

Abruzzo, Italy

Central Italy in Spring

Tuesday 31st May – Tuesday 7th June 2022 (8 days)

NEW: A small group tour with Andrea Corso



The rare and shy Apennine Chamois is one of the mammals we hope to see in the Abruzzo National Park © Antonio Antonucci

Central Italy Birding Tours with Limosa Holidays

This new and exclusive holiday to Central Italy has been designed for Limosa by our Italian bird and wildlife expert, Andrea Corso, and visits the heart of the rich and picturesque Abruzzo region. This area is rightly famous for its wonderful woodlands and spectacular mountains with deep calcareous gorges and historic towns and villages. Well known for the isolated population of Marsican Brown Bears, the region is also home to many birds and during our tour we will hope to see White-backed Woodpeckers and Collared Flycatchers in the ancient beech forests and Golden Eagles drifting over snow-capped peaks. Other possibilities include White-winged Snowfinch, Rock Partridge and Rock Sparrow, along with colourful Mediterranean fare such as Eastern Subalpine Warbler, Golden Oriole and European Bee-eater.

Highlights

- looking for birds, mammals, butterflies and orchids in the majestic Abruzzo and Majella National Parks
- 3 nights at Pescasseroli in the heart of the Apennines – the spine of Italy
- Endangered populations of Marsican Brown Bears, Abruzzo Chamois and Italian Wolf
- Italian Sparrows, Hoopoes, Bee-eaters, Golden Orioles and Wrynecks
- Stunning Collared Flycatchers and White-backed Woodpeckers in ancient beech forests
- 4 nights near Caramanico Terme – a gorgeous small medieval town on the northern edge of the majestic Majella National Park
- Golden Eagle, Rock Partridge and White-winged Snowfinch
- Small party size with a maximum of 12 participants
- Designed and expertly led by Limosa's own Italian expert Andrea Corso

What's Included?

- Led by Andrea Corso and accompanied by an English-speaking expert local guide to the birds, mammals and orchids of Central Italy
- 7 nights accommodation in Central Italy with 3 nights at Pescasseroli and 4 nights near Caramanico
- All main meals
- Minibus transport
- All excursions, entry fees and permits
- All tour-based tips (hotel, meals etc) and taxes

Outline Itinerary

Day 1

Fly to Rome and transfer east to our first hotel in the Apennine Mountains. Night Pescasseroli

Days 2-3

Looking for birds, mammals, butterflies and orchids in the Abruzzo National Park, La Camosciara and Sirente-Velino Mountains. 2 further nights Pescasseroli

Day 4

Transfer to the Majella National Park visit Sorgenti del Pescara en route. Night near Caramanico

Days 5-7

Visiting Majella National Park: Orfento Valley, Gran Sasso National Park, Valley of San Bartolomeo, Rava del Ferro. 3 further nights near Caramanico

Day 8

Fly Rome to the UK

Tour Overview

This new and exclusive 8-day trip to Central Italy has been designed for us by Limosa favourite and Italian expert guide Andrea Corso. Travelling to the heart of the rich and picturesque Abruzzo region, this is a land famous for its wonderful woodlands, spectacular mountains with steep and deep calcareous gorges and small historic towns and villages.

It is also home to some spectacular wildlife and though best known for the endangered population of Marsican Brown Bears, the mountains, valleys and woods are home to many superb birds. White-backed Woodpeckers and Collared Flycatchers inhabit ancient beech woodlands, Golden Eagles soar over snow-capped peaks and elusive Rock Partridge and Rock Sparrow scabble about on dry and stony slopes.

There will also be plenty of colourful Mediterranean species such as Eastern Subalpine and Spectacled Warblers, Golden Oriole and Bee-eaters. A number of butterflies will be active in and there should still be several interesting orchids to be found.

A couple of hours east of Rome, the Apennine Mountains rise above the plains and this is unquestionably one of Italy's most interesting wildlife and flora areas, as well as one of its best-kept secrets. The Abruzzo National Park which was established in 1923 protects an area of 400 square kilometres and is the centre of this mountain region.

