

Ever had Rome in Italy as a must-visit birding destination? My guess is, probably not.

Despite being perfectly located in the Mediterranean region the country's reputation when it comes to birds simply is bad. How it is possible that a country like this can house so few birds is beyond my comprehension. Too many wine fields leaving no space for wildlife? Or perhaps the classic Mediterranean tragedy with uncontrolled killing and eating for fun and life? Or perhaps the Almightyness above in favor of celestial justice has decided that with the presence of the Holy P there would be no need for other sky-reaching divine creatures to enlighten the day and life of the Italian people..?

Still I went there with my girlfriend in late October.

Being her first visit to Europe I thought that, even though Denmark has a lot to offer too, it would be a good experience to visit one of the old important European capitals. And her catholic background and inclinations made the eternal city a natural choice.

It would be a sightseeing trip as most people do it, but of course trying to twist it slightly in direction of birds, for what that would be worth. And fortunately it is worth at least a tiny something:

It looks like consensus has been reached among leading taxonomists, rewarding the Italian Sparrow with full species status! A lifer was therefore in play. Nothing to get too excited about you might say, but being a listing enthusiast, all species count, and even more so because I have a strong feeling that I'll never visit Rome or Italy again.

We decided to stay for a whole week, giving time to enjoy and not just skate through the sites and the city tailing the other tourists. But also to give space to the eventual birding opportunity should there be time. Studying trip reports I soon found out that about 30 species would be the realistic result of a visit to Rome. Sounding worse than poor, I was glad when we agreed about a hotel on the coast instead of downtown Rome. Imagined that the coast, and being close to the river mouth - the Tiber, would produce more birds. On the map it looked like there were some good green spots, so, moderately optimistic, I set a goal of 40 species to be seen during my stay.

Fiumicino, the airport, lies on the coast just north of the Tiber and our hotel was on the south side. Away from the normal tourist flow we had to find a local bus to get there. We only succeed after calling the hotel for directions. Luckily they spoke English because our Italian is practically non-existing. It's often said that if you speak Spanish, you'll have no problems with Italian, and vice versa. But only perhaps 30 % of the two is similar – not enough to have a meaningful conversation with anyone.

We arrived at Lido di Ostia after about half an hour's journey. A lady on the bus had told us, in Spanish, that we should get off at Lido Centro and from there take the metro to Stella Polare. One stop. From there we could walk to the hotel.

Roman style perhaps, I don't know, but after trying several times with the bus driver intending to figure out how to pay for the ride, we gave up, and just found a seat. The same lady then told us that you have to buy your tickets beforehand – either at a ticket kiosk or the Tabacco shops. But no worry she calmed us – had never experienced any ticket control. And we didn't either.

Lido di Ostia is a seafront suburb; the Roman escape during the hot season. Now it was quiet. Just how I like it. Urban seafront, we passed through large green areas to get there, a semi natural ruin complex, and the feeling of good anticipation felt justified. There had to be birds here.

It was afternoon when we checked in, but rather than confronting the frenetic metropolis right away, we decided to take it easy and explore the local area the rest of the day. Almost a new country to both of us any place would be interesting to visit first (I had vague memories from my booze-infested Interrail adventure just after High School). And even more prudent this decision turned out to be, when I realized that there was a natural reserve close by. Of course I would like to go, and doing it without having to break up one of the other days dedicated to sightseeing, couldn't be better. Very considerate of me.

The ocean is always a magnet, so our first move was to cross the street and walk the 50 meters to the beach. Restaurants and beach facilities were lined up in both directions. But there were very few people around. Being a work day of course would have an effect, but the 20 + degrees could have attracted some. But no. Nobody was swimming nor sun bathing. The volcanic dark sand looked inviting enough, though far from a bounty dream, but still we didn't feel inclined to submerge.

I was more focused on scanning the beach and ocean for anything flying. But that came out very disappointing. Not a single bird in sight!

I'm used to the Pacific Ocean in Mexico and in general it's not like you can expect a huge movement or congregation of birds when casually scouting from a waterfront, but a few birds at least will always show up. Think it could be expected anywhere in Denmark as well, but Italy certainly did live up to its poor reputation.

