

Trip report Montenegro (28 May-10 June 2019)

Crew: Willem, Bartje, Jeroen & Pieter

Report: Willem

We did a road trip around Montenegro, mostly for amphibians and reptiles, and also a bit for butterflies and speleo(bio)logy. While Montenegro is hardly ever mentioned as a bird-watching paradise, it is a hot spot for reptiles, and also harbours some nice, endemic amphibians, such as Albanian pool frog. Although none of us were really die-hard bird watchers, seeing Dalmatian pelicans on Lake Skadar was also one of our main goals.

28-29 May – The journey

The early morning of 28 May, I left Gent-St-Pieters in the drizzling rain to meet up with the rest of the crew in Liege, to start a long train journey to Montenegro. The journey continued through Frankfurt, Zurich and Zagreb towards Belgrade, where we took the night train to Bar, at the Adriatic coast. Species-wise the journey was relatively uneventful, although we saw some **White storks** near Freiburg.

30 May – Lake Skadar & Bukumirsko Jezero

In the early morning, we crossed the Montenegrin border with a two hour delay. After a short passport check, we continued our journey through the impressive landscape of the Dinaric alps. The train crossed Lake Skadar on a dyke, where Jeroen saw our first **Dalmatian pelicans**. After we picked up our rental car at the train station of Bar, we took off.



Figure 1: Welcome to Montenegro - Bijelo Polje railway station

We drove back on the same dyke where Jeroen saw the Dalmatian pelicans through the train window, and we stopped for a lunch break on the island with the ruins of Fort Lesendro. After a short time, we were able to see some more Dalmatian pelicans in the distance. Additionally, we saw some **Grebes** and a few **White-winged terns**. We also saw a single **Dalmatian wall lizard** (*Podarcis melisellensis*) in the ruins and a pool frog, which may have been an Albanian pool frog.



Figure 2: Dalmatian wall lizard

After lunch, we continued our journey towards Bukumirsko Jezero. The area around this small lake in the Prokletije mountains, near the Albanian border, is home to the rare and highly endemic **Prokletije rock lizard** (*Dalmatolacerta montenegrina*). On our way, we saw some **Common linnets**. After arriving at Bukumirsko Jezero, we parked our car near the lake, and we made a small walk towards the rocks north of the lake. Between the rock crevices, we were able to find a single lizard, while several **Crag martins** were circling above our head. Back at the lake, we saw a **Crested lark** and lots of **Northern wheatear** and **Yellowhammer**.



Figure 3: Prokletije rock lizard hiding between the rocks

When it got dark, we decided to look for amphibians in a smaller pond 100 metres from the lake. In addition to common species, such as **Alpine newt** (*Ichthyosaura alpestris*), **Smooth newt** (*Lissotriton vulgaris*) and **Common toad** (*Bufo bufo*), we also saw large numbers of **Yellow-bellied toad** (*Bombina variegata*) and **European green toad** (*Bufo viridis*). A calling **European tree frog** (*Hyla arborea*) was heard but not seen. After this fruitful evening, we pitched up our tents and went to sleep.



Figure 4: Bukumirsko jezero

31 May – Bukumirsko Jezero & Prokletije mountains

We decided to leave the car at the lake and to hike up the mountains. Soon, we caught a **Wood white** (*Leptidea* sp.). During our climb, we encountered large numbers of **Common redstart** and **Red-backed shrike** and we heard a **Common cuckoo**. We also caught a bumblebee (*Bombus mesomelas alboluteus*). This species occurs in mountain ranges in Europe and the Caucasus, while our subspecies occurs eastwards from the Balkans to Iran. During a short break, we also noticed a few Prokletije rock lizards.

We hiked up to the top of Surdup and Štitan (both ca 2180 m asl.), two neighbouring peaks, where we saw **Alpine accentors** and **Alpine choughs**. The climb was not always easy, as there still was a lot of snow present from about 1500 m high. When descending, we were caught up by some heavy rain. Another big Green toad crossed our path, but because of the poor weather, we decided to call it a day.

