the park, which would basically mean looking for bears. Given how crowded the area was bound to be, I was not initially that confident of my chances, but as I drove through the tiny hillside village of San Sebastiano dei Marsi, literally within a few minutes of my arrival and before I had even reached my accommodation, I noticed a fairly large gathering, including several locals with binoculars and impressive camera equipment. In a scene reminiscent of nervous partisans waiting for an enemy convoy to arrive, all eyes and lenses were trained out across the hills, which I knew must mean only one thing...a bear! Technically a wolf was also a possibility, but wolves generally evaporate across a landscape and not linger within it, whereas a bear will more or less stay forever if there is food around. There is also a special affinity for bears here and from the mood and murmurs of the crowd, I had a feeling that one of their own had been spotted. I quickly joined the growing throng at the side of the road and began scanning, trying to confirm what had been seen and exactly where, as there are relatively few English speakers in rural Italy and it took me several minutes to confirm that a bear had indeed been glimpsed and that everyone was waiting for it to reappear. We did not have to wait too long before a lady called out excitedly beside me and I moved my binoculars into the position that she was frantically indicating, just in time to see a bear walk clearly into view. Whilst it was a brief sighting, no more than a few seconds as the bear shambled across a clearing before disappearing into the forest, to have encountered a Marsican brown bear within an hour or so of my arrival was almost unbelievable

and I was exceedingly grateful to this eagle-eyed lady, as much for the fact that she was sitting next to me as anything else, as only a handful of the expectant villagers had been able to pick up the bear before it again moved out of sight. We waited until dusk to see if it might reappear and although it did not, I moved on with renewed confidence, given that I had arranged several bear activities for the coming week and knew that I also now had the option of visiting this village at around the same time every evening, just in case the bear returned. As it was, and to once again highlight the entirely unpredictable nature of wildlife viewing, I would not see another bear during my entire stay and should really have just sat and waited in comfort at a café at San Sebastiano, as the very next day, whilst I was involved in a long and utterly unproductive hike elsewhere, a bear, known locally as Amarena, walked through the ancient cobblestone village with her four small cubs in tow. As I was traipsing up and down a seemingly endless succession of torturous mountain trails, villagers were filming the extraordinary event on their mobile phones and during the course of the week



Amarena returned to the surrounding area on several occasions, but never while I was there, despite the fact that I returned each day and on some occasions in both the morning and evening. It was just one of those impossible situations when you have no idea whether to stick or twist, as I could not risk spending my one week at Abruzzo sitting staring at the same view, but equally, as the week progressed, my chances of seeing another bear became increasingly less likely. I was not helped by the fact that most of the best trails had to be searched as part of a group, as you have to use an authorised guide during the busiest months of the year at Abruzzo, to ensure that the resident wildlife is not unduly disturbed. This is fine in principle, but in practice the local operators are too greedy and allow too many people to join each tour, up to twenty in some cases, which is probably far more invasive than a controlled number of individuals or small groups walking independently. If the group tours that I joined are in any way typical, then that is certainly the case, as most of the participants talked loudly throughout and when I pointed out a herd of red deer in the distance, several people stood up and began walking directly towards them with cameras. Rather unsurprisingly the deer instantly scattered and I knew it was going to take a miracle to see a bear in these conditions, particularly as the guides said absolutely nothing and were more concerned

