

Sicily

Eastern Sicily in Spring

2022 Friday 22nd - Friday 29th April (8 days)

2023 Thursday 20th - Thursday 27th April (8 days)

Single-centre, small group tour with David Fairhurst & Andrea Corso



A migrant male Collared Flycatcher © Andrea Corso

Sicily Birding Tours with Limosa Holidays

Designed exclusively for Limosa by Andrea Corso, Sicily's foremost ornithologist, our one-week birdwatching tour to eastern Sicily combines an opportunity to look for regional specialities such as the endemic Sicilian Rock Partridge, Scopoli's Shearwater and 'Sicilian' Long-tailed Tit with the chance to also enjoy the spring migration. With a southern coastline which is south of northern Tunisia, Sicily is an important 'steppingstone' for birds heading north into Europe and during our trip we expect to see a great range of both resident and migratory species.

We will be based at a converted 19th century hotel offering first-rate hospitality and delicious home-cooked meals, so join Andrea and Limosa's David Fairhurst for a delightful spring holiday.

Highlights

- Wonderful Sicilian landscapes from cliffs and coastal *garrigue* to the forested slopes of Mount Etna
- Excellent range of 'classic' Mediterranean birds, regional specialities and passage migrants
- Greater Flamingo, Audouin's Gull, Bee-eater, Spectacled Warbler, Golden Oriole and Italian Sparrow
- Opportunities to look for Sicilian Rock Partridge, Scopoli's Shearwater and Sicilian Long-tailed Tit
- Raptors on migration could include Pallid and Montagu's Harriers, Lesser Kestrel and Red-footed Falcon
- Enjoy some wonderful early spring butterflies and orchids
- Home-cooked Sicilian meals featuring locally produced ingredients
- Expertly led by Limosa's David Fairhurst with Sicily's foremost ornithologist Andrea Corso

What's Included?

- Limosa Tour Leader
- Expert English-speaking Sicilian ornithologist
- 7 nights accommodation in Sicily, staying at a characterful *masseria* (farmhouse hotel)
- All main meals
- Minibus transport
- All excursions, entry fees and permits
- All tour-based tips (hotel, meals etc) and taxes



Black lava flows below Mt Etna © David Fairhurst, Limosa

Outline Itinerary

Day 1

Fly to Catania and transfer south to our farmhouse hotel. Night Siracusa

Days 2-7

Birdwatching in eastern Sicily including Murro di Porco, Penisola Magnisi, Capo Passero, the Cava Grande del Cassibile, the Vendicari wetlands and Mt. Etna. Six further nights Siracusa

Day 8

Fly Catania to the UK

Tour Overview

Separated from the toe of Italy by the Strait of Messina and from the coast of Tunisia by the Sicilian Strait, Sicily has long been known as an important 'steppingstone' for migratory birds moving between Africa and Europe.

With parts of the island's southeast being south of northern Tunisia, this mountainous island is also one of the most fascinating regions of Europe with its landscape the product of a rich blend of history, archaeology, art and culture. Sicilian food and wine are wonderful and the people are as warm and friendly as the island's climate.

Largest of all the Mediterranean islands, first-time visitors may be surprised at just how big Sicily actually is! For this reason, our spring tours focus solely on the island's bird-rich eastern side where we will watch birds amidst a landscape dominated, and largely shaped, by the immense smouldering cone of Europe's biggest volcano, Mount Etna. We will scour the rugged slopes here for three of the island's special birds: the endemic Sicilian race of Rock Partridge (still awaiting promotion from its mainland cousin), the distinctive 'Sicilian' Long-tailed Tit (which breeds in the mountain oak woods and scrub) and the enigmatic 'Sicilian' Common Crossbill (which we will look for in the pinewoods on Mount Etna).

To the south, the ancient port of Siracusa is one of the most beautiful and historic towns in Europe. In spring, the coastal *garrigue* (scrub) of Murro di Porco or Penisola Magnisi has breeding Stone-curlews and Calandra Larks, Audouin's Gulls fly by and nearby wetlands have breeding Kentish Plovers, Slender-billed Gull, Ferruginous Duck and Western Swamphen.

Our hotel's gardens and nearby groves of almond, olive and carob lure migrants from Nightjar and Hoopoe to Golden Oriole and Collared Flycatcher.