1 June – Bijelo Polje

As we wanted to do some speleology, we met up with a local speleologist in Bijelo Polje. Soon after leaving Bukumirsko Jezero, we stopped at a nice grassland, where we caught a **Woodland ringlet** (*Erebia medusa*). We also saw some **Red-rumped swallows**. The journey to Bijelo Polje took several hours, because the road was in poor condition and was used by heavy machines driven by a big army of Chinese workers, who were building Montenegro's first motorway. On several locations, the small road had turned into a dirt track with big holes in it. Luckily, we arrived in Bijelo Polje in one piece, and we, together with our local guide, visited Pećina Osoja. Except for a **Horseshoe bat** (*Rhinolophus* sp.), we did not find any interesting vertebrates, although the cave was also populated by several millipede species.



Figure 5: Horseshoe bat in the cave

After our cave visit, our guide showed us a small restaurant at the banks of the Lim river, where we were allowed to pitch up our tents in the garden. This seemed to be the local (free) camping ground, as several other tourists also spent the night at this place.

2 June – Some more speleology

Our guide led us to another cave, Novakovića Pećina, where we saw another Horseshoe bat. Another nice find was *Rozajella madzgalji*, an endemic cave beetle that only occurs in this cave and was named after our guide! Near the cave entrance, we found a **Clouded Apollo** (*Parnassius mnemosyne*). After our speleology-adventure, we went to Biogradska Gora, where we did a small walk around the lake, which only yielded a common toad. In the evening it started raining heavily, so we decided to sleep under a small pavilion at the lake bank.

3 June – Biogradska Gora

It kept on raining throughout the day. Unfortunately not the best circumstances for reptiles, but we decided to climb the mountain anyway. We saw some big individuals of the nominal subspecies of the **Fire salamander** (*Salamandra salamandra salamandra*), and after turning some stones we found a **Slowworm** (*Anguis fragilis/graeca*). As both Greek and Common slowworm occur in the area, it was impossible to say which species we found. During the walk we were also invited inside by some nice shepherds, who let us dry our clothes and offered us some really nice food. Afterwards, we walked back to our car and drove through the Tara Canyon in the direction of Žabljak. We left the main roads to look for a nice place to sleep. Along the dirt track, we found a group of abandoned Katuns. The small stable was open and seemed comfortable enough for a good night's rest.



Figure 6: Our hotel for the night

4 June – Durmitor

After a long, but scenic drive over dirt tracks, where Northern wheatear, Red-backed shrike and Alpine newt were our only observations, we arrived in Žabljak. After some shopping, we parked our car at the border of the national park, and we started the hike to Katun Lokvice, an unattended mountain hut where you can spend the night for free. During the climb, we saw a couple of **Mosor rock lizards** (*Dinarolacerta mosorensis*), another target species! Additionally, we had some nice views of **Chamois** (*Rupicapra rupicapra balcanica*). Near the Katun, we also saw a **Ring ouzel**. In a small lake nearby, we found Alpine newt and **Common frog** (*Rana temporaria*).



Figure 7: Mosor rock lizard

5 June – Durmitor (day 2)

We climbed to a mountain peak and afterwards visited the ice cave Ledena Pećina, which was a rather stunning experience. Except for some Alpine choughs, we did not see any birds worth mentioning. Then, we started the descent and in the early evening we arrived at our car. As we wanted to visit the coastal region in the next few days, we already left in the direction of Nikšić, where we stopped for dinner. For a cheap and tasty meal, I can strongly advise the restaurant 'Nutricia'. We drove a little outside the city to pitch up our tents at Slansko Lake.



Figure 8: Even though it's not a bird, the ice cave is definitely worth a visit.

6 June – Lovćen

After a rather bad night (we did not get much sleep, as dogs were barking at us all night long), we drove to Cetinje. The route took us along narrow, winding roads, and we got to realize that Montenegrins drive like crazy! Somehow, we arrived in Cetinje in one piece. This former Royal Capital of Montenegro is a small, but rather nice town. At Cetinje monastery we saw **Wall lizards** (*Podarcis muralis*). As it was already noon, and our reptile list was still a bit disappointing, we decided to go uphill and visit Lovćen.

