

## **Sorrento 3<sup>rd</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> September 2013.**

Failing to find any reports of the Sorrento peninsular for the autumn, even in connection with the bird observatory on Capri, this is posted to spark some interest in others on family holidays' who see a few birds to add to the picture in this beautiful part of the world.

It's a report in two parts;

part one is the birds and where we saw them;

part two a more fuller report on how we got around and what else we saw.

Read one, both or neither, but if you do go I would be interested in what you find contact me on twitter via@dunnock67.

Part One.

2<sup>nd</sup> Sept. Arrival at dusk in the Airport at Napoli and transfer to Hotel Girasole, just inside Sorrento. Traffic crazy as ever and temperature 27C.

3<sup>rd</sup> Sept. First birds were rooster, blackbird and Italian sparrow while I lay in bed. Yellow-legged Gull from a walk down into Sorrento then as temperatures crept slowly into the mid 30s serin, collared dove, tree sparrow, hooded crow magpie and swallow were added poolside. Kestrel over Sorrento as we walked to dinner.

4<sup>th</sup> Sept. Boat across to Capri produced Scopoli's Shearwater in the channel between the mainland. The boat around the island gave only YL Gulls. Walk up to Capri stopped to 'see the view' as marsh harrier headed to Anacapri and by a garden that gave spotted flycatcher and sardinian warbler. Chair lift frustrating glimpses of passerines, but heard great tit, greenfinch and blackcap. From the top swift, raven and sparrowhawk. Waiting for the boat back two buzzards, hooded crow, probably another marsh harrier. Boat back another Scopoli's.

5<sup>th</sup> Sept. Poolside in the morning Honey buzzard going south to Amalfi coast. Saint Agnello train station Osprey and swallow. Pompei blackbird, kestrel, serin, Italian sparrow, jackdaw, hooded crow and collared dove.

6<sup>th</sup> Sept. Castelmare di Stabia. Blackcap, blue tit and cettis warbler (song). Vico Equensa White wagtail, kestrel, Yellow-legged gull, Italian sparrow.

7<sup>th</sup> Sept. Bus from Sorrento. 2 Raven after Saint Agata. Amalfi blackbird and Yellow-legged gull. Ravello –House martin, Swallow, honey buzzard, blue rock thrush and great tits.

8<sup>th</sup> Sept. Weather subtly different bit of high cloud and took longer to reach 30C. Swallows past the pool early morning were indications that things were changing also sardinian warbler firecrest and spotted flycatcher were new. Afternoon walk up from Sorrento behind the cemetery added chaffinch to the list in the olive grove at the top.

9<sup>th</sup> Sept. Train to Ercolano then taxi up Vesuvio. Crater had kestrel, Black redstart, wheatear and best of all two lanner. Ercolano held blue tit magpie goldfinch Italian sparrow jackdaw and the ever present collared dove. Also there serin blackbird blackcap and kestrel.

10<sup>th</sup> Sept. Naploi. Blackbird and Pallid swift. Plus gulls at the port –YL, Black headed and med Gull.

11<sup>th</sup> Sept. Back up to the olive grove gave willow warbler, spotted flycatcher, blackbird, Italian Sparrow greenfinch blackcap and great tit.

12<sup>th</sup> Sept. nothing new going to the airport but last bird of holiday was magpie feeding on runway.

**Bird list.**

Species	Poolside, Hotel Girasole	Wider Sorrento	Capri	Amalfi coast	Castellamare di Stabia/Vico Ecquensa	Pompei	Vesuvius and Ercolano	Napoli
<b>Scopoli's Shearwater</b>			6					
Sparrowhawk			1					
Osprey		✓						
Buzzard			2					
Marsh Harrier			2					
Honey Buzzard	1			1				
Kestrel		✓			✓	✓		
<b>Lanner Falcon</b>							2	
Yellow-legged Gull	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	
Black-headed Gull								✓
Mediterranean Gull								✓
Collared Dove	✓	✓				✓	✓	
Blackbird	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
Blue Rock Thrush				✓				
Black Redstart							✓	
Wheatear							✓	
Swift			✓					
Pallid Swift								✓
White Wagtail	✓				✓			
Swallow	✓	✓		✓				
House Martin				✓				
Magpie	✓						✓	

Hooded Crow	✓	✓				✓		
Raven		2	2					
Jackdaw						✓	✓	
Italian Sparrow	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	
Tree Sparrow	✓							
Spotted Flycatcher	✓	✓	✓					
Sardinian Warbler	✓	✓	✓					
Blackcap	✓	✓	✓		✓			
Willow Warbler		✓						
Cetti's warbler					✓			
Firecrest	✓							
Great Tit	✓	✓	✓	✓				
Blue tit		✓			✓		✓	
Serin	✓	✓				✓	✓	
Greenfinch	✓	✓	✓					
Chaffinch		✓						
Goldfinch							✓	

Part Two.

