

AUSTRIA: CHRISTMAS IN SALZBURG

DECEMBER 19–27, 2019



The church in Aigen, an easy stroll from our hotel. -- Photo Rick Wright

LEADERS: RICK WRIGHT & ALISON BERINGER
LIST COMPILED BY: RICK WRIGHT

VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS, INC.
2525 WALLINGWOOD DRIVE, SUITE 1003
AUSTIN, TEXAS 78746
WWW.VENTBIRD.COM

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with Rick Wright and Alison Beringer



Salzburg from the Mönchsberg. -- Photo Rick Wright

As uncharacteristically warm as it was in Salzburg this early winter, we knew that there was one place we were guaranteed a genuine White Christmas: twenty-five minutes away from our wonderful hotel, the rather dauntingly named Rossfeldpanoramastrasse rises to an even mile in elevation on the northern face of the Austrian Alps.



Up there, the drizzle and mist we'd experienced in town had amounted to more than a foot of fresh, fluffy snow, and the trees of the mountain forest were flocked in the purest white. The only problem: there were no birds.

We'd stopped on the way up in the tiny Bavarian village of Oberau, where a kind homeowner was happy to share the Great, Blue, and Long-tailed tits at his feeders (and to fill us in on the scandalous difference in price between oatmeal for human consumption and oatmeal for the

birds). It was so lively there, just below the snowline, that we were sure the higher elevations would yield up their prizes. As we climbed higher, though, and the snow grew heavier, birds dropped out completely, and on our first transit of the highest road in Germany we tallied a total of precisely zero—not a single bird of a single species. We turned back to the Austrian side, determined to cut what seemed to be our losses, and then, at the mile-high point, a dark shape appeared in the blowing snow. A Common Raven, and our morning was saved! All the same, we thought it the better part of valor to return to the valley of Salzburg's Salzach River.

After, of course, a quick restroom stop at the top, after which Leigh pointed to a big lump in a snow-covered fir. Surely the raven again; but this bird was brown, with heavy barring and a chicken-like head and bill. As we watched, struggling to see field marks through the wind and snow, a second bird, this one black and lyre-tailed, bounded up onto a lower branch.



Black Grouse are never easy to see when the males are not fighting on the lek, and this sighting was certainly the most surprising of any our congenial group enjoyed over the entire tour. We could hardly believe our good luck as we watched the birds for a quarter hour before they took off,

the female's white wing stripe and the male's bizarre tail on full display.

Surprise and delight characterized nearly every one of our outings, from Yellowhammers and Mistle Thrushes in our wonderfully rural Aigen



neighborhood to intricate ironwork in the Salzburg Cathedral and skaters on the ice beneath the watchful eye of Mozart himself. Music, of course, was everywhere in the city, with carolers and brass bands providing the background to the Christmas and Advent markets. Among the most moving of our experiences was a program of liturgical chant and song in the church of the Franciscans, otherworldly voices resounding in the half-dark of the high vaults of the Gothic choir.



Minds and hearts nourished, we were careful not to neglect more physical needs, too. Lavish breakfasts at the Doktorwirt were followed by excellent midday and evening meals at our hotel and in Salzburg. It would be invidious to name a favorite, but all of us, I think, will look back fondly at our festive dinner in the Petersstube, an establishment first attested in AD 803 and claiming, plausibly, to be the oldest restaurant in Europe. M32, at Salzburg's Museum der Moderne, though, was the clear leader for scenic views, with the entire Baroque city spread out beneath us at lunch.

Alison and I hope that all of you enjoyed our time in Austria as much as we did, and that we get to bird together again soon—taking the chance to explore the art, music, history, and culture

of a new landscape once again.

-Rick Wright

(More photos from our tour: tinyurl.com/RW-Austria2019 and ventbird.com/content/128/Photos.aspx)

December 19: in transit to Salzburg.

December 20: introductory meeting and dinner, Hotel Doktorwirt, 7:00-9:10 pm. Warm (mid-60s F), breezy, cloudy.

December 21: cloudy, chilly (40s F), calm, damp but no rain yet. Breakfast in hotel starting 7:30 am. Birding hotel grounds 9:00-9:40 am. Leave hotel 10:00 am. Light drizzle, temperature falling slightly. 10:35-11:10, Mönchsberg. 11:25-12:10, Cathedral. 12:30-2:05 pm, lunch at Herzl. Drizzle. 2:20-3:35 pm, Cathedral Museum and Cabinet of Curiosities. Drizzle. 4:00-5:00 pm, concert by Virgil Schola Salzburg, "Advent in the Middle Ages," Franciscan Church. Brief return to Christmas Market at Cathedral; mid-30s, very light rain, calm. At hotel 5:35 pm. Dinner in hotel 6:45-8:40 pm. High 30s, calm, cloudy.