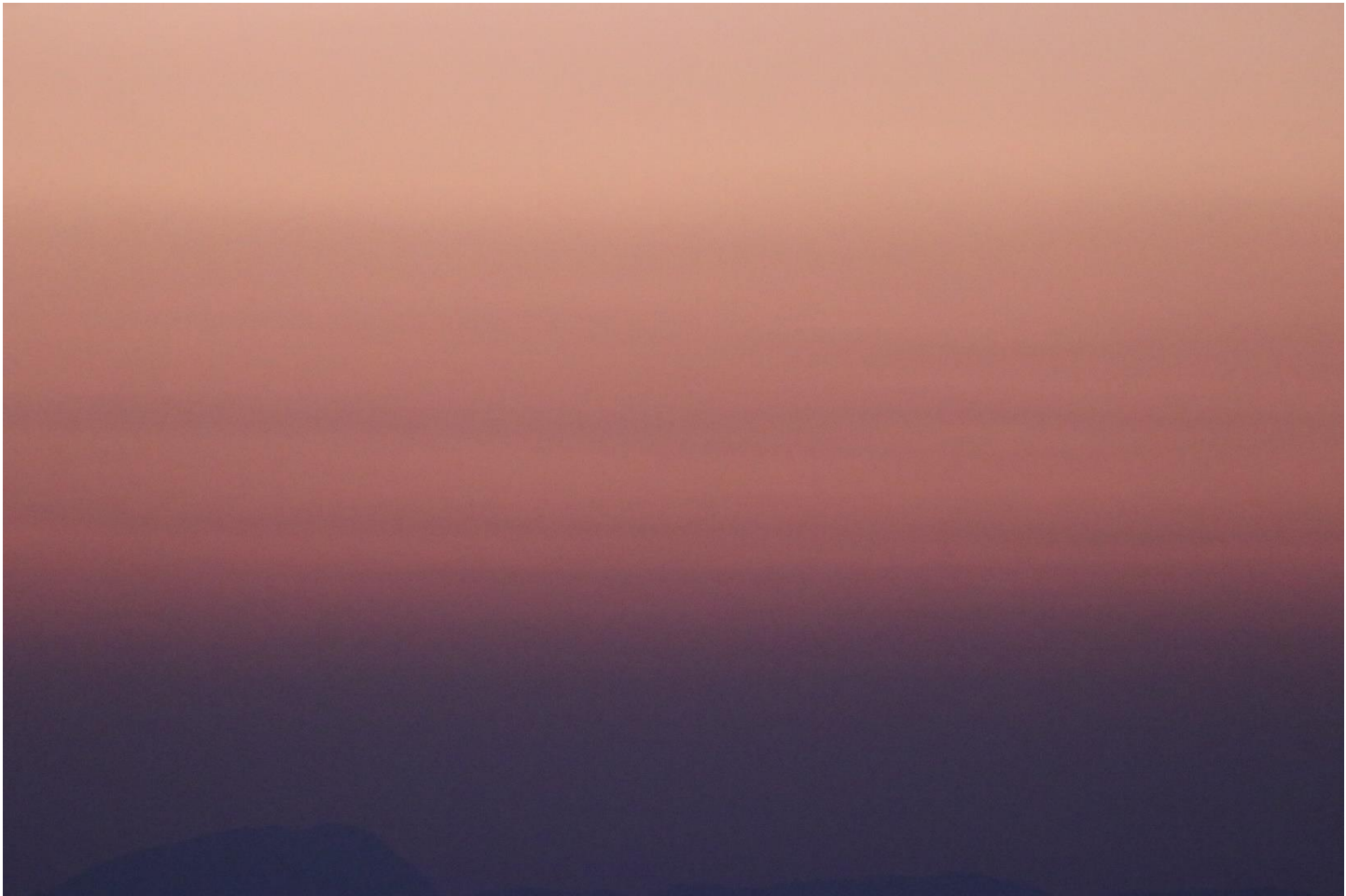
with the weather, moving the entire group down off the mountain at the first sign of rain, despite an absence of lightning. All of the bear tours were similarly disappointing, but thankfully, the chamois Monte Amaro expedition was significantly better, as the walk is simply too exacting for the inexperienced general tourists who somehow find themselves searching for bears and I found myself among a small group of hikers who more knew how to behave on the mountain and around animals. I was the only member more interested in finding the chamois than actually making the summit and although the view from the very pinnacle of Monte Amaro was unquestionably dramatic, as was the ascent itself, I was satisfied long before we reached the top, having been able to approach to within a few metres of several southern chamois. Described, perhaps rather fancifully considering there are only two distinct species, as the world's most beautiful chamois, the Apennines variety is certainly distinctive and I would see far more of these majestic



animals on the journey down, several hundred in fact. They were actually one of the major highlights of the trip and despite a few frustratingly ineffective tours and the inevitable disappointment of missing the gorgeous Amarena and her four adorable cubs, I would have certainly accepted one sighting of each of the two mammals that Abruzzo is synonymous with. Considering that the vast majority of visitors never even see a bear, a pack of wolves would have been almost asking too much and after very long days in the field, I probably did not spend long enough out at night to give myself the best possible chance. I did see a lot of signs of these apex predators, including scat and reasonably fresh tracks, but they eluded me on this occasion, which is no bad thing, as wolves, of all wild creatures, should never be easy to find. Except from the many reckless drivers of course, wolves and bears are protected at Abruzzo, but hunting still occurs here and it is currently permitted to hunt deer, wild boar, hares and foxes, as well as a variety of birds. However, it is forbidden to hunt in areas that are known to contain bears, which is probably why I encountered so many boar while specifically searching for bears, in one case a herd of almost 30 and another well beyond that number, including close to twenty diminutive piglets. Considering that foxes cannot be eaten, it is an immense shame that they can be killed within a national park,