2<sup>nd</sup> Sept. Arrival at dusk in the Airport at Napoli and transfer to Hotel Girasole, just inside Sorrento, the outline of Vesuvio was just visible across the bay. Traffic crazy as ever and temperature 27C. Walked down into Sorrento. The first place that looked like it would serve edible food was past the crossroads a pizza franchise, simple food done well. Firework display from the bay as we walked back –a welcome and a half.

3<sup>rd</sup> Sept. I awoke about 7am and the first bird was a rooster as I lay in bed. Having arrived after dark it was hard to say what the outside world was like but this was followed by a blackbird and Italian sparrow. This is a relatively small family run hotel found and booked through <http://www.citalia.com>. The grounds were a mix of citrus trees, cacti, ornamental flowers attractive to insects and a pool. This was separated from the hotel by a small lane shared with another hotel which led to their pool.

Breakfast was a cold buffet with plenty of choice. After which we walked down to Sorrento. This time we chose the back route –right out of the hotel and first right down a quieter street to the chicken-run that is Corso Italia. A thirty yard stretch with no path makes for an interesting walk into town. The white plastic flowers in a vase may have been significant.

Overlooking the bay Yellow-legged Gulls were clearly seen as temperatures crept slowly into the mid 30's. After Ice cream we spent the rest of the day by the pool. Ubiquitous collared dove and YL gulls were in sight and three hooded crows flew over to a high tree vantage point, but the serins did not stop. After a while it became clear that 5 of the sparrows buzzing around were tree sparrows. It took a while for their call to be picked out. 3 hummingbird hawk moths and a scarce swallowtail fed on the flowers with a painted lady. As the day cooled past 3pm swallows started to appear all headed west towards Sorrento and eventually Capri. Many of them would divert to take a drink out of our pool or the one nearby. Some even bathed when the pool was empty by about 5pm. A magpie was in the distance and a Kestrel over Sorrento as we walked to dinner picked out the colours of the setting sun. The 'tick-ing' of a Sylvian warbler was not a blackcap. This was the closest I could get to an id in the garden centre near the football pitches. Bats were seen around some lamp posts.

4<sup>th</sup> Sept. Boat across to Capri, we booked onto the 1045 and it was late. Get the earliest one you can (times are available on the web) and get a seat outside. A few YL Gulls were seen but it produced the bird I hoped for - Scopoli's Shearwater in the channel between the mainland. Five birds were together until one split off and kept pace with the boat -3 wing flaps and a glide. As a lifer this was a real treat. One feature I had not noticed in books was the white outer primaries on the upper wing looking like a LT skua.

Straight off our ferry and onto a tour around the island at €17 it is great value for money. No new birds but it got us to the Blue Grotto. €12 extra but a real must see must do as you clamber from boat to boat and then go into an amazing natural phenomena.

The queue to get tickets for the funicular was quite long so I did the 'Dad thing' of saying we would walk up to Capri. It is further than you think it should be in 30C. We stopped to 'see the view' or

prevent us from dying just as a marsh harrier headed to Anacapri and by a garden that gave spotted flycatcher and sardinian warbler. We dripped as we ate in the main square overlooking harbour.

Bus ride up to Anacapri quickly takes you higher and drops you close to the chairlift to the top. This is another must. It seems rude not to speak to the people going down past you, but it seems even ruder to break the silence of this peaceful mode of transport. Frustrating glimpses of small passerines in the trees is all I got on the ride up. At the top though the butterflies were amazing apart from a swallowtail I can only guess what they were some looked like large gatekeepers .

From the top two raven flew towards the café and then 3 swift with a sparrowhawk above them. We never met any English people up here as perhaps this is too far off the usual tourist route. But birders get yourself up there. It was also a great place for lizards and the way down dangling over the few bits of more natural vegetation gave a glimpse of what the island may have been like. We did not wait for the bus and could not see anywhere to get a ticket from anyway, so paid the €15 taxi fare (bus was €5.40 one way get a return ticket in Capri would be best) to ride open topped with a canopy roof in a Mercedes.