West of Siracusa is the beautiful and unspoilt Iblei region: a rough, sheep-grazed limestone plateau cut by deep valleys such as the Cava Grande del Cassibile, Sicily's equivalent of the Grand Canyon, where we will look for migrating raptors and scarce local specialities such as Rock Sparrow and Spectacled Warbler.

North along the coast are various wetland sites and jutting headlands that can hold exciting breeding and migrant species with the possibility of species such as Pallid, Marsh and Montagu's Harriers moving through.

We shall be based at a comfortable family-run *masseria*, the charming *Pozzo di Mazza*, a fully renovated 19th century former winery near Siracusa where the meals and hospitality are simply a delight. Set amidst lemon and orange groves, the grounds are alive with the sound of Sardinian Warblers and Crested Larks, while nearby fields hold Zitting Cisticolas and Tree Sparrows.

As a tourist destination, Sicily has enjoyed a surge in popularity following the BBC's screening of the Italian tv series *Inspector Montalbano* which was filmed on location in the stunning southeast of the island.

Our consultant expert **Andrea Corso** lives in Siracusa and is Sicily's foremost ornithologist. He is author of the *Avifauna di Sicilia* and one of the leading lights in birding and conservation in Italy. He also has a wonderful sense of humour, not to mention a fine singing voice (!!) and possesses an infectious enthusiasm for his country and its birds.

Indeed, Andrea's knowledge of Sicily's birds and where to find them is unsurpassed and it is impossible to imagine a trip there without him!

Our April 2022 visit will be Limosa's 21st tour to Sicily with Andrea, 14 of them having been in spring.

Guide **David Fairhurst** led our April 2015 and 2019 trips to Sicily with Andrea and our April 2022 tour will be his fourth visit to the island.



With a penchant for salt pans, the male Kentish Plover is a smart looking bird in spring © Gordon Small, wildlifeimagesgs.com



The highly distinctive Sicilian Long-tailed Tit © Andrea Corso

Daily Itinerary

Day 1

FLY TO CATANIA, TRANSFER TO SIRACUSA

Our spring birdwatching tour to Sicily begins with a flight to Catania on Sicily's east coast where Andrea will be waiting to welcome us.

Leaving the airport, we follow the shores of the Golfo di Catania and head south (for about an hour), beyond the ancient and historic port of Siracusa, to reach our delightful accommodation for the week.

'Discovered' for us by Andrea, the simple but charming *Pozzo di Mazza* is a renovated former winery dating back to the nineteenth century. We can expect to be greeted with lemon juice freshly squeezed from the fruit in the hotel's ground, while the home-cooked Sicilian food and hospitality is wonderful; indeed you may not want to leave!

In spring, migrant birds find the Pozzo's groves of citrus, olives and almonds equally irresistible, while for us there is also a swimming pool and tables to dine *al fresco* on warmer evenings.
Night near Siracusa

Days 2 - 7

SIRACUSA, VENDICARI WETLANDS, CAPOPASSERO AND MOUNT ETNA

Siracusa makes an excellent base from which to explore the rugged, southeastern corner of Sicily which is Andrea's 'home patch'. We may begin our discovery of this fascinating region with a visit to an area of former salt pans, now a nature reserve, on the Golfo di Siracusa. In spring, waterbirds to watch for include Squacco and Purple Herons, Little Bittern and Garganey, while the extensive reed beds can hold Eurasian Penduline Tit along with Eurasian Reed, Sedge and Great Reed Warblers. Both Red-throated Pipit and Western Yellow Wagtails of various races also occur on passage and the view from the lighthouse out over the gulf is fabulous, with the historical islet of Ortigia spread out before us.

Penisola Maddalena, a sparsely populated promontory covered with dense Mediterranean *macchia*, and the Capo Murro di Porco, are renowned as one of Italy's major migrant hotspots and in spring, the old gardens are a prime place to check for birds such as Woodchat Shrike, Pied, Collared and Spotted Flycatchers, as well as Icterine, Eastern Subalpine, Spectacled, Sardinian and Wood Warblers.



Woodchat Shrike © Andrea Corso

Marked by dazzling white calcareous cliffs, an easy walk along the coast can produce a host of different species and birds we have seen here previously include European Nightjar, Tawny Pipit, Common Nightingale and Black-eared Wheatear. In 2015, we even found a Cream-coloured Courser which was the first record for Italy since 1978 and a new Sicilian bird even for Andrea!