although lots of people do still have affection for these routinely persecuted animals and I saw a number being fed at the side of the road. Sadly, as I tried to explain to one woman throwing cheese to a tiny cub from her car, fed foxes are often dead foxes and you should never feed genuinely wild foxes, certainly not in the middle of the road. These are not urban foxes that you can leave food out for in your garden and heartbreakingly during the course of my stay, I discovered several dead cubs, some of which I knew had been encouraged towards the road and had simply stepped out in front of the wrong vehicle. I avoided the same animals myself at night, whilst looking for a variety of nocturnal predators, including wolves of course and several mustelids, the most diverse carnivorous mammal family and a particular favourite of mine. Having seen a beech marten earlier in the trip and ignoring the rare possibility of observing an otter while driving, there were three likely mustelids remaining at Abruzzo and I very nearly achieved all three. In fact I probably did, as I enjoyed an excellent view of a pine marten dashing across the road in my headlights and an equally good look at a solitary Eurasian badger snuffling in the undergrowth beside the road. A European polecat would have completed the carnivorous triumvirate and I am fairly certain that one scurried out in front of me in the rain, before disappearing down a steep bank and into the night. Running, it had to be polecat, but I did not see it well enough in the dark and the rain to be entirely certain and have not therefore included it on my confirmed list of mammal sightings. This occurs on almost every tour and in Italy I also encountered a number of rodents that I was not able to take pictures of in order to formally identify and bats, which I very rarely attempt to identify, regardless of whether I have photographs or not. In all, around 70 mammals have been recorded at Abruzzo and with more than 700 kilometres of trails available, not to mention some of the most breathtaking scenery imaginable, the park remains one of the foremost in all of Europe, although I would definitely recommend visiting beyond the heaving summer months of July and August. I had no choice on this occasion of course and was simply happy to be free to explore again after months of captivity. Regrettably, the summer window was never likely to be a great deal more than a brief respite, as the situation was always going to deteriorate as soon as hundreds of millions of people left the safety of their own homes and began to lead at least some semblance of normal life. For me, that will always mean exploring the wild places of this extraordinarily beautiful planet and if this was to be my only chance to breathe for the foreseeable future, then I left Italy happy in the knowledge that I had taken a deep and life affirming gulp.





No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	A single sighting in the alps, two at Maremma and multiple views at Abruzzo.
2	Brown Bear	<i>Ursus arctos</i>	One fleeting sighting at Abruzzo.
3	Beech Marten	<i>Martes foina</i>	Brief view at the side of the road near Maremma.
4	European Pine Marten	<i>Martes martes</i>	Running across the road in the headlights at Abruzzo.
5	Eurasian Badger	<i>Meles meles</i>	A solitary animal at night at Abruzzo.
6	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	First observed at Stelvio and then routinely everywhere except the Dolomites.
7	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	Encountered at every Italian destination excluding the Dolomites and not seen in Switzerland.
8	Fallow Deer	<i>Dama dama</i>	Low numbers in and around Maremma.
9	Southern Chamois	<i>Rupicapra pyrenaica</i>	Several hundred on one mountain hike at Abruzzo.
10	Northern Chamois	<i>Rupicapra rupicapra</i>	Observed at every major destination in the Alps.
11	Alpine Ibex	<i>Capra ibex</i>	Distant sightings at Gran Paradiso and Stelvio and a close encounter with a small herd at Swiss National Park.
12	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>	First observed at Maremma and large numbers encountered at Abruzzo.
13	European Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>	Irregular encounters at Maremma and Abruzzo.
14	Alpine Marmot	<i>Marmota marmota</i>	Common, or relatively so, at every destination in the Alps.
15	Eurasian Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>	Solitary encounter at Gran Paradiso.
16	Coypu	<i>Myocastor coypus</i>	Several sightings in one area near Maremma.



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