So we continued, and walking along the ocean boulevard toward the reserve the first birds finally showed up: White Wagtail, European Starling, Hooded Crow, Eurasian Blackbird and European Robin. The last three species turned out to be the character species of the area. Expect they were local birds. The crows look more slender than the birds in Denmark I think. With a profile more like a House Crow.

The reserve would be 5 kilometers away we were told, so with the help from an Italian guy waiting to visit his dentist we took a taxi. Had to phone it. The driver knew the place, but told us that it probably would be closed. It was fine with me. The idea was simply to add species to the list, and not so much getting good birding experiences. Expected that there would be some movement in and out. And it was lying close to Tiber mouth on the southern side – again, water and birds...

It was closed. And surrounded by a fence and with views obscured by vegetation it turned out useless. The entrance sign was highlighting Moustached Warbler and Little Bittern. The vegetation being of the water loving type they could indeed have been present inside, but of course impossible to do anything from a distance with these two skulkers.

We tried to circle around the reserve to find a vantage point but gave up when we saw that the road continued in a direction away from there. A Cetti's Warbler was calling from a shrub along the road. Never saw it, though, as with all the other absent birds! Nothing. Not even herons, gulls or doves. Stone dead. The reserve, perhaps 2 ha. big, was surrounded by apartment buildings and light industry making it an unattractive site to visit.

Opposite the reserve we found an entrance to the Port of Rome, yachts and sail boats, and from there we could walk back to the hotel along the esplanade. A nice walk in the fading light. It was less than 5 kilometers, and less was also the species list I had hoped to kick-start after this visit. The day gave me 11 species. All of a sudden the 30 species sounded more realistic than 40.

Not even the sparrow showed up. But luckily, reading through reports from earlier Rome explorers, dipping on the sparrow would require an extraordinary effort, like staying in your hotel room 24 hours a day, all days, and even then you might have to struggle to not hear a single chirp from a by-passing bird. So, having planned to see all the major attractions, it would only be a matter of time before the sparrows would reveal themselves.

The next day we took off after breakfast in the early morning and commuted to the center of Rome with the working people. It was about half an hour to get to Porta San Paolo, twin station to Pirámide. A bus took us closer to Pantheon where we would start our ruta turística. We got off after passing the Victor Emanuel monument, Altare della Patria, which by its sheer size is impossible to ignore. We wanted photos, but decided not to climb it. From there we started walking. Pantheon, Piazza Navona, Fontana di Trevi, Piazza di Spagna and finally the Borghese park.

The sparrow I got already at Pantheon, and satisfied I could then concentrate on navigating the river of crowds that took us through the town. The narrow streets throughout the center were packed with people. All in calm order, but a constant flow of bodies. And that is when you learn the bad way that the Romans smoke a lot and eat too much fresh garlic!

Of course we were impressed with the city and the art, but still the true excitement on my part first began when we entered Parco di Villa Borghese. Besides getting away from the crowds I hoped to get photos of some of the common species as well.

I only started taking photos after Mexico became my life project. As a consequence there are many common European species I don't have photos of, and here I might have a chance with some of them. Firecrest, for example, we do have in Denmark, but it's not common, so getting good photos is a challenge. From other trip reports I had understood that it should be regular, if not common. I would also like to have photos of Yellow-legged Gulls on their native grounds. This species shows up in northern Europe in some numbers, but many discussions about how to identify them take place on the basis of birds found away from their normal distribution area. Prone to errors based on very large variation among individuals of the large gulls, I prefer to have my own reference material from within the known distribution range. Italy is that.

And it turned out that one of the more regular species we saw when walking around, indeed was the gull. The presence of the Tiber and plenty of [street] food, I imagine, the gull seemed to thrive.

However, the passerines in general simply would not cooperate. Got a few Firecrests, yes, but way out of photo range, and only 1 warbler: Another Cetti's. Hooded Crow, European Robin and the Blackbird participated again, as did the local dark subspecies of Long-tailed Tit. During the week it turned out to be one of the more common small birds. In town and on the coast.

A Little Egret at the duck pond gave photos. The two rats that circled my feet where I had dug into a hedge to pee did not! I stayed calm, doing my business, and they stayed calm ignoring the fresh sprinkle as they moved along slowly.