Walking down from Capri we realised the path was longer than we thought and explained the way we felt going up. The spotted fly and Sardinian warbler were still in the same garden. Waiting for the boat back two buzzards hunted the cliffs and hooded crows flew onto the harbour wall. It was at this point we realised that was where we should be as the 5.45pm boat goes from the opposite side of the harbour to where we were dropped off. As we left, probably another marsh harrier was going along the ridge top. In the channel between the island and the mainland another Scopoli's was seen.

Having walked back to our hotel San Agnello was closer for dinner so we went there and was treated to a great vegetable pasta meal prepared for us as the family run restaurant *something* Rosa (turn left out of the hotel and first left at the crossroads and its on the right hand side). They had no vegetarian food on the menu but came up with this stunner for €43. It's a bit dark down there and we did get some insect bites too.

5<sup>th</sup> Sept. It was not going to be an early start after yesterday's walking so by 10am we were poolside as a Honey buzzard went south to Amalfi coast. No new birds but the second painted lady butterfly and a scarce swallowtail returned.

Saint Agnello train station for 2pm train and an Osprey just appeared coming up from the coast. A lesser cast of swallow going west and the ever present collared dove. The train to Pompei breaks you into the fact that this is not all sunshine and icecream. It is gritty on the inside and graffiti on the outside, but it was OK. Patronising as it sounds we were entering real Italy. The entrance to Pompei is easy to find but even at 2.30 it was still hot and the numbers of people being guided round made it feel oppressive in parts and it was not until we got down to the amphitheatre that the temperature dropped, the people thinned and a few more birds were seen. It is the south side of the site that seemed to have more birds. Jackdaw was new and another kestrel was seen. Lots of guidebooks will describe the site and that is not the purpose of this but as we left around 5.30 people were still

entering the site. This would be a great time to go as there were few people and the temperatures had dropped.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/the-mafia-left-naples-in-ruins-can-they-do-the-same-to-pompeii-8581883.html>

Back at the hotel a quick swim gave great views of swallows coming into drink. This seemed to be a real phenomenon of the 10 days. Birds would arrive from the east and some would divert to one of the two pools here and drink and sometimes bath as they then continued west. As there is no standing fresh water around here I guess this is an established pattern worth sitting in the sun to observe. Hard job but someone has to do it. Our first trip to Inn Bufalito was a good one for dinner (seek it out <http://www.innbufalito.it/>).

6<sup>th</sup> Sept. Morning by the pool and then again the 2pm Circumvesuvian train, this time San Agnello to Castellum di Stabia. We had planned to get the bus up Monti Ferano. There is a cable car here that was taken stopped in March for maintenance. It was due to restart in September but the town council seem to have decided that it is too expensive to keep running. Whatever reason they have decided the capital cost to put it in must be less than the revenue to run it. This could be one way of attracting tourists back to this once popular resort town.

OK we arrived mid-afternoon but it felt like the one horse in the town was on its last legs. There were wedding photographs being taken amongst huge stone pine trees towards the beach which made a stunning setting until we turned around and saw the view the other way as we looked for a replacement bus to the cable car. Luckily, a guy in a bar we would not probably have drunk in, explained to us, in English, we needed to get the train to Vico Equensa and there may be a bus from there. My embarrassment at not speaking Italian could not be greater at this point.

The station platform however added new holiday birds. In amongst the amazing selection of walnut, fig, hornbeam and other trees I did not recognise there were blackcap, blue tit and remarkably for someone who has only had them in the Norfolk Broads before Cetti's warbler burst into song.

Vico Equensa still maintained its air of a prosperous resort town. Sitting on the cliffs it looked down onto two beaches which we never got down too. A Jesuit Church sign told us of the Popes intention to pray for Syria on the following day. A flyover White wagtail got added to the list and the other birds of note were kestrel, Yellow-legged gull and Italian sparrow.

Poolside again and a white wagtail flew over there too, but today there were no swallows by 6pm.

7<sup>th</sup> Sept. Bus tickets for the Amalfi coast could be obtain from a table outside the train station in Sorrento. Get the earliest bus you can you will need a good day to do everything. Had to stand to Positano from Sorrento, but got two ravens for my trouble. The views are amazing, as is the rubbish in the laybys and other viewing points down to Positano. We stayed on to Amalfi and the driving is worth every penny to see. As is the cathedral. Amalfi is another world heritage site and for me it out did the last one we had seen –Pompeii. The steps up, the façade and the paradise garden are all incredible.

We got the smaller bus from the east end of the bus turning area to Ravello –Italians do not do queuing so we played the same game and got a seat. Spectacular views of the valley make this a great trip. Walked through the tunnel to a beautiful piazza with house martins overhead. After lunch using walk 17 from Tippet's Sorrento, Amalfi, Capri: Car Tours and Walks (Landscapes) we headed down to Amalfi. From the piazza down to a row of ceramic shops. After the 'Alcohol and Drugs' bar you go through a small tunnel and take the steps up (not the path down to the left) this takes you past some more restaurants and along to some steps –they are in poor repair, but the views are great.