A little further to the north-east is another important national park, the beautiful Majella National Park. This area is famous for numerous picturesque mediaeval towns strung along the steep gorges and valleys. As a backdrop to some of the best birds and wildlife in Italy, this region is unsurpassed and with Andrea as guide, it is simply a pleasure to explore this fabulous landscape.



Even in May some of the Apennine mountaintops are likely to still be dusted with snow © Antonio Antonucci

We start the tour with three nights based in the mountain town of Pescasseroli which is ideally situated for making short drives or walks into the varied and rich landscape.

One of our main bear-watching areas is just a stone's throw from our hotel and we plan to watch from close to an old church where hopefully these rare animals will appear on the opposite side of the valley.

Over the course of our stay, we plan to thoroughly explore the Abruzzo National Park and will enjoy various scenic strolls into valleys looking for Golden Eagle, Peregrine Falcon, Red and Black Kites, Rock Bunting and Rock Sparrow.

We will also hope to find the shy and rare Apennine Chamois and plan to visit an ancient forest where a small population Italian Wolves survive, although we will be extremely fortunate to find these endangered canids.

The ancient beech forests of this area still hold populations of White-backed Woodpecker of the distinctive southern subspecies *lilfordi*, and we will listen for its subtle call, as well as that of the stunning Collared Flycatcher, short-tailed 'Italian' Long-tailed Tit, Golden Oriole and many other woodland species.

We then move northeast to the Majella National Park to spend four nights near Caramanico Terme, one of the most remote parts of Italy. Once again, there is a population of the elusive Apennine Wolf but we are likely to have more luck with a range of alpine birds such as Golden Eagle, Northern Goshawk and both Alpine and Red-billed Choughs, all of which breed inside the park.

One of the Western Palearctic's trickiest species, the elusive Rock Partridge can also be found here but as with the wolves, we will need luck on our side to locate this difficult bird.

On the higher slopes, we will also be on the lookout for Alpine Accentor and White-winged Snowfinch, with dramatic and fast-flowing streams providing perfect habitat for Grey Wagtail and White-throated Dipper.

In the Black and Mountain Pine woodlands, we will listen out for the distinct trilling song of Western Bonelli's Warbler, whilst over the forest we will scan for Honey Buzzard.

This exciting new tour to these two majestic parks will undoubtedly offer many special bird and wildlife encounters which will be enjoyed at a relaxed pace and based at comfortable hotels. With great Italian food and wine and in the company of one of Italy's foremost naturalists, Andrea Corso, it will unquestionably be a holiday to remember.



During our time in Abruzzo, we will hope to find the Marsican Brown Bear © Antonio Antonucci

Daily Itinerary

Day 1

FLY TO ROME, TRANSFER TO PESCIASSEROLI

Our holiday begins with a morning flight to Rome where we will meet Andrea. Heading east, we will soon leave the city behind as the landscape quickly changes and we begin to climb into the hills and lush green landscape of forested slopes and terracotta villages.

As we continue onwards, we will make a number of short stops to not only enjoy our first Italian lunch but also look for our first birds and wildflowers of the trip. The possibilities include Spectacled and Melodious Warblers, Tawny Pipit, Rock Sparrow and Ortolan Bunting, with an outside chance of both Western Orphean Warbler and Black-headed Bunting.

By late afternoon, we plan to arrive at the town of Pescasseroli which will be our base for the next three nights. *Night Pescasseroli*

Days 2-3

ABRUZZO NATIONAL PARK

Pescasseroli is a historic village on an ancient route previously used by the Roman legionaries. In more recent times, the tradition of transhumance has dominated the region, with the sheep brought down from higher mountain pastures during the winter months.

Perfectly situated for our needs, many sites are just a short distance away and we have two full days to explore the national park. Our daily routine will include an 'optional' pre-breakfast walk or short drive (typically looking for bears), then after breakfast we fill our days radiating out to the best locations in search of the special fauna and flora of Abruzzo.