Otherwise the biggest surprise was when the exotic birds flying around turned out to be an unexpected species. Escaped Monk Parakeets have established in the city as they have all around the world. Have them in Guadalajara too. But the many parrots that flew around this day in the park were not Monkies. They were Rose-ringed Parakeets. This Afro-Asian species is another of the common exotics rapidly establishing in urban jungles around the globe.

On our way out we saw two Monk Parakeets in front of their nests.

The sweet Italian Sparrows were in fresh plumage most of them. Meaning that the black breasts of the males were obscured by the fresh pale fringes to the feathers. It looks like a mix between the House Sparrow and the Eurasian Tree Sparrow. Brown crown, no black cheek spot and black chest. The females are supposed to be inseparable from female House Sparrows. I thought they looked warmer colored, at least warmer than our birds in Denmark, but this could have to do with the fact that most of the females I saw were young birds.

Being tired after a long day walking, and without any recommended restaurants in mind, we ended up in a tourist trap restaurant. More expensive than the quantity and quality could justify, as expected. But I asked them to fill up the plate, and they did so without complaints or extra charge. But of course, if not in Italy where else should pasta be served in plenty and for less..?

And then it was time to commute back to our, in this moment, very far away hotel. Only that in the morning we hadn't thought about buying bus tickets for our return trip, so we had to do this now. And of course as the universal laws predict, not a Tabacco in sight when needed. I think we walked up and down Via del Corso several times before we finally found one hidden in the back of a restaurant on Piazza Venezia. And we did ask!

We bought the tickets, but contrary to what you would normally do, we got on the bus, but without stamping them! Strange you might think. But so done after advice from a local Lido di Ostia the night before who, while eating pizza, had told us not to do it. We should wait until the metro station. The time based ticket system is supposed to cover all public transport forms in Rome, but for some reason, if you stamp the ticket before entering the metro station, it will not be accepted by the entry machine and you'll have to buy a new one.

Perhaps it's an inevitable genetic trait of the Italians: Too uninspiring to deal with daily life challenges, only reaching mental momentum and drive when they're dealing with unnecessary high class products, like sports cars, clothes and Gitzo tripods.

In retrospective, I think the much walking up and down Via del Corso to get tickets was needless. An unstamped ticket is probably equally invalid as a non-existing - the tickets are always available at the metro stations...

The visit at Borghese park gave 8 new species, thus ending the day with a total of 19 species for the trip.

Wednesday was dedicated to the Vatican Museum and Saint Peter's Church. A whole day achievement and birds were not in focus. With a prognosis saying all day rain, we couldn't have chosen a better day for this indoor activity.

Again we commuted into the city, but this day, instead of leaving the metro at Porta San Paolo, we would continue taking another line to Termini, and from there take another line again toward the Vatican. We could have taken a bus too, but thought it would be faster and more convenient on the metro. Partly a mistake!

We arrived well at the Termini platform and walked toward the other line we were to take, and were chocked! The stairs and the platform were packed with people. Theft and run-down casualties ran through my head while deciding if we should retreat our way back to find a bus. But we had to be at the museum at a certain time because we had bought the tickets online (recommended to avoid long waiting time), and it said that if you arrive later than the entry time you had chosen when buying the ticket, you would have to join the ordinary line. We didn't have time for experiments, so we secured our bags and, blending with the crowd, started to move slooowly forward. But all in good order, it turned out. The Romans are of course used to it, and when train number four arrived we were first in line, and the journey continued.

What can you say. Impressive of course, the Vatican interior. Especially the map room with the incredible gold framed ceiling. I remember I was impressed when I saw the Sistine Chapel the first time back in -85 (we weren't drunk all the time). But this time I felt it less so. I think partly because I have traveled more and have experienced more grand human endeavors since then. But also because of the atmosphere. The

experience was less pleasant because of too many people. In some parts of the museum you can walk freely, and take your time to study the art work, but when approaching the S Chapel it starts to get more tense and because of the narrow access stairs you feel like being squeezed through a tube until you suddenly pop out into the big room. But the relief was short. The room was packed, and it was a struggle to simply find a place to stand securely and start observing and enjoying.