After parking our car, we walked through beech forest, where we saw a **White-backed woodpecker**. After climbing into more rocky terrain, things got a little more interesting. First, Bartje found a female **Nose-horned viper** (*Vipera ammodytes*), and then we found large number of the dark form of **Sharp-snouted lizard** (*Dalmatolacerta oxycephala*). A few hundred metres further, we found another female Nose-horned viper and a large population of Mosor rock lizard. These animals were more yellow and a lot more shy than the ones in Durmitor. On our way back to the car, we found a **Common slowworm** (*Anguis fragilis*) and a few Green lizards, but as we were not able to catch one, it was impossible to say whether these were Eastern or Balkan green lizards.

After this successful excursion, we drove southwards, following the coastline to the small coastal town of Petrovac. Here we ate a pizza, observed crowds of Russian tourists and finally pitched our tents a bit outside the town centre.



Figure 9: A rather angry Nose-horned viper.

7 June – Lake Šas

After a quick swim in the Adriatic Sea, we packed our stuff and drove towards Lake Šas, after doing some shopping in Ulcinj. This small lake is situated south of Lake Skadar, near the Albanian border, and is almost completely surrounded by reed, and barely influenced by humans.

We first checked the shrubland near the ruins of an old church and monastery. Here we caught **Spotted fritillary** (*Melitaea didyma*). We also had some nice views of **Eastern black-eared wheatear**, while the shrubland was populated by **Eastern subalpine warblers**. At the castle ruins, we caught a **Balkan green lizard** (*Lacerta trilineata*) and we saw a few **Balkan whip snakes** (*Hierophis gemonensis*). We also found an **Eastern baton blue** (*Pseudophilotes vicrama*) and a **European beak** (*Libythea celtis*).

We then drove to one of the few places where the lake was accessible, near a small restaurant. In the lake, we saw large numbers of **Dice snake** (*Natrix tessellata*) swimming. At the lake, there were also some boats, which formed nice platforms for diving. After a short visit to the border town of Štodra, we decided that the wooden platform near the old church ruin would be the best place to spend the night.



Figure 10: So that's why they call it 'Dice snake'...

8 June – Lake Skadar

During a morning walk, I saw a single **Dalmatian algyroides** (*Algyroides nigropunctatus*) on the wooden stairs near the old church. After we packed our bags, we left for Lake Skadar. Near Sjerçi, we found a nice spot at the banks of the lake. A small bay with a dense vegetation of water plants was inhabited by hundreds of **Albanian pool frogs** (*Rana shqipericus*), another target species! We also spotted several individuals of Sharp-snouted lizards. Here, we saw the blue morph, which is a lot nicer than the dark morph. In the distance, we also saw a dozen Dalmatian pelicans swimming past. In the lake, we found a dead **Grass snake** (*Natrix natrix*). Just when we were about to leave, we saw another group of Dalmatian pelicans coming our way, and landing in the small bay. We were able to observe them for several minutes at a distance of only 20 m!



Figure 11: Male of the Sharp-snouted lizard (blue form): much nicer than the dark form!



Figure 12: Albanian pool frog, one of the rarest amphibians in Europe!

After driving a few hundred metres, we had to brake, as a large, snake-like reptile was crossing the road! **Glass lizard** (*Pseudopus apodus*)! We were able to catch it and to watch this beauty up close. Later during the day, we saw several other individuals crossing the road. When we passed through the next village, we stopped for a dead Balkan whip snake that was lying on the road. As we were unable to catch the living specimens we saw the day before, this was a nice opportunity to have a closer look at the species. When we wanted to return to our car, we were surprised by a **Hermann's tortoise** (*Testudo hermanni*), walking at the side of the road! After taking some pictures, we continued our journey. We stopped again at the banks of the lake near the town of Godinje. In addition to some European beaks, we also heard a **Great reed warbler** singing from the reed. With this nice observation, we decided to leave for Bar, where we had to return the car in the evening.



Figure 13: Pieter with his new friend.



Figure 14: Dead Balkan whip snake.



Figure 15: The crew with Hermann's tortoise.