Early morning and late afternoon/dusk are generally the best times to locate Marsican Brown Bears (and Italian Wolves) and we will drive to vantage points to scan across meadows and woodland edges in an attempt to find them. We will sit quietly and patiently in the hope these secretive animals will appear, as the bears typically come to forest edges and fields at the beginning and end of the day. Red and Roe Deer, Red Fox and Wild Boar are also all seen in the area.



The beautiful, forested slopes in the Apennines © Antonio Antonucci

Late May and early June is the start of the mating season for the bears, so it is a time when they are often a little more active and likely to come out into the open.

Mountain roads wind through mixed beech woodland and montane grasslands, where Red-backed Shrikes can be reasonably numerous, and we will no doubt stop to admire a handsome male at some point during our stay.

Resident Black Redstarts and chestnut-crowned Italian Sparrows will be seen regularly, and we should also hear and see Common Cuckoo and Eurasian Hoopoes, with the latter fluttering across the roads and fields. The distinctive fluting song of a Golden Oriole is another sound we will become familiar with, and the striking yellow-and-black males stand out in the sun.

On one morning, we will make an excursion to the Vallone di Pesco di Lordo di Pescasseroli where the road winds through a narrow valley with patches of lush-green beech woodland. We will spend time walking and watching and one of the species we could find is the superb Wood Warbler with its distinctive song as it flits from branch to branch.

Common Redstarts are often found here too and we will make a special effort to locate the very smart Collared Flycatcher.

The woods are also home to both Middle Spotted and White-backed Woodpeckers (the latter of the subspecies *lilfordi*, which is also known as the 'Dalmatian Woodpecker' and recognised as a separate species by some.)

Whilst we would be lucky to see even a trace of either, these forested hills are also home to predators such as Pine Marten and Wild Cat but we will again be hoping to find Brown Bears which can occasionally be seen feasting on ants in this region.

Above the woodland, it is possible to watch Honey Buzzards making their wing-clapping display and as we gradually climb higher, there are chances for Apennine Chamois that live in this rugged terrain and we will scan the highest ridges in the hope of finding this localised animal.

We will also keep an eye out for alpine species such as song-fighting Water Pipits, Rock Bunting and maybe Alpine Accentor and Alpine Chough, whilst lower down in the forest clearings, we will hope to find the endemic *Iris marsica* in bloom.



Red Kite © Antonio Antonucci

After a satisfying lunch, we can take an easy walk along the Fondillo torrent, where it is possible to find various species of orchid including Eggleaf Twayblade, Early Marsh, Fragrant and Heath Spotted plus Bee Ophrys. White-throated Dipper and Grey Wagtail also occur along the tumbling river, with Red-backed Shrike and Woodlark also possible nearby.

Further possibilities in the mixed forests include tiny Firecrests, canary-yellow Serins and Western Bonelli's Warblers. We could also see both European species of treecreeper with Eurasian preferring the pines, whilst Short-toed are generally in the deciduous forests.

Exploring along the edge of the Lago di Barrea, there are woodlands that are home to Common Redstart and Marsh Tit and in the surrounding meadows, we should hear the familiar songs of both Yellowhammer and Corn Bunting, as well as Common Stonechats. Scanning the mountains, we hope to find soaring Golden Eagles and may find the menacing form of a Northern Goshawk.