But I managed to find a spot in the middle of the room. My girlfriend strayed her own way. As one of the first things, I automatically took out my camera and lifted it overhead to start shooting. But then a loud commanding voice suddenly shouted out: NO PHOTOS! What the f...!? I could just have pressed the button, was shooting without flash, but the sudden attention and standing there in the center of it all, I followed the order, and took down the camera.

Of course I was not the only one with photo intentions. There were several guards in the room, and on shift they continued shouting. Don't know why it was not allowed, forgot to ask. Perhaps to protect the paintings, but then they could have said photos without flash. Perhaps to avoid that slow-moving photographers would block the flow. But then they could have arranged the flow through the room more intelligently. Or perhaps the more likely cause: To protect the right to earn enormously on two-fingered-souvenirs!

For any eventualities sake I always bring my binoculars if possible. Also this day. No restrictions on these which made it much easier to study the details of the paintings on the ceiling and high on the walls. 20 meters high, 40 meters long and 13 meters wide. Like that I could cover the entire room from one safe spot away from the massive flow.

Don't think there were artificial light to illuminate the wonders, and with the overcast and rainy day, I'm sure this added to the moody experience.

Tip: If the Sistine Chapel is the highlight of the museum and you plan on continuing to visit Saint Peter's Church afterward, then you can save an enormous amount of time if you buy a guided tour to the museum. Of course more expensive, but you get the benefit with such a ticket to enter the church from a passway directly from the Sistine Chapel. Like this you don't have to leave the museum the normal way, and walk through the streets to Saint Peters Square from where you will have to line up to get in. I think we waited more than an hour. Being late afternoon then, we simply did not have enough time to enjoy the church. Or perhaps better: Split up the two visits and enjoy them to the fullest. You can easily use a whole day in the museum. We felt forced to leave before having seen it all, to reach the church.

Noted one species on this day. From the open windows overlooking the Vatican garden a few Rose-ringed Parakeets came flying in and sat in a tall pine tree. Had been more proper though, if they had been Monk Parakeets...double Argentinian Roman Style within the Holy walls...

We had supper in a local dinner close to our hotel. Good quality stuff that was.

Thursday was a combi-day. The agenda said Colosseum and Forum Romano. Ignoring the historical perspective the latter is practically a city park. Admitted, a lot of stones, but also a tree here and there. Other birders had seen Blue Rock-Thrush from the walls. Would love to get a picture.

Colosseum surprised me when I visited the first time in -85, and also this time. From the outside it looks rather modest in size, but when entering the open space in the center, it's enormous! But I also remembered the uncomfortable feeling of being in a place appealing to the lowest in human beings. Different times - different values, you might say, but I don't buy it. It's an absolute. Violence for pleasure can only be the result of a decadent and perverted mind set.

Colosseum gave a Kestrel, a Hooded Crow and a Gray Wagtail. Plus a few Yellow-legged Gulls enjoying the view from the highest walls.

It was pretty fast to get through security this time. Yes, security with a bag scanner just like in the airport, though the equipment here looked a bit outdated. The long time waiting to get into Saint Peter's was for the same reason...Do true believers, pure at heart, really need this? Didn't Jesus show us by example the extent of personal sacrifice we should all accept and endure to consider ourselves true to God? True faith is also an absolute. Rhetorical of course, since it is obvious that both insiders and most visitors have lost their hearts to worldly gains!

It took longer to get through security at Forum Romano, but being out in the open I didn't mind. While waiting, I hoped, and visualized the Rock-Thrush to emerge from some protrusion above our heads.

When visiting new places and localities I instinctively move about based on two criteria: First seeking out spots with interesting vegetation or habitats, and next moving about trying to avoid other people. Achieving any of the two was a challenge this day.

But with one eye out for the attraction we did the attempt, and soon we found our way down a narrow tree-fringed path, and here the first Black Redstarts showed up. The males in crisp black plumage. Further ahead we passed through what must be called the hotspot of the day: A single Common Chiffchaff puzzled about overhead, and from almost the same tree a European Serin was singing. Not much of a hotspot I hear you think, and you're right. But everything being relatively, it still was.

For some inexplicable reason it was not allowed to enter Colosseum with any liquids at all. If you bring some, it will have to be consumed at the entrance or dumped. Of course most people are not able to consume all their water reserves in one go, and to accommodate them, the good Romans had placed several black buckets just before the x-ray machine. Water being more expensive every day, I decided to drink as much as possible hoping there would be good access to toilets inside. Emptied the rest into the bucket and went through security at least half a kg heavier.