After returning the car, we had a quick meal, and we boarded the night train to Belgrade, for a 48-hour train journey back to Belgium.

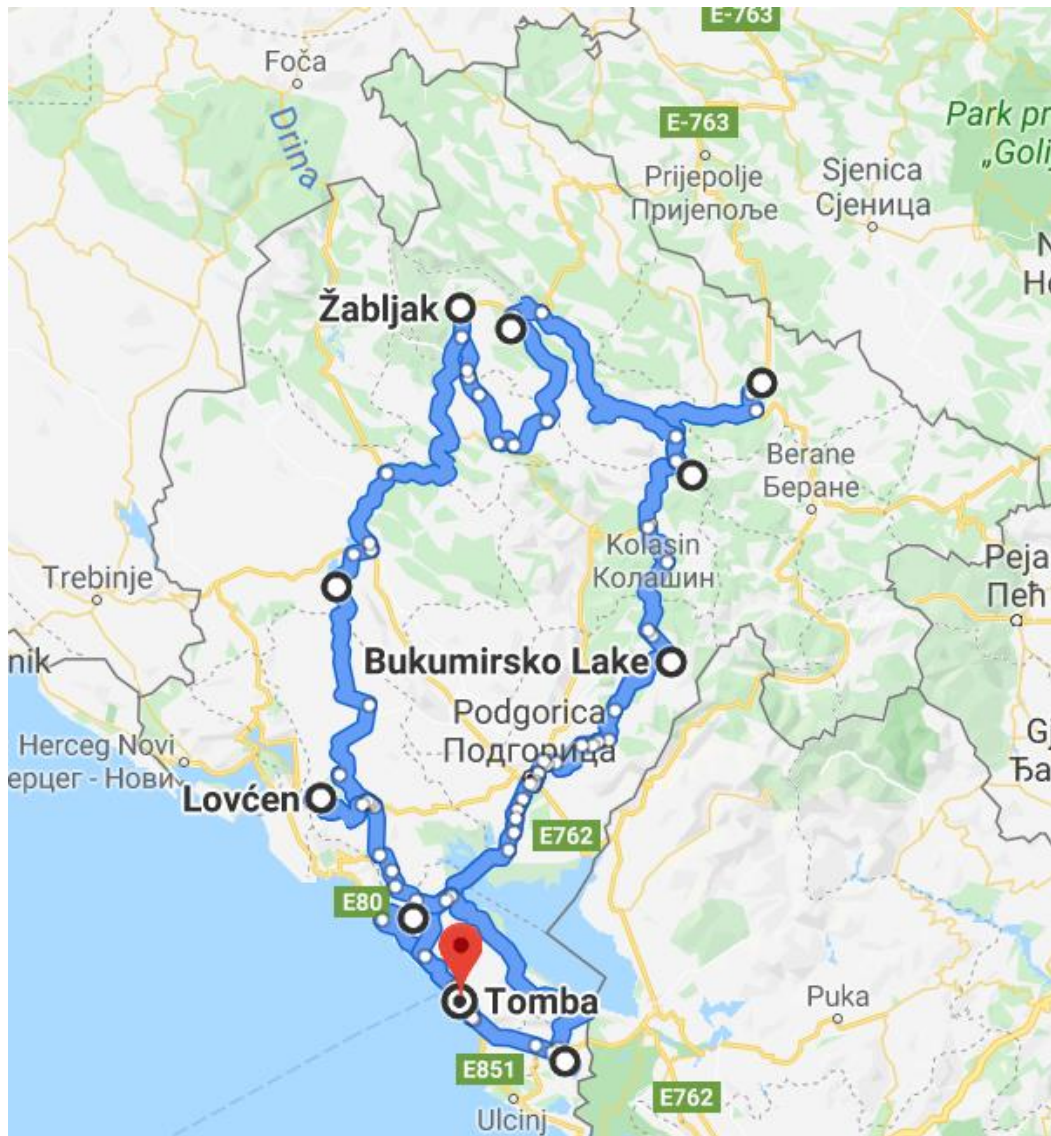


Figure 16: Overview of the complete route

Tips & Tricks

- The train ride from Belgrade to Bar is one of the nicest in Europe. If you have time, it is an excellent and relatively cheap alternative to flying.
- Once in Montenegro public transport is scarce, although many cheap taxi services exist. Still, renting a car is by far the easiest way to get around.
- Finding gas for cooking your meal is very difficult in Montenegro: gas canisters are hard to find and are designed for outdated gas cookers that need to be 'stabbed' onto the gas bottle. We never found canisters for Campingaz or for cookers that can be 'twisted' on the canister. If you plan to cook and do not arrive by airplane, bring plenty of gas!