Each day we return to the historic Pescasseroli for a fine evening meal and either another look for Marsican Brown Bear or a stroll along narrow cobbled streets of the village. *Two further nights Pescasseroli*

Day 4

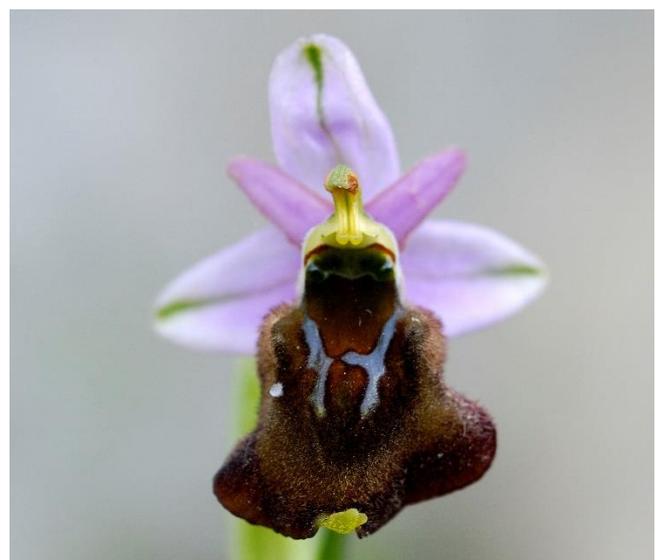
DRIVE PESCASSEROLI TO CARAMANICO TERME AND DECONTRA

We will reluctantly depart from Pescasseroli after breakfast and passing through the now familiar forested hills, will head north into the wild regions of the Majella National Park. Passing many old, historical villages, we will no doubt make one or two interesting stops to admire the scenery, buildings and birds.

At the town of Popoli, we plan to visit the nature reserve of Sorgenti del Pescara, a damp area of considerable local importance, where many species of waterbirds nest or stop-over, including Black-crowned Night Heron and Pygmy Cormorant.

We hope to arrive at our lovely hotel close to the town of Caramanico Terme by mid-afternoon, to allow us enough time to head out for a stroll on the northern slopes of the national park.

Deontra is a small enchanted medieval village, nestled between the mountains overlooking a rocky gorge. It is a place of great quietude - a 'kingdom of peace' and we will be served local and home-produced foods, cooked and served with love and dedication. *Night Deontra di Caramanico Terme*



Abruzzo can be a great place to find orchids © Antonio Antonucci

Days 5-7

MAJELLA NATIONAL PARK: ORFENTO VALLEY, GRAN SASSO NATIONAL PARK, VALLEY OF SAN BARTOLOMEO, RAVA DEL FERRO

Awaking each morning, we will have views across the grasslands and up into the mountains. It is possible to see Short-toed Snake and Golden Eagles from the town and as this is the only breeding site in Abruzzo for Montagu's Harrier, we will keep a keen eye out for these elegant raptors as they search for prey in the surrounding fields.

We have three full days to explore the Majella National Park which is one of the best-preserved Apennine ecosystems. Due to a combination of its altitude and inaccessibility, most of the park is uninhabited and during our stay, we will make early starts and stay out into the evening to scan for Bears and other wildlife.

As the sun sets, some have even been lucky enough to see 'Apennine Wolf' hunting across the valley meadows. With an estimated seventy individuals and eleven packs in this protected area, the population density is one of the highest in Europe.

Travelling out each day from the hotel, we will visit the high rocky areas, but also the famous gorges and calcareous valleys of the Majella. Many of the bird species reflect the montane environment with Peregrine Falcon, Golden Eagle, Short-toed Snake Eagle, Red and Black Kites, both Alpine and Red-billed Choughs as well as White-winged Snowfinch all possible.

Northern Goshawk and Rock Partridge also occur here in low numbers, though we will need luck to find the latter. Red-footed Falcons can sometimes be seen passing through the area and in the woodlands, we should find both Western Bonelli's and Wood Warblers.

Amongst the sites we plan to explore is the Orfento Valley, where it is possible to find numerous species of orchids including the endemic *Ophrys promontorii*. Walking along paths that cross pastures and glades, we hope to see and hear Woodlark, Red-backed Shrike, Red-billed Chough and may even be able to spot the nest of a Golden Eagle on a beautiful rocky cliff along the valley.

At Pianagrande, we will have a splendid view of the upper part of the Orfento Valley, with further chances of finding Chamois and if we are very fortunate, it is possible to find both wolves and bears in this region.