The Hotel Doktorwirt. -- Photo Rick Wright

December 22: breakfast in hotel beginning 7:30

am. Leave hotel 8:30 am.

Hellbrunn Palace gardens, zoo, and Advent Market 8:45-11:55 am.

Low 40s F, calm, cloudy, very occasional very light sprinkle.

Lunch at Koller & Koller 12:20-

1:40 pm. Calm, cloudy, dry. Mozart Birthplace 2:00-3:05 pm.

Light rain. Coffee and cake at Altstadt Cafe 3:15-3:55 pm.

Occasional very light sprinkles. Cathedral Christmas Market, sightseeing on own, 4:00-5:55. Dinner Petersstube 6:00-7:55 pm. Light sprinkles. At hotel 8:20 pm. High 30s F, calm, cloudy.



Beneath the dome of the Salzburg cathedral. -- Photo Rick Wright

December 23: breakfast in hotel beginning 7:30 am. Leave hotel 9:00 am. Low 40s, light rain.

Hohensalzburg fortress 9:45-11:50 am. Clouds thinning, breezy, upper 30s F. Lunch at Stieglkeller

12:00-1:35 pm. Light rain. Stift Nonnberg 2:00-2:55 pm. Birding for some on Salzach, Christmas

Market, shopping 3:00-4:25. Violin recital in Alter Residenz 5:00-5:45 pm. Mid-30s, very light rain.

Dinner at Sternbräu 6:00-8:25 pm. At hotel 8:45 pm. Upper 30s, cloudy, no precipitation.

December 24: breakfast in hotel beginning 7:30 am. Sunny, calm, low 40s F. Leave hotel 8:55 am.

Liefering ponds 9:20-11:55 am. Lunch at Herzl 12:30-2:00. Cloudy, low 40s F. Schloss Leopoldskron

3:30-3:35 pm. Rain, low 40s F. Checklist at hotel. Dinner at Imlauer 7:00-9:20 pm. Cloudy, dry, low 40s F.



A small part of the Wunderkammer in the museums of the cathedral district. -- Photo Rick Wright

December 25: breakfast in hotel beginning 7:30 am.

Light rain, low 40s F. Leave hotel 8:40 am for

Rossfeldpanoramastrasse, Berchtesgaden, by way of

feeders in Oberau. Rain, then light snow, then moderate snow. To Liefering ponds; 12:40-1:30 pm. Light rain,

then steady rain and wind. At hotel 1:55 pm. Steady rain, dark. Dinner in hotel restaurant 6:00-8:40 pm. Clearing,

calm, low 40s F.

December 26: breakfast in hotel beginning 7:30 am. Mid-30s, cloudy, faint mist. Birding hotel grounds and walk to Aigen church, 8:45-11:20 am. Mid-30s, rapidly clearing, calm. Depart hotel 12:00 pm. Lunch at M32 12:30-2:00 pm. Salzburg Museum of Modern Art 2:00-3:25 pm. At hotel 4:00 pm. Mostly clear, high 30s F, calm. Dinner in hotel 6:00-8:40 pm.

December 27: breakfast in hotel beginning 7:30 am. Mid-30s F, light rain. Departures, reluctantly, for train station or airport.



The church in Aigen, an easy stroll from our hotel. -- Photo Rick Wright

BIRDS

Waterfowl

Mute Swan, *Cygnus olor*: five at Leopoldskron December 24. This is a common—and native—resident of wetlands over much of Europe.

Graylag Goose, *Anser anser*: four at Liefering and ca. 200 at Leopoldskron December 24. Four at Liefering December 25. The Liefering birds were banded and quite used to close approach by humans; it is possible that they were escaped barnyard birds, though their body shape, especially the sleek bellies, and “normal” plumage characters suggested wild origin. The breeding range of this most abundant European gray goose continues to expand dramatically, helped by releases and escapes.



Common Goldeneye, on the Salzach. -- Photo Rick Wright

[**Snow Goose, *Anser caerulescens*:** one white-morph adult, unbanded and with both halluces intact, on the Salzach December 23; almost certainly an escaped or released bird, though apparent wild vagrants have appeared elsewhere in Europe.]

