



# A flying start in Florence

All manner of wildlife, from Sardinian warblers to glossy ibis and blue catfish, abounds on The Prof's avifauna and angling safari in Tuscany

IT IS a sunny Sunday morning in spring and bells peal from several towers as I march through the centre of Florence in my waders and head just upstream of the Ponte Vecchio, where a man is landing his third Arno catfish of the day.

Oliver Rampley is something of a Renaissance man. On a long walk from Venice to Rome, when he was a postgraduate English student at Oxford, he decided to make his home in Italy and now, aged 33, he runs Altana Europe, which offers bespoke wildlife, hunting and fishing tours in Tuscany. I invited myself out on an avifauna and angling safari with him this April and, from the moment he met me at the airport with a white BMW and his glamorous photographer friend, Katrina, the trip was stylish, impeccably organised and hugely entertaining.

We first headed down towards Porto Ercole, where another friend has a spacious villa right on the edge of the Lago di Burano nature reserve (it's soon apparent that Mr Rampley is a Signor Fixit of the region). Ornithology is one of his several passions—cooking and boar hunting being others—and he's out scouting the salty lagoon before dawn. Over cake and industrial-strength coffee, I've already spotted two hoopoes strutting through the eucalyptus groves, so we're off to a flying start, as it were.

I have to admit that, although I write nature articles for this magazine and have happily observed specimens from the lovely cotinga in Belize to Kenya's lilac-breasted roller, I'm not

a hardcore birdwatcher. As we make our way through the myrtle and bullrushes, my guide's glittery-eyed enthusiasm is infectious, however.

First, we see a shy water rail that squeals like a piglet. We hear small passerines such as Cetti's and Sardinian warblers. He points out other notable species—red-rumped swallows, black-winged stilts—but the star turn of our morning is a scarce glossy ibis in its metallic winter plumage (*Plegadis falcinellus*, just to prove I was listening). On the way to lunch, he makes a sudden detour and shows me a dozen dozy flamingoes.

**‘I shall return to ambush one of these krakens as they prowl among the waterlilies’**

On the harbour front, we drink cool *bianco* and do some leisurely fishing in the deserted marina. There are numerous little sea bass and I hoik out a couple of elegant goldline—*Sarpa salpa*, also nicknamed dreamfish, as eating them can sometimes cause acid-like hallucinations. We stick to the trattoria's squid casserole, but, nonetheless, there was never a monochrome moment during my whistlestop Tuscan tour.

We then spent an entrancing afternoon with Fabio Cianchi, the leading Italian ornithologist. Somehow, with his naked eye, he found us a genuine rarity: riding



Is there something in my teeth?: the persico sole or pumpkinseed

the thermals 1,600ft aloft, scouting for snakes, was a short-toed eagle. 'Magnifico,' he murmured.

We had clocked up a respectable 40 species during our day, but he once recorded 80 in a single morning.

The reserve is criss-crossed with creeks and channels that teem with mullet—a tough challenge for fly-rodgers. Before leaving the villa, I sauntered across the nearby hayfield in my Tod loafers ('very louche,' said Mr Rampley approvingly) and, on my Squirmy Worm pattern, hooked two lively specimens. One, in the hefty 4lb bracket, opened up

his afterburners and emptied my reel as he rocketed upstream into the next commune—he may still be there, for all I know. Ah, *gli incerti della pesca*.

It was time to aim the Beemer again northwards, to Montesertoli, where we were to stay at the resplendent Castello Sonnino ([www.castellosonnino.it](http://www.castellosonnino.it))—once the stronghold of the Machiavelli family, now home to colourful and cosmopolitan Sandro and Caterina de Renzis Sonnino. From the top of their watchtower, I surveyed the estate, with its award-winning vineyards and a lustrous vista of Etruscan hilltops.

Secluded beneath the olive groves is a private lake hooching with black bass (*above*).

A small Olive Dancer fly seemed to do the trick and, at times, there were several modest-sized bass chasing it simultaneously. I love these 'popcorn' fish, the building blocks of the sport of angling and reminiscent of one's childhood forays. We landed dozens of them, along with a decent blue catfish and several exquisite sunfish—the persico sole, or pumpkinseed, as gorgeously coloured as any tropical-reef species. A couple of immense carp shed my hooks in the weed. It had proved a most diverting day.

There followed a sybaritic evening. The castle is filled with wondrous artefacts (Gucci had just completed a fashion shoot) and, in the mural-bedecked salon, with huge fragrant logs flaming in the grate, we sampled much estate wine, before Giovanni the white-gloved butler served us a sublime gnocchi *alla romana*, with asparagus Bismarck. 'I am well known as the rudest man in Italy,' proclaimed our baronial host, petting Nelson, his

redoubtable Staffie. With some reluctance, we departed the following day for Florence.

Mr Rampley made his name in the international guiding world by catching catfish on the fly from the mighty Arno. His record wels to date weighed a stupendous 165lb. On this Sunday morning, an American client has managed three smaller silurids and now, as I wade out towards the Uffizi, it's my turn. I hurl out a streamer on his 12-weight rod, as pizza-nibbling boulevardiers peer curiously down from the parapet, but the cats have stopped playing.

In autumn, I shall return to ambush one of these krakens as they prowl among the waterlilies at dusk.

For further information, visit [www.altanaeurope.com](http://www.altanaeurope.com) or contact Oliver Rampley (00 39 39 2695 8732)

David Profumo caught his first fish at the age of five. A novelist and a biographer, he lives up a Perthshire glen with his new cocker puppy, Pompey, who only understands Latin



THE ELECTRIC RANGE

MODERN EFFICIENCY,  
CLASSIC GOOD LOOKS.



With six widths available and a choice of great colours we're confident we have just the right EVERHOT for you.

01453 890018  
[www.everhot.co.uk](http://www.everhot.co.uk)