After the steps you get onto a dirt path past olive groves and various tended veg patches. The woods on the left held great tits but they are a mix of native hard woods so at other times of the year will contain other things. There is a set of steps at a bend (with a number 38 next to them) which caused some confusion, but the path you need is further on after the path hugs the cliff face (effectively the second set of steps). Here we stopped and above the house martins a honey buzzard was going west high up. High on the cliffs a white house was Gore Vidal's. A house with grassy area outside had a blue rock thrush sitting on an out building. After this, more descent with amazing spiders webs containing ladders inside their lairs and a burst of bird song that could have been a melodious warbler. Further down we went past the church and onto the beach where a swim was just reward. Even going down, given the 30C plus heat it was a hard walk, but well worth the effort. Got off the bus at Positano, for a brief walk around town and to watch the lights coming on -another beautiful spot.

8<sup>th</sup> Sept. Weather was subtly different, a bit of high cloud and it took longer to reach 30C. Swallows in a large group flew past the pool early morning were indications that bird wise things were changing too. Also sardinian warbler, firecrest and spotted flycatcher were new for here.

Afternoon we walked up from Sorrento behind Sorrento cemetery added chaffinch to the list in the olive grove at the top. Largely it is the first part of another walk from the book. The views from the seating area above the first olive groves are stunning, you know they will be as your lungs are fit to burst and the lactic acid hugs your hamstrings. From here you can see more greenery and more potential for some natural vegetation, but still not as good as if you go along to the point of the peninsular according to information I had come across.

9<sup>th</sup> Sept. 9am train from Sant Agnello to Ercolano. Some of the stops after Pompeii give an indication of the poverty of this part of Europe. Many disused buildings and industrial sites being reclaimed by vegetation and those that are still in use are covered in graffiti. The ticket office for the transport (good 8 seater taxi) is in the left hand corner when you come out of the train station. Be shocked, but quietly, the town at the base of Vesuvio is reminiscent of a developing country. The rubbish and decay are shocking and a reminder that Italy is not all sunshine and gelato. Right up to the Parc gates dilapidated pizza places and graffiti are depressing sights. But once inside the park natural vegetation takes over. The car park was packed with busses and cars but our taxi fare included entry to the park so that was easy. The walk up is hard and it may be good to know that the sweat is dropping over the fence onto species of plants only seen here, but that is only with hindsight. It is worth the effort. The view from the top both out to Napoli and into the crater are amazing. A kestrel hunted the crater lip then disappeared. Anne found two confiding black

redstarts hunting insects, but we were the only ones looking. Two wheatears were also inside the lip. On the walk down the second trip lifer appeared as two lanner falcons hunted and cut the air with their dives. An American guy asked if they were eagles. They could have been seen equally as well from the car park, but you would have missed out if you do not go up. I could hear a variety of passerines from the car park, but not well enough to add anything new to the list.

You get dropped at the station with a pointer towards the first place to eat. Avoid this (though it may be good we did not go in) and go down the street towards the Roman Town of Erculano. Before you get to the museum (as opposed to the Roman site at the bottom of the hill) on the right hand side, pizza from Luna Caprese is fabulous.

Ercolano was more enjoyable than Pompeii in my opinion. It is a more manageable site less people and it feels you are more in touch with the past and less Disney. It is also easy to look up at the modern town and see patterns of housing still used today. The site held blue tit magpie goldfinch Italian sparrow jackdaw and the ever present collared dove. Also there serin blackbird blackcap and kestrel.

Before I went I was aware of the issues of extortion and crime in Southern Italy. Not to any great depth but have read more since getting back. If you have choice to spend your tourist money in a town you could do worse than spend it in Ercalano.

<http://www.presseurop.eu/en/content/article/1319421-town-stood-mafia>

A cloud had come across Sorrento by the time we got back and warm rain meant it was still comfortable to sit out in the covered area by the pool and read. I was at this point alone until a male and juv. serin came to talk the seeds the basil in the pots. Great views as up to then they had only been fly overs. Inn Bufalito again.

10<sup>th</sup> Sept. Napoli. I have to start by saying I did not want to like Naples. I had read a enough to make me concerned about the dirt, the rubbish and the crime to make me cautious, but what we found was a city I would be happy to go back to several times.