At the very tip, a wonderful white lighthouse dominates the steep cliffs and the sea-watching from the point can be productive with Scopoli's and Yelkouan Shearwaters and Audouin's and Yellow-legged Gulls all possible. If we are lucky, we could also spot a pod of Striped or Bottlenose Dolphins passing by. Nearby, we might enjoy our first Sicilian picnic, perhaps some delicious sandwiches freshly made at a local deli, with Italian hams (*crudo* and *cotto prosciutto*) and local cheeses, sun-dried tomatoes, aubergines and olives.

Heading south from our hotel, an hour's drive will bring us to one of the southernmost corners of Europe. Against a backdrop of ancient groves of almond and olive trees and the stunning white Iblei mountains, we will reach Vendicari nature reserve.

Here, we will hope to find flocks of rose-pink Greater Flamingos mingling with Shelduck, Garganey and Ferruginous Ducks. A good selection of waders, gulls and terns are usually present in April and we will take a short walk out into the sand dunes towards the Sveva tower which was built in AD1430.

Marzamemi, an old tuna-fishing village, makes an excellent spot for a coffee before we move on to Capo Passero and Portopalo, at the southernmost tip of Sicily. Seawatching from the Cape could produce thousands of gulls, as well as further chances for Scopoli's and Yelkouan Shearwaters. Nearby, there are some splendid old saltpans, sometimes dusted pink with Greater Flamingos which are likely to be accompanied by waders, terns and gulls including Wood Sandpiper and rosy Slender-billed Gulls.

It is well worth checking the scrubby hillsides for Eastern Subalpine Warblers and sometimes even Richard's Pipit.

To the west are various wetlands where we hope to see Spoonbill, Purple Heron and Garganey and if we are there on a fine evening, the sunset will mark the end of another unforgettable Sicilian day.

During our stay near Siracusa, we shall enjoy one longer day trip out, heading north to explore the slopes of mighty Mount Etna.



Sicilian Rock Partridge © Angelo Zimmitti

The journey will take about two hours and Etna's basal circumference of 140 kms makes this immense active volcano the largest in continental Europe (surpassed only by Mount Teide in the Canary Islands). The cone soars to an impressive 3,329m (10,922 ft) and absolutely dominates the landscape of eastern Sicily. Up close, Etna's flora adds splashes of bright colour to the vast swathes of old black magma.

Against this stark but spectacular backdrop we will make a determined effort to track down the Sicilian Rock Partridge, an extremely wary species that is notoriously difficult to find!

Etna's steep lower slopes, clothed in dense mountain oak woods, pines and scrub, are also home to the island's own distinctive races of Long-tailed Tit and Common Crossbill. European Nuthatch, Short-toed Treecreeper, Eurasian Golden Oriole and Cirl Bunting all breed and birds of prey to watch out for over the volcanic slopes include Golden Eagle, Common Buzzard, Sparrowhawk, Kestrel and Lanner. The slopes are also home to two special butterflies: sulphurous Eastern Orange-tips and Italian Festoon and both are often found here.

Inland of Siracusa, a trip to the Cava Grande del Cassibile, the 'Sicilian Grand Canyon', offers further opportunities to try for both the Sicilian Rock Partridge and Long-tailed Tit, as Alpine, Pallid and Common Swifts zip across the skies and Northern Ravens tumble and croak above the chasm.

Our attention may be diverted by the fine array of orchids (25 species were recorded on our 2019 tour, when conditions were good) and other wildflowers that adorn the hillsides.

Our picnic lunch may be taken *al fresco* amidst the trees and flowers of the valley. Red-rumped Swallow, Tawny Pipit, Zitting Cisticola, Blue Rock Thrush, Black-eared Wheatear and Tree, Rock and Italian Sparrows are among a range of other birds we could encounter.

We will keep our eyes open for the endemic Sicilian Wall Lizard and there are several lush valleys to explore and we hope to visit one of these for an afternoon's walk.

There are many sites north and south of Siracusa that are also worth visiting. Murro di Porco is close by and can be another good spot for migrants such as Whinchats, wheatears, shrikes and warblers, as well as being a regular wintering site for the scarce Richard's Pipit.



Italian Festoon, Sicily © tour participant Peter Farren

Siracusa's salt pans can hold Squacco Heron, egrets, Glossy Ibis and Marsh Sandpiper and possibly a passing Western Osprey. Indeed, these sometimes use a post that Andrea stuck in the marsh for just such a purpose!