At the Gran Sasso National Park, we plan to cross the Ofena plain, where Rock Sparrows and the increasingly scarce Lesser Grey Shrike breed in the agricultural habitat. Driving beyond the village of Ofena and heading towards Castel del Monte and the rocky and arid Campo Imperatore, we find a unique open landscape, where Eastern Black-eared Wheatears nest and there is the occasional sighting of Lanner Falcon.

The open landscape hosts numerous species of orchids including Early Purple Orchid and Elder-flowered Orchid. In the prairie-like habitat, it is possible to find flocks of Griffon Vultures drifting overhead, while across the fields Tawny Pipit and Common Wheatears display and the characteristic calls of Red-billed Choughs sweep over the meadows.

Driving up to an altitude of 2,200m we hope to find White-winged Snowfinch and if we are really fortunate both Rock Partridge on the rocky scree and Wallcreeper flitting about the cliffs.

Heading back to Decontra, we will pass some beautiful mediaeval villages including Santo Stefano di Sessanio with its old castle. This area is a unique mosaic of grasslands and small agricultural areas giving us an opportunity to look for Ortolan Bunting and perhaps the endemic Early Spider Orchid.

As well as orchids, butterflies and dragonflies are an important part of the Abruzzo biodiversity and if the weather has been warm, we could find species such as Grizzled Skipper, Pearl-bordered Fritillary and Scarce Swallowtail or the rare and endemic Italian Goldring dragonfly. *Three further nights Decontra di Caramanico Terme*

Day 8

DEPART DECONTRA, DRIVE TO ROME FOR FLIGHT TO UK

An early start is required this morning, as we must reluctantly leave the mountains to drive back to Rome for our return flight to the UK where our tour to Abruzzo concludes.



Apennine Chamois © Antonio Antonucci

Trip Information

Group Size Max of 12 participants and 2 leaders

Birds 120-150 species

Butterflies 30+ species (weather permitting)

Given fine weather, there should be a fair number of butterflies and dragonflies. Good all-round wildlife interest on this tour, with a wealth of wildflowers to enjoy and hopefully some interesting mammals.

Accommodation 7 nights accommodation based at two different but equally charming hotels each serving delicious home-cooked meals. All rooms have private facilities.

Our tour begins with a 3-night stay at a quirky hotel in Pescasseroli, followed by 4 nights at the picturesque thermal town of Decontra di Caramanico Terme. Both hotels are perfectly located to allow access to the best birding locations.

Meals All main meals are included in the tour price, commencing with lunch on the edge of the Abruzzo NP on Day 1 and concluding with lunch on Day 8. Lunches will usually be picnics made with tasty local cheeses and cured meats, fresh fruits and tomatoes.

Walking Mostly easy. Short walks over mainly easy terrain. A couple of walks will be a little longer and uphill but taken at a gentle pace. Comfortable waterproof walking shoes with stout corrugated soles for grip are advised. Much of the Abruzzo and Majella National Parks are accessible by road and we will reach a maximum elevation of c.2,500m (8,000ft).

Weather This is unpredictable in all high mountain areas but by late May conditions in the Apennines are usually settled. We will expect largely sunny days, but perhaps some showers, with temperatures in the highlands being cooler. Day-time temperatures will be in the range of 20-28C, becoming much cooler at night (3-10C).

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.

Tour Cost

2022 (8 days):

Land only cost: £1,995

Deposit: £500

Single Supp: £375

Cost includes

- Limosa Tour Leader – Andrea Corso
- Expert English-speaking Italian ornithologist
- 7 nights accommodation in Central Italy in comfortable rural hotels
- All main meals
- Minibus transport
- All excursions, entry fees and 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.



Rock Bunting © David Fairhurst

About Your Guide

Andrea Corso Born and raised in Siracusa, in southeast Sicily, Andrea is one of the leading voices in birdwatching and conservation in Italy and very much “Limosa’s man 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.

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

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.