

SLOVENIA 2008 – MT. KRN AND THE ROCK PARTRIDGE

by Petri Hottola

The following short notes have been written to aid people who look for **Rock Partridge** (*Alectoris graeca*). The species has a restricted range in the southeast of Europe and there is hardly any site information in the Internet. In particular demand are the northernmost sites, which are conveniently close to many business and holiday visit destinations in Central Europe. In Western Croatia southwards, the species is easier to see.

One such site is located in the northwestern corner of Slovenia, at Mt. Krn, by the Italian and Austrian borders. It is a historical site of a major World War I battle between the Austria-Hungary and Italy, a birthplace of *blitzkrieg*, and a today's picturesque mountain tourism destination. The Krn Mountain is not far from other birding destinations such as Kis-Balaton in Hungary and Lake Neusiedl in Austria. Personally, I drove from Prague. In one afternoon, it is possible to drive through Austria and find accommodation in the valley below (Hotel Hvala €67, at Kobarid, topli.val@siol.net, <http://www.topli-val-sp.si/>). The partridges may be observed the next morning, before a return drive to Prague for the evening. Distances are short and one does not need to stop at European Union borders anymore.

In theory, there are sites even further north, on the Tirol mountains of Austria, for example. They are, however, apparently difficult to reach. Public information is vague. The Krn site was kindly pointed out to me by Andrej Figelj of BirdLife Slovenia. The southern slope is a reliable place for the species and the correct habitat can conveniently be approached by a sedan, on a narrow but fine tarmac road. There are other interesting birds and mammals around, as well. In March 2008, I saw a **Chamois** and two **Golden Eagles** higher up than the **Rock Partridges**, and a **Red Fox** and party of no less than 16 male and 1 female **Ring Ouzels** lower down, to mention few species. The partridges were at the edge of snow just above the Krn village, calling actively and chasing one another in the morning sun.

How to get to the site? At the northern end of Kobarid village, turn right across the Soca River on a bridge and take the right fork in a Y-junction. The left fork goes to a ski resort on the snowy top of the mountain, on the barren northern slope. The birds are on the south slope. From the Y-junction, the road follows the eastern bank of the river to south, until a left hand junction (at Ladra) takes one to Vrsno and, eventually, Krn (I love these Slovenian names!). The mountain road goes through villages (if in doubt, take the right fork in midway) all the way up to the village of Krn, the partridge stakeout. It was a scenic location with interesting architecture, majestic mountains, sheep and lambs, and thousands of spring flowers.

In the village, one should go right instead of driving to the village centre (left, main road). Continue straight on a rather narrow gravel road, past houses, until you reach the place portrayed in **Fig. 3**. Park in the limited space available (a small car is a definite plus up there). Next, one may either walk across pastures or climb up to the snowline (in March 2008, 300 meters steep uphill) or one may do as I did. I took my scope and climbed on top of a close-by grassy hill. From there, it was possible to scan most of the open mountainside. The partridges showed reasonably well, in terms of identification. For close views one needs to do the climb and stalk the birds from there. I went up to Krn village at 6 AM, which was too early for the partridges but nevertheless rewarding for other birds and animals. The partridges started to call later, emerging at 8.30 AM, when the sun had warmed the slope up. I saw 4, with 3 others calling not far away. Good luck for your **Rock Partridge** trip! The following photos should help in locating the right site.



Fig. 1. On the way up to Krn Mountain (on the background). As you see, the road is narrow but fine.



Fig. 2. The 2x2 track ends here, soon after the Krn village. Park by the junction, but not like this!



Fig. 3. Above the junction, there is a grassy hill on the right for fat and lazy birders (my scope observation point). Alternatively, walk left hand, across pastures, and climb up to the snow limit, if you are up to it. The partridges were beyond the trees on the left, at snowline (visible from the grassy hill, just like the top of the mountain). In winter, they probably descend all the way down to the village.

See: <http://www.maplandia.com/slovenia/kobarid/> for satellite images.