Raptor migration occurs on a broad front across Sicily and, when conditions are suitable, harriers can sometimes be seen in the highlands or at headlands. At the Penisola Magnisi, we might be lucky to see a migrant Montagu's or Pallid Harrier flush a party of Greater Short-toed Larks or Western Yellow Wagtails.

We are also likely to visit some ancient burial chambers cut into the limestone where Calandra Larks nest and we may also find the sleek Ocellated Skink.

Over the years, our Sicily groups have also enjoyed some extraordinary spring 'finds' from Western Reef Egret, Long-legged Buzzard and Cream-coloured Courser to Bar-tailed Lark, Isabelline Wheatear and (two) Atlas Pied Flycatchers. While we can't promise you a rarity on every trip, if you love spring migration and the excitement of not knowing what the next day might bring, eastern Sicily is a great place to visit!

Six nights near Siracusa



Cue Inspector Montalbano!... © David Fairhurst, Limosa

Day 8

RETURN TO CATANIA, FLY TO UK

We leave Siracusa after breakfast and return north, passing the nests of White Storks beside the *autostrada* as we make our way back to Catania airport. Bidding farewell to Andrea, we check-in for our flight to the UK, where our spring birdwatching tour to Sicily concludes.

Trip Information

Group Size Max of 12 participants and 2 leaders

Birds 130-160 species

Depending on weather conditions (prior to the tour), a good selection of orchids and Sicilian wildflowers may be in flower when we visit. [If it is a particularly early spring, however, please note that some of the flowers can already be over by mid-April.]

A selection of early spring butterflies including Italian Festoon, Eastern Orange-tip and Cleopatra are also possible on this tour.

Accommodation 7 nights at the charming and characterful agriturismo *Pozzo di Mazza*, a small, family-run *masseria* (farmhouse hotel) located near Siracusa, in the southeast of Sicily. Dating from the nineteenth century, the '*Pozzo*' is a renovated former winery. Rooms are simply furnished but comfortable and all have private facilities.

Meals All main meals are included in the tour price, commencing with lunch or dinner on arrival in Sicily on Day 1 (*according to flight schedules*) and concluding with breakfast or lunch on the island on Day 8 (*again according to flight schedules*).

Breakfasts and dinners of freshly made Sicilian food are taken at the *masseria*. Lunches are mostly delicious picnics, with sandwiches or local pastries freshly prepared that morning of local cheeses, hams, sun-dried tomatoes, olives and aubergines.

Walking Easy. Short walks over mainly easy terrain. Comfortable walking shoes with stout corrugated soles are recommended.

Our tour includes a day trip to Mount Etna but please note that the focus is on seeing the birds and wildlife and we do **not** go to the summit area on our trip. **Maximum elevation on this tour:** (Mount Etna) is approx. 2,000m (6,500ft).

Weather Expect a mix of sunshine and showers, with typical daytime temperatures up to 22C (72F), falling to overnight lows of 10-13C (50-55F). It can be significantly cooler on the higher slopes of Mount Etna (where some snow could still be lying), so **be sure to pack** some warmer clothing to layer up if necessary.

Flights Due to the pandemic, it is proving extremely difficult to predict future flight prices and schedules, especially when a trip is scheduled for beyond the period when flights can be booked. As a result, we have taken the decision to price our holidays as excluding all flights.

To keep the process as simple as possible for our clients, however, we are now working closely with a dedicated agent at Travel Counsellors who will be able to advise you which flights we are recommending and he will be able to book these for you.

Ground Transport By minibus.

Photos Good photographic opportunities: birds, wildflowers, butterflies and other wildlife, plus some fine scenery and archaeological sites.

Tour Cost ^{*1}

2022 (8 days):

Land only cost: £1945

Deposit: £500

Single Supp: £375

Cost includes

- Limosa Tour Leader
- Expert English-speaking Sicilian ornithologist
- 7 nights accommodation in Sicily at a rural *masseria* (farmhouse hotel)
- All main meals
- Minibus transport
- All excursions, entry fees, permits
- All tour-based tips (hotel, meals etc) and taxes
- Limosa checklist of birds

Cost excludes

International flights, insurance, drinks, airport/in-flight meals and snacks and other items of a personal nature.