Never saw a toilet in Colosseum, because there was no need to. An unexpected delay but when leaving the Serin hotspot it was time. We both had to pee!

Surely no hedges or hidden corners to use in this place, so we started scouting. Not with tears in our eyes, but a thought imaging long waiting lines did give birth to a slight worry. I really had to go. In fast paced radar mode we zigzagged in and out of slow-moving lines, and finally spotted the building. Probably have to enter from the other side, I thought, because there were no lines to see. But the miracle was real. No line, and life was good. When I came out 10 men were waiting in line with their eyes fixated on the door! I smiled and retreated to scan some large trees close by while waiting for my ex.

The Rock-Thrush never showed up. More Black Redstarts, a few Cetti's Warblers and Common Chaffinches did, as well as a kestrel that I first thought was a Lesser, but had to call Eurasian when revising the photos. A modest result indeed.

From the palace building on the highest ground a few gulls showed an exceptionally tame attitude. One was lying on top of the thick wall, allowing people to approach it almost to touch. Adept adaptation to the urban jungle lifestyle.

We left in the afternoon after a good day. Returned via Términi to buy tickets for next day's trip to Florence. Had dinner in our local diner again. Easy and good.

The Forum Romano visit gave 6 new species for the trip, reaching an impressive total of 25!

We decided to include a one-day trip to Florence to expand our Italian horizon. I'd gotten the impression that the city is a golden beauty of precious artwork and architecture. I would like to see it. Michelangelo's David was at the top of my ex's wish list. Regarding the birds I didn't expect anything.

It's fairly easy to make this day-trip if you choose the fast train. Frecciarossa. Not cheap, but with a march speed of 246 km/t you can plan with a whole day's sightseeing and still return to Rome before it gets too late. It takes 1 and a half hour. You should buy your tickets in advance – it's a very popular trip.

We were to start our trip from Términi, but almost missed it! We had calculated with one hour to get from the coast to the station which our newly gained experience had told us should be enough. But of course there were delays this morning, and when sitting in metro number two a few stops before Términi with 10 minutes to departure and the doors didn't close, I was sure we had lost.

We would have to find our way through this the largest train station in Rome without any clue about distances, directions and other obstacles.

The well-known feeling of childish disappointment started to bubble close to the surface. Of course the tickets would be lost if we arrived late, and it would probably be difficult to find available tickets the next day, being a Saturday. But simply the price for the trip with double expenses on tickets was not to my liking. Would be too much.

Finally the doors closed and we continued. Almost holding our breath we kept starring at the clock as we moved slowly through the tube. We arrived at Términi 5 minutes before departure. Though it looked impossible we decided to give it a try and started running the fastest we could while activating our super perceptual cerebral mode scanning every sign we passed by in a light-speeding pace.

The station was very big. We kept running through long endless corridors, almost like in the airport. A confusing sign stopped us for a while, and when back on track again, it was only to find the road blocked by a man in uniform. Not welcomed, a ticket control in the middle of nowhere. Behind him we could see that the corridor continued for at least 50-100 meters. Hopeless. We tried to get some meaningful directions out of him, or perhaps just a calming word, but it did not happen. Italian stoneface. We just had to keep running. Exhausting. But then finally the light of mercy was cast upon us, when half way down the corridor a left turn had us enter the aisle to get up on the platforms. Last resources to climb the stairs and hallelujah, the train was still there! We tumbled inside through the nearest door, and while still breathing uncontrollably we could confirm that it was one minute to departure. Thank you!

Of course the train was late, and we were already relaxed when it finally took off. In that moment my ex found out that her new scarf was missing. Surely, it had slipped from her beautiful neck during the run.

Train rides and birding don't match that well, and even less so when on a high speed train, so it was time to lay back and enjoy the hopefully beautiful Tuscany landscape. Just that I had my doubts, because I have to admit that Tuscany is not my thing. Too neat and sterile it looks.

And so it turned out. Perhaps spring is more beautiful, but the rolling hills without eye-catching colors, shapes or structures soon became boring to look at, and we both gave in to the sweet slumber that only a train ride can provide.

