

# Italy – Sicily at Leisure

## Heart of the Mediterranean

**Saturday 14 April - Saturday 21 April 2018**

Leaders: Nicola Scatassi and local guides

2018 Cost: **£2,099** single room supplement **£130**



**S**icily is located in the heart of the Mediterranean, and in many ways it epitomises its characteristics, with its sunny beaches, a very pleasant climate all year round, gardens and orchards full of flowers and vegetables, and its relaxed way of life. Yet it is hard to put down in words the magic of Sicily: the combination of the charm of its ancient Greek ruins with the more recent architectural splendour, as well as the wonderful landscapes combined with the wealth of birdlife, make for an unforgettable destination for any nature lover. Add to all of this the world famous quality of Sicilian food and its fantastic wines, and well, it's hard to resist!

Bird watching in Sicily is very good all year round, but probably April offers some of the best chances of seeing both migrating and breeding species: at this time of year the passage of passerines can be spectacular, with many species of warblers on show, including Eastern Subalpine, Spectacled and Sardinian, as well as larks, shrikes and the first European Bee-eaters and Eurasian Golden Orioles. Waders and ducks are also numerous, with the more widespread species accompanied by less frequent ones, such as Stone Curlew, Collared Pratincole and Ferruginous Duck. Other interesting species include Common Rock Sparrow, Sicilian Rock Partridge and Audouin's Gull. Also, Sicily is home to the last Italian population of Bonelli's Eagles with 20 pairs still remaining and there are also some breeding Lanner Falcons.

We will explore the extensive wetlands, headlands and rocky areas near Syracuse, where we will be based for the first five nights, including a visit to the foothills of the majestic Etna volcano; the last two nights will be spent near Ragusa. From there we will visit the Gela area in order to take in some different bird habitats.

Black-winged Stilt



### ITINERARY

#### Days 1 to 5

We leave London on a flight to Catania, where we meet our guide, Nicola Scatassi. We travel close to the shores of the Golfo di Catania, heading just south of Syracuse, where we check-in to our hotel for a stay of five nights. During the next four days we can make a variety of excursions to different habitats. On one day, we can visit the Vendicari Reserve which protects some important coastal wetlands and we can stroll along its paths and visit some of the hides where we can hope to see flocks of Greater Flamingos, along with diving ducks such as

Tufted, Pochard and the scarcer Ferruginous; there may also be some pairs of Garganey. Other birds we hope to find include Eurasian Spoonbill, Wood Sandpiper, Slender-billed Gull, Western Marsh Harrier, Purple Heron and Purple Swamphen, while warblers may include the noisy Great Reed, as well as Sedge and Common Reed. From there it is a short drive to Capo Passero, the southernmost part of Sicily. Virtually anything can turn up on this promontory, from Pallid Harrier to Collared Flycatcher.

We need an early start when we visit the impressive Riserva Naturale Cava Grande del

Cassibile. The winding road takes us to various viewpoints overlooking the spectacular limestone gorges of this nature reserve. Here we can look for the endemic Sicilian Common Rock Partridge, Rock Sparrow, Peregrine Falcon, Spectacled Warbler and the amazingly smart Sicilian version of the Common Stonechat.

Down on the coast, the Syracuse Salinas may hold migrant waders and we can look for Curlew and Wood Sandpipers, Little Stint, Little Ringed and Kentish Plovers, Pied Avocet and Black-winged Stilt. We might also find something more interesting, such as a Glossy Ibis, Osprey, Squacco Heron or a Marsh Sandpiper. Later, we

Bonelli's Eagle



can visit the Capo Murro di Porco, the eastern tip of the island, and look for migrants, such as Isabelline and Black-eared Wheatears, Tawny Pipit and Pied and Collared Flycatchers. Near the lighthouse we can sea-watch and try to find passing Scopoli's and Yelkouan Shearwaters. The nearby Lido d'Avola is a good place for watching gulls – Audouin's, Mediterranean and Black-headed.

Mount Etna dominates the eastern landscape, with its cone at 3,290m high (10,990ft); in Europe it is surpassed in size only by Mount Teide on the Canary Islands. It is one of the most active volcanoes in the world, and is in an almost constant state of activity. Black magma covers much of the upper slopes, but lower down, amongst the rock scree, scrub and oak, we can search for Sicilian Rock Partridge, Eurasian Golden Oriole, Cirl Bunting, Short-toed Treecreeper, Golden Eagle, Peregrine Falcon and the local race of Common Crossbill. The spring migration will be in full swing and in the vineyards and orchards of the lower slopes we can hope for a fall of birds, which may include Wood and Eastern Subalpine Warblers, Woodchat Shrike, Pied and Collared Flycatchers and Common Redstart.

The Magnisi peninsula is another migrant stopover for species such as harriers, pipits, wagtails, pipits and larks. Calandra Lark actually breed here, as do Stone Curlew. At the nearby Priolo salt pans (now designated a nature reserve) we can hope for Ferruginous Duck, Slender-billed and Little Gulls and the opportunity to hone our skills distinguishing Pallid from Common Swifts. In the early

afternoon we will take a break from birding and walk through the delightful centre of Syracuse with its Greek and Roman remains.

#### Days 6 & 7

Today we spend the morning checking out one or two of the migration hotspots or revisiting the Riserva Naturale Cava Grande del Cassibile before driving to Ragusa, where we stay for two nights. Having checked in, we will take a walk around the centre of this historic town that figures regularly in the Italian TV series 'Montalbano'. Even here, we will be able to continue birdwatching with sightings of Blue Rock Thrush, Grey Wagtail and Eurasian Hobby pursuing flocks of Common Swift.

The next day we visit the Biviere di Gela nature reserve. The lagoon here is another Sicilian migration hotspot. The plains behind the industrial town of Gela are home to some large colonies of Lesser Kestrel and good numbers of Stone Curlew. Collared Pratincoles also breed here. At the Lago Communelli we look for Purple Swampphen and check to see what species of heron, egret and warbler are using it as a stopover.

#### Day 8

We take a leisurely cross-country route towards Catania that will allow us some birdwatching in three different habitats, namely a protected area of cork oak, an area of deeply-cut limestone and the margins of Lago di Lentini, a huge reservoir. Late additions to the tour list might include Eurasian Wryneck, Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush and Cattle Egret. In the afternoon, we catch the return flight to London from Catania Airport.

Lesser Kestrel



#### Outline Itinerary

<b>Day 1</b>	Fly to Catania and transfer to Syracuse
<b>Days 2-5</b>	Syracuse
<b>Days 6-7</b>	Ragusa
<b>Day 8</b>	Depart Catania

#### Party Size

Maximum of 12 clients.

#### Accommodation

Comfortable accommodation in twin/double and single rooms, with private facilities.

#### Transport

By minibus.

#### Includes

All flights, meals, accommodation, transport, entry fees, services of the leaders, VAT, airport taxes and tips.

#### Gradings



Good



150



Warm



Low



Normal



Relaxed



Good



Easy



Scheduled



Stone Curlew