After Ercolano the train goes through more suburbs of the city that look the same kind of urban sprawl -1960s concrete with little soul. Perhaps this is all cities as you enter by train and Napoli is not special in that regard. In fact the last view of the city before you go underground is reminiscent of going into Leeds from the east –old buildings, modern buildings and older industrial parts. The thing Leeds lacks was the shanty town behind high walls from the north side of the train. Also a huge building with Chinese writing standing to attention on its roof dominated that part of the skyline.

We joined the masses spilling out into Piazza Garibaldi and headed to the NW corner along Via Alessandro Poerio and Via del Tribunali to the Duomo. Culturally, we were now a long way from Sorrento. Mopeds rushed past with the riders wearing no helmets. A man digging through waste skips as a 'profession'. Dark streets sunk deep between tall buildings. Carabinieri parked outside the Duomo as two boys played football and two women begged as we went in and out.

Pressing on we stopped for coffee opposite San Paolo Maggiore on the corner of Via San Gregorio ('Christmas Street' in some guide books) and we started to appreciate the city for what it is. The area did not seem to be flocking with the tourists we would expect elsewhere and the café owner seemed to be over helpful, in a good way. We went down and up V. San Gregorio and were amazed at the models and figurines, the church (San Gregorio Armeno) whilst not famous contains some fabulous art work in its drab shell. Napoli Sotterranea is not to be missed (<http://napolisotterranea.org/naples-underground/?lang=en>) it is 90 minutes hands-on history, geology and culture that adds to story of the layers of this city. Nearby was Santa Maria del Purgatorio with its bronze skull outside another part of the story. We then pressed on via the alleys to the Museo Archeologico Nazionale, though being Tuesday it was closed. However, opposite on the corner of Via Foria and Via Santa Maria del Constantinopoli was a pizza house that did fabulous food. We then added blackbird (if any birders are still reading) at Piazza Bellini as it stood on the Greek walls. Capella San Serverro was also closed on Tuesday, as was Santa Anna dei Lombardia, but by now we were in love with the place. We also appreciated that while we were not walking miles everything was on a grand scale. Huge churches never got a mention as they were not as grand as bigger grander church two streets away. Each one getting bigger and bigger until we go to Santa Chiara which must have clouds inside it and then turned around to see Gesu Nuova, a vast building that a photo does no justice to the scale.

The city then seemed to slip away a bit as we went down Via Toledo, High Street global names started to appear and then replaced local shops. Then, more big, impressive statements of buildings Galleria Umberto, Castel Nuovo and the buildings surrounding Piazza Plebiscito. 3 Pallid swift flew over, it was not so much their blunt wing tips but they do not make such a big curve as the swifts seen on Capri. They felt a bit like breast stroke swimmers who could not get their arms as far back as they should.

We then headed to the ferry as a great way to finish the day rather than return by train. The public toilets are bright and clean though lack certain features –toilet paper and toilet seats. While we waited to leave on the 6.25pm yellow-legged gulls were supported by black-headed and 1 mediterranean gull. We had hoped to see cetaceans or shearwaters from the boat but the sun set over Ischia was fabulous and made up for this. It was dusk as we got into Sorrento. We ate out in the main square in Sorrento, at the eastern end there are twinned restaurants the one that does the 'light food' was mainly vegetarian and my favourite food of the holiday. You could see lightening over the sea towards Napoli and during the course of desert and the walk back an amazing light show ensued both between clouds and just as general flashes. It continued until we had walked to the Hotel, there was no thunder and the rain did not fall until the early hours.

11<sup>th</sup> Sept. Last day and still keen to see new birds after a walk into town around the lemon grove – blackbird and great tit, and 'garden centre' I went back up to the olive grove from 8<sup>th</sup> Sept but this time from where it comes out nearly opposite the hotel on Via Arigliola. It gave willow warbler feeding in a walnut tree, as the only new bird, but a number of spotted flycatchers showed that migrants were moving. Lizards all over the walls will be missed when we are back in Britain as will the butterflies. The final meal was on Via San Francesco on the bend of the road by the piazza our second visit and just as good the second time.

12<sup>th</sup> Sept. nothing new going to the airport but last bird of holiday was magpie feeding on runway.

As it says at the start this is not a hard core birding trip, but for any birders who find themselves on a family holiday here, it will add something to your reading. Even though migration happens here it has not attracted much attention. If you do go I would like to hear what you find.

Finally, this should not put you off going but as a background to crime in Naples this is worth reading if you cannot stomach Roberto Saviano's book. <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2012/05/naples-mob-paolo-di-lauro-italy>

Any comments on this report via twitter to @dunnock67.