Canada Goose, *Branta canadensis*: two at Liefering December 24 and December 25. Long established in much of western Europe, this American species has been introduced

repeatedly to the Old World. Wild vagrants also appear, but the large size and urban habitat of these two birds suggested that they were members of the feral population.

Mallard, *Anas platyrhynchos*: a couple on the Salzach December 21. Half a dozen in palace park at Hellbrunn December 22. Fifteen or so on the Salzach December 23, including one handsome chestnut-flanked and white-breasted drake of obvious domestic heritage. Half a dozen at Liefering, several on Salzach, and about 20 at Leopoldskron December 24. Eight or ten at Liefering December 24.

Common Merganser, *Mergus merganser*: one female-plumaged bird on the Salzach December 23. A dozen at Liefering and several at Leopoldskron December 24. Old World birds of this species, known as Goosanders, differ subtly from American birds by bill and head shape and wing pattern.

Common Goldeneye, *Bucephala clangula*: one adult male and two female-plumaged birds on the Salzach December 23. American and European birds of this species differ only slightly in size and are indistinguishable in the field.

Mandarin Duck, *Aix galericulata*: one male in palace park at Hellbrunn December 22. Eight or ten at Leopoldskron December 24. This introduced species first bred in the Salzburg area in 1988, and has increased notably since then; numbers are higher in eastern Austria, especially around Vienna.

Grouse



Black Grouse, White Christmas, on the Rossfelderpanoramastrasse. -- Photo Rick Wright

Black Grouse, *Tetrao tetrix*: a male and a female together at the high point of the Rossfelderpanoramastrasse December 25. Like ptarmigans, these birds often spend the winter nights in snow burrows they have excavated themselves, helpful behavior in the conditions of the northern Alps.

Pigeons

Feral Pigeon, *Columba livia*: common throughout.

Wood Pigeon, *Columba palumbus*: four in the Aigen cemetery December 26. This common bird is usually much more conspicuous at this season.

Eurasian Collared Dove, *Streptopelia decaocto*: two at hotel December 21. Several at Liefering December 24. At least five in Aigen December 26. Spreading northwest from the Balkans and Turkey, this now familiar species first bred in Austria in 1943.

Rails

Common Moorhen, *Gallinula chloropus*: four or five in Hellbrunn December 22. This species was resplit from the American Common Gallinule *Gallinula galarata* in 2011. The two are reliably distinguishable only by voice; even in the hand, the morphological differences are trivial.



Wood Pigeon, Aigen. -- Photo Rick Wright

Gulls

Black-headed Gull, *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*: on Salzach December 21; a few seen there incidentally December 22. Hundreds on the Salzach December 23. Hundreds at Liefering and on Salzach December 24. About 120 at Liefering December 25. On the Salzach December 26. By far the most abundant gull in inland Europe.

Hérons



Eurasian Griffon, Hellbrunn. -- Photo Rick Wright

Great Egret, *Ardea alba*: one in distant flight at Liefering December 24. This is a scarce but increasing winter bird in Austria, with breeding essentially restricted to the eastern parts of the country. Currently considered by many authorities to be conspecific with the American Great Egret, but the two taxa differ notably in soft part colors in the breeding season and probably represent two species.

Gray Heron, *Ardea cinerea*: 10 or so at Hellbrunn December 22, where there is a small heronry. One roadside bird December 25. Far and away the most abundant heron in Europe. Superficially similar to

the much larger Great Blue Heron, but as we remarked in the field, the proportions are quite different, the Old World bird shorter, stockier, and overall dumpier than the Great Blue.

Hawks and Old World Vultures

Eurasian Griffon, *Gyps fulvus*: two free-flying birds in Hellbrunn, December 22, quite habituated to humans. The local population is thought to derive from birds released or carelessly

curated at the Salzburg Zoo, but vultures from Italy and Croatia also occur over large stretches of Austria.

Common Buzzard, *Buteo buteo*: one roadside bird December 25. One hunting on the ground in Aigen December 26. This abundant and familiar European hawk closely resembles the Red-tailed Hawk, and some even have a coppery tail; like the Red-tailed, this species has a very wide range of plumage variation, from white to black. The two birds we saw were of a common plumage type, messy brown with a white “horseshoe” on the upper breast.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk, *Accipiter nisus*: one male at Liefering December 24. Like the similar Sharp-shinned Hawk, this is a bird-hunter; males tend to take small passerines, while the larger females may specialize in doves and similarly sized birds.