We hope to see a spectacular range of orchids and other flowering plants during our holiday

^{*1} 2022 tour costs shown. Please note costs for our 2023 tour TBA (available summer 2022)

About Your Guides

David Fairhurst Ever since he can remember, David has been passionate about birds and wildlife. This has led to a varied 25+ year career in conservation (working largely for the RSPB) and guiding bird and wildlife tours. His work has taken him to all four corners of the UK, from studying Wood Larks in Dorset to tour leading in Shetland and he currently runs the RSPB reserve near Snape (Suffolk).

David has also been involved in some fascinating projects around the world, ranging from studying Griffon Vultures in Israel to restoring fragile ecosystems on the Seychelles. He has travelled far and wide in pursuit of birds, including trips across Europe, Chile and South Africa.

David lives close to the Suffolk coast with his wife and two daughters. He is not only an exceptional birder, but an accomplished all-round naturalist with enthusiasm and humour as well as excellent leadership and bird finding skills.

Our April 2022 and 2023 tours to Sicily will be David's fourth and fifth spring visits with Andrea.

Andrea Corso When it comes to birding, Andrea is "Mr Sicily"! Born and raised in Siracusa, in southeast Sicily, he is the island's foremost ornithologist and one of the leading voices in birdwatching and conservation in Italy.

A prolific writer, ornithological consultant and advisor, Andrea is author of the *Avifauna di Sicilia* and has written or co-authored a further 300 or so books, papers and articles covering everything from bird migration, identification and taxonomy to the status and distribution of birds within Italy and Europe!

He is the Italian authority for *Dutch Birding* and *Birdwatch* magazines, writing his country's monthly bird reports for each of those journals.

Andrea has co-ordinated or taken part in dozens of ornithological research projects in Italy and overseas, for conservation bodies including LIPU, WWF, RSPB and Birdlife International.

During the course of his work he has also travelled extensively within the Western Palearctic, as well as visiting Russia and Asia several times.

Andrea lives in Siracusa, watching birds and enjoying island life. He says he would never change this town for any other and who can blame him!

With his natural enthusiasm, infectious humour and Italian charm and not to mention a fine singing voice, we are indeed honoured to have him join us as ornithological consultant on our Sicily trips.

Our April 2022 tour will be Limosa's 21st trip to Sicily with Andrea, 14 of these being in spring.



Black-crowned Night Heron © Andrea Corso

What You Say...

"This was a superb holiday from start to finish. Andrea Corso was the finest local guide. His hearing, sight and knowledge was excellent out in the field. He found the most beautiful places to have lunch, ice creams and coffee."

IP, Eastern Sicily tour

"First birding trip for 40 years, most impressed by overall excellence of pre-tour [info] and tour itself. Nice friendly group of similar age. More than lived up to expectations - I saw 22 new species including all those on my target list. I signed up for this trip because of the Italian (Sicilian) guide - I was able to practice my spoken Italian with Andrea who I think enjoyed our conversations. Andrea is a phenomenal birder - his eyesight and hearing are unreal - what he does not know about the fauna and flora of Sicily is not worth repeating."

DL, Eastern Sicily tour

"Andrea Corso [has] incredible skills and seemingly limitless knowledge of the area, birds and local culture..... [He] worked in a relaxed but highly effective way to make sure everyone sees the birds and learns about the local culture."

H&CS, Eastern Sicily tour

"Scenery wonderful, flowers beautiful, birding not bad either! And then the Bonelli's Eagle drifted over!!"

V&BW, Eastern Sicily tour

"A most enjoyable trip with excellent views of birds and stunning wildflowers in great company."

MR, Eastern Sicily tour

How To Enquire

Due to the considerable uncertainty created by the pandemic, Limosa Holidays are not currently accepting bookings for any trips, however, you are welcome to contact us either by email or phone to register your interest in any of our holidays.

Whilst some tour companies may be willing to take a deposit from you and say a trip is a "confirmed departure", our approach is going to be to wait a little longer as we consider this both honest and realistic.

Once we are confident that the trip can run, we will be in touch to confirm your place and ask for a deposit.

We do encourage you to register your interest as we are expecting considerable demand, once the consensus is that it is safe to travel again.

Any Questions

Please do not hesitate to contact us by email or phone. Our office is generally open from 09:30-17:30 but you are welcome to contact us outside these times too. We are happy to take calls in the evening and at weekends but if no one is available the call will go to our answerphone.

Thank you for your interest in our tours. We do hope that you will be able to join us once the pandemic is over and we look forward to hearing from you.