- While the main roads are okay, visiting some of the nicer places requires driving over dirt track: make sure you have a car that can handle this.
- The coastal regions of Montenegro have a dry, hot Mediterranean climate. The inland mountains, however, are quite wet, and can be cold during most of the year. We visited the mountains in the beginning of June. For birds and reptiles, this is okay, but for butterflies it is way too early!

Species lists

Birds

English name	Scientific name	Dutch name
Great reed warbler	<i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i>	Grote karekiet
Red-rumped swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>	Roodstuitzwaluw
White-winged tern	<i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>	Witvleugelstern
White stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	Ooievaar
Common cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	Koekoek
White-backed woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos leucotos</i>	Witruugspecht
Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	Geelgors
Crested lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	Kuifleeuwerik
Red-backed shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>	Grauwe klauwier
Common linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	Kneu
Eastern black-eared wheatear	<i>Oenanthe melanoleuca</i>	Oostelijke blonde tapuit
Northern wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	Bonte tapuit
Dalmatian pelican	<i>Pelecanus crispus</i>	Kroeskoppelikaan
Common redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>	Gekraagde roodstaart
Alpine accentor	<i>Prunella collaris</i>	Alpenheggenmus
Crag martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>	Rotszwaluw
Alpine chough	<i>Pyrhocorax graculus</i>	Alpenkauw
Eastern subalpine warbler	<i>Sylvia cantillans albistriata</i>	Balkanbaardgrasmus

Amphibians

English name	Scientific name	Dutch name
Yellow-bellied toad	<i>Bombina variegata</i>	Geelbuikvuurpad
Common toad	<i>Bufo bufo</i>	Gewone pad
European green toad	<i>Bufo viridis</i>	Groene pad
European tree frog	<i>Hyla arborea</i>	Europese boomkikker
Alpine newt	<i>Ichthyosaura alpestris</i>	Alpenwatersalamander
Smooth newt	<i>Lissotriton vulgaris</i>	Kleine watersalamander
Albanian pool frog	<i>Pelophylax shqipericus</i>	Albanese poelkikker
Common frog	<i>Rana temporaria</i>	Bruine kikker
Fire salamander	<i>Salamandra salamandra salamandra</i>	Vuursalamander

Reptiles

English name	Scientific name	Dutch name
Dalmatian algyroides	<i>Algyroides nigropunctatus</i>	Dalmatische kielhagedis
Common slowworm	<i>Anguis fragilis</i>	Gewone hazelworm
Sharp-snouted lizard	<i>Dalmatolacerta oxycephala</i>	Spitskophagedis
Prokletije rock lizard	<i>Dinarolacerta montenegrina</i>	Prokletijeberghagedis
Mosor rock lizard	<i>Dinarolacerta mosorensis</i>	Mosorberghagedis
Balkan whip snake	<i>Hierophis gemonensis</i>	Balkantoornslang
Balkan green lizard	<i>Lacerta trilineata</i>	Balkansmaragdhagedis
Grass snake	<i>Natrix natrix</i>	Ringslang
Dice snake	<i>Natrix tessellata</i>	Dobbelsteenslang
Dalmatian rock lizard	<i>Podarcis melisellensis</i>	Karsthagedis
Wall lizard	<i>Podarcis muralis</i>	Muurhagedis
Glass lizard	<i>Pseudopus apodus</i>	Scheltopusik
Hermann's tortoise	<i>Testudo hermanni</i>	Griekse landschildpad
Nose-horned viper	<i>Vipera ammodytes</i>	Zandadder