Kingfishers

Common Kingfisher, *Alcedo atthis*: at least two very active birds in Hellbrunn December 22. This is the famous “halcyon” of myth, the bird that lays its eggs on the sea in seasons of calm.



**Common Kingfisher, Hellbrunn. --
Photo Rick Wright**

Falcons

Common Kestrel, *Falco tinnunculus*: a dashing male at Hohensalzburg December 23. One female at Liefering December 24. This is a large kestrel, longer and heavier than the much less common Merlin. Common Kestrels are typical city breeders in much of Europe, preferring to nest in church towers.

Woodpeckers

Great Spotted Woodpecker, *Picoides major*: two at hotel December 21. At least three at Hellbrunn December 22. One heard at Liefering December 25. Three or four in Aigen December 26. This abundant woodpecker ranges from westernmost Europe to easternmost Asia; it has strayed to Alaska on rare occasions.

European Green Woodpecker, *Picus viridis*: an extremely vocal and territorial male at Hellbrunn December 22. In size, voice, and often terrestrial habit, this species recalls the American flickers.

Corvids

Eurasian Magpie, *Pica pica*: in Aigen December 23. At breakfast at hotel December 24. One at Liefering December 25. At least three in Aigen December 26. This species and the American

Black-billed Magpie are very similar in plumage, but differ signally in their calls, one reason that they have recently been resplit after long being considered conspecific.

Eurasian Jay, *Garrulus glandarius*: 3 at Hellbrunn December 22. Two in Oberau December 25. Two at Oberau December 25. Two in Aigen December 26. The specific name “glandarius” refers to this species’ fondness for acorns.

Eurasian Jackdaw, *Corvus monedula*: common throughout. This charming and sociable little crow owes its odd species name to the tale of Arne Sithonis, who, Ovid reports, was punished for her greed by being transformed into a jackdaw, a bird notorious for its fondness for money.

Carrion Crow, *Corvus corone*: common throughout. This black crow has at times been lumped with the handsome gray Hooded Crow, with which it frequently hybridizes in north-central Europe. Most authorities now consider the two separate species.

Common Raven, *Corvus corax*: 2 at Hellbrunn December 22. Five at Liefering December 24. Two high on the Rossfelderpanoramastrasse December 25. As in its North American range, this species is spreading and becoming more common in much of Europe.

Titmice

Coal Tit, *Parus ater*: one or two at Oberau feeders December 25. The distribution of this natty titmouse is irregular in central Europe; nowhere exactly rare, it is still less familiar here than in Britain.



Blue Tit, Liefering. -- Photo Rick Wright

Eurasian Blue Tit, *Cyanistes caeruleus*: several at hotel December 21. Three or four at Hellbrunn December 22. Common at Liefering December 24 and 25. Several at Oberau feeders December 25. Three or four in Aigen December 26. This is one of the most familiar woodland birds in Europe, though outnumbered by its larger relative the Great Tit.

Great Tit, *Parus major*: common in all wooded habitats, including at our hotel. This always common species appears to be increasing rapidly in central Europe, and we found it the most abundant passerine species of the tour.

Marsh Tit, *Poecile palustris*: one at feeders in Hellbrunn December 22. Three at Liefering December 24. One or two at Liefering December 25. One heard only in Aigen December 26. Less conspicuous than its colorful relatives, but still fairly common in woodlands; this species now far outnumbers the very similar Willow Tit, whose populations have dramatically declined in much of Europe.

Bushtits

Long-tailed Tit, *Aegithalos caudatus*: a flock of eight or ten at Oberau and another six or eight at Liefering December 25. Interestingly, the Oberau birds all had smudgy brown head masks, while the Liefering flock comprised entirely white-headed individuals; heads are whiter and less marked in the east, browner and more heavily masked in the west.

Kinglets

Goldcrest, *Regulus regulus*: one at Hellbrunn December 22. One heard at Liefering December 25. This bold and hardy bird is the smallest in Europe, weighing the equivalent of about two US pennies.

Nuthatches

Eurasian Nuthatch, *Sitta europaea*: one at hotel December 21. Two or three in Hellbrunn December 22. Four or five at Liefering December 24. Several at Oberau December 25, three or four at Liefering the same date. At least four in Aigen December 26. The German name, "Kleiber," refers to this bird's habit of plastering the entrance to its nesting cavity with mud.