It took us some time to find out that there was no tourist information at the train station, so we had to buy a map in a Tabacchi which we also had difficulties finding. But then we were off. Walking.

By decision we would only visit a few places. Frankly, I hadn't prepared well for the visit, and I'm sure there were important art pieces that we 'ought' to have seen that we didn't. Michelangelo's David and the Da Vinci museum plus Ponte Vecchio were on the agenda. I don't even think we had the Cathedral in mind. Impossible to miss it however. Impressive no doubt, but it also radiated a strange gloomy doom-laden aura that made me not want to go inside. But we did.

David was well-done, Da Vinci with hands-on was fun and the bridge took us to the other side of the the Arno river where we had lunch while surrounded by sparrows. The day gave 3 species! The sparrows, Black-headed gulls on the river and 3 Cattle Egrets flying to their night roost as we approached the train station after a pleasant day.

On the bridge they sell jewelry to los enamorados. We didn't buy anything. We bought a very expensive ice-cream instead of. 25 euro for two small cups! It was good, but not that good. Never can be...

Our train was again delayed, from Milan. But the ride back went smoothly and we were back at our hotel in good time.

With the Cattle Egrets the species total was now 26!

Saturday went to shopping and sightseeing around Circo Massimo. We found an interesting organic market behind the complex and bought tasty souvenirs.

A quiet and pleasant day without any birds registered.

Sunday was our last day, and because the birding had been rather poor I was granted a visit to a large park like area, Castel Fusano, close to our hotel. We went together. A stop or two on the metro and from there we would walk. It was a costal pine forest with brushy understory. It looked promising. But also to the daily Ostians. Dog walkers and joggers all over! But at least the area was larger and wilder than Forum Romano and it was possible to circle out of their way, into the shrub.

A Greater Spotted Woodpecker was quickly new on the list as well as Great and Eurasian Blue Tit – feeling very much at home... The robin, the blackbird and the crow too, as always. Further ahead a Eurasian Jay and a Wren gave sound. Easier here in Europe with the wrens... Overhead two larger flocks of Common Wood-Pigeons flew by, and on the ground some loose and lost feathers puzzled me and still do. Likely from a kill. A strange combination of long narrow brownish-barred primaries and yellowish-green breast or belly feathers. No sign of the rest of the bird. But perhaps the solution lies in combined remnants, from both the victim and the attacker, the yellow-green feathers being from a parrot..?

For a short while, with the new species, and not knowing the species total exactly, I started to hope that I would achieve my goal of 40 species. Even more so when a Short-toed Treecreeper started calling from a trunk nearby. More Long-tailed Tits, a Firecrest and the liquid twitter from a European Goldfinch only added to the day list. But as we continued walking through the monotonous habitat the activity slowly died out. We wanted to go to Rome in the afternoon to do some last shopping and to say Farewell Roma, so we left the forest and started walking back to the hotel along the beach front.

Being a nice sunny day, and Sunday, there was considerably more activity along the road. The birding on the ocean side was still almost none-existing. The only difference from the other day being 4 roosting Great Cormorants and 51 ditto Sandwich Terns. Adding two species to the list.

And during our whole walk we didn't see any signs of the earthquake that hit us in the morning. One of the strongest in modern Italian history!

We were eating breakfast when the floor suddenly started to move, and forced us to leave the building. But it only lasted a few seconds, and apparently nothing happened to anyone nor anything. We were therefore very surprised to hear about its force afterward. We even entered the dining room again to finish our breakfast (in the moment of writing, January 19, another earthquake has caused death in the same region when an avalanche ploughed through a hotel). We were fortunate. Fortunate with living. Less fortunate with loving, as it later turned out. Would have preferred to have both, but after all the best combination if one has to choose.

After our farewell visit in the center we returned to our hotel and had dinner in one of the seafront restaurants close by. The best during the trip, and a very pleasant experience.

Adding up all the observations, the species total ended on 34. Average, and it probably isn't possible to get much more out of a combined culture and bird trip to this region.

An experience richer, and one species, early Monday morning we left Italy, and arrived safely in Denmark a few hours later. Less so did my suitcase. Who knows where it went meanwhile, but despite that it was name tagged, it still took one week to finally reach Copenhagen. Late, but intact.
All well!

Complete species list