Treecreepers

Short-toed Treecreeper, *Certhia brachydactyla*: two in Hellbrunn December 22. Extremely similar in plumage, and not recognized as distinct species until the nineteenth century, the two treecreepers overlap in range and habitat in Austria; Dwayne's photos were very helpful in identifying the treecreepers we saw.

Eurasian Treecreeper, *Certhia familiaris*: one at Liefering December 24. This species is typically found in wilder, higher-elevation areas dominated by conifers, while the Short-toed is a classic bird of open hardwood forests and city parks.

Wrens

Eurasian Wren, *Troglodytes troglodytes*: two at Hellbrunn December 22. One at Liefering December 24. Heard at Liefering December 25. Long thought to be conspecific with the North American Winter and Pacific Wrens, this very widespread species may yet be split again, with island populations some of the most obvious candidates for elevation to full species status.

Chats

European Robin, *Erithacus rubecula*: heard at hotel December 21. Three seen well at Liefering December 24. One at Liefering December 25. One in Aigen December 26.



European Robin, Aigen. -- Photo Rick Wright

Thrushes

Mistle Thrush, *Turdus viscivorus*: four at Hellbrunn December 22. One in flight at Liefering December 24. Two or three in Aigen December 26, one perched above a ball of mistletoe. In Austria, this species is largely an elevational migrant, moving from breeding areas in mountains and foothills into the river valleys and plains for the winter.

Eurasian Blackbird, *Turdus merula*: common throughout, including at our hotel. One of the most abundant birds of cities and suburbs across western and central Europe, the Blackbird has undergone some population loss over the past decade.

Accentors

Alpine Accentor, *Prunella collaris*: one perched on a wall at the Hohensalzburg fortress, unfortunately flushed almost immediately by (gasp) a non-birder, never to return. This is another elevational migrant, breeding high on barren mountaintops and descending to winter on cliffs and steep hillsides.



Eurasian Blackbird, Aigen. -- Photo Rick Wright

Finches

Common Chaffinch, *Fringilla coelebs*: a dozen or so at hotel December 21. Four or five at Hellbrunn December 22. A total of about 20 at Liefering December 24; five or six there December 25. Half a dozen in Aigen December 26. Often said to be the most abundant passerine in Europe.

Brambling, *Fringilla montifringilla*: two at Liefering December 24, one there December 25. Variably abundant and widespread across Europe from winter to winter, this northern finch is one of

few Old World passerines regularly encountered in North America, with records scattered across the continent.

Hawfinch, *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*: four at Liefering December 24. Very secretive in the breeding season, Hawfinches are somewhat easier to see in autumn and winter, but even then—as we discovered—this huge, chunky finch can be elusive.

Eurasian Bullfinch, *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*: at least three males and at least one female at Liefering December 24. Three males and a female at Liefering December 25. Five males and a female in Liefering December 26. Another skittish bird when breeding, the bullfinch is much more easily seen in winter, when small flocks gather in the tops of maples and ashes to chew on the samaras.



European Bullfinch, Liefering. -- Photo Rick Wright

European Greenfinch, *Chloris chloris*: common at Liefering December 24, with a total of about 15. This species is experiencing population decreases at the moment, thanks largely to trichomonosis, the same disease that regularly affects House Finches in North America.

European Goldfinch, *Carduelis carduelis*: two or three at hotel December 21. About 20 at Liefering December 24. Rather nomadic in winter.

Buntings

Yellowhammer, *Emberiza citrinella*: four in Aigen December 26. A classic bird of extensively cultivated fields, this species has declined with the intensification of agriculture, but remains fairly common.

Old World Sparrows

House Sparrow, *Passer domesticus*: two in Salzburg December 23. A dozen at Liefering December 24. Ten or more in Aigen December 26. Greatly decreased in numbers in Britain and on much of the European continent, but still fairly common in central and eastern Europe.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow, *Passer montanus*: two at Liefering December 24. One in Aigen December 26. This species, historically less abundant than the House Sparrow in central Europe, is now more common than that species in agricultural habitats on the northern flank of the Alps. In Britain, however, it has decreased locally even more dramatically than the House Sparrow.



Yellowhammer, Aigen. -- Photo Rick Wright

Mammals

Eurasian Red Squirrel, *Sciurus vulgaris*: seen every day in parks and gardens.

Roe Deer, *Capreolus capreolus*: one at Liefering December 25.