# Mediterranean Marvels

Marco Colombo – a Wildlife Photographer in His Own Words

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder - and this young promising Italian author sees it everywhere, as this glorious gallery shows. Discover through his images the wonderful, under-appreciated, endangered universe of Southern Europe's natural world

Born in 1988, graduated in Natural Sciences, I've always loved nature and animals in particular. In 1999 I started taking photographs (the first shot I've taken depicted a wasp building her nest) with my father, who taught me how to use his camera, a Nikon F70. Since then, reading lots of publications in various languages (Italian works are very scarce, so I usually read English, Spanish and French ones too) permitted me to improve my knowledge about animals behaviour and ecology; furthermore, I continuously keep on looking at other photographers' work, as I think that from them I can learn what to (and mostly what not to) do in order to get good shots - that doesn't mean to copy them, of course, but to learn more about techniques. My equipment ranges from wide-angle lenses to a zoom telephoto lens, including macro lenses, extension tubes, flashes and more; nowadays I'm using a digital camera (Nikon D700). My favourite subjects are reptiles and amphibians, due to various reasons: first of all, they are just beautiful; secondly, they are a quite free "photographic niche" in my country, as most of photographers concentrate themselves on mammals and birds; and, last but not least, these animals are still victims of prejudice and killings, so



photographs can be a way to sensitize people towards them. Among my favourite subjects I'd also add invertebrates, arachnids in particular; looking for them here and there permitted me to also discover something interesting or new and occasionally publish it on scientific papers. I also like mammals and birds, of course, but in such an anthropized country, their behaviour is very shy, apart from a few exceptions, and my 70-200 mm is not always generous in these cases (I'd need more time to concentrate myself only on them). I also take underwater photographs: after several years using the glorious analogical Nikonos V, I've started using an underwater housing for a digital camera, with two flashes. I usually take underwater shots in the majestic, secretive and magical atmospheres of north-western Sardinian underwater caves, but I also love freshwater life, such as trout, river crabs and crayfish. Among plants, my favourite species belong to wild orchids and carnivorous plants. I think that curiosity and passion should drive people to feel awe for natural environments; in my opinion, in a good shot the vision of the photographer could act as a filter, through which even the "uglier" subject (if any actually exist) becomes attractive.

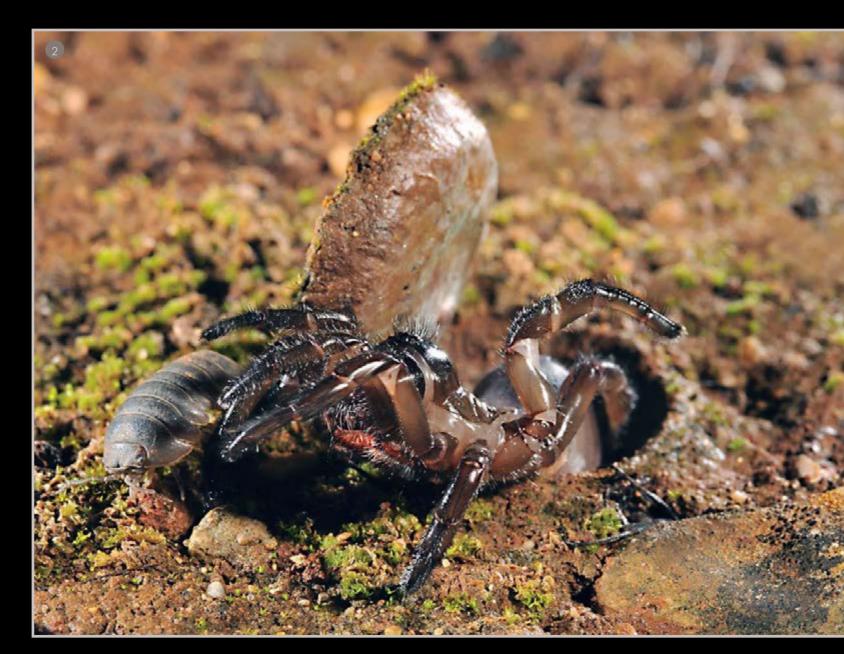
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Heart-flowered tongue-orchid (Serapias cordigera), May 2011, Liguria, Italy.
Nikon D700, 70-200 mm/f2.8, extension tubes, no flash, 1/6400 f3.5, ISO 200, tripod.
Wild orchids are wonderful little jewels, endangered by anthropization in many Italian areas.
This tongue-orchid attracted me as a silhouette in the dawn light. In fact, I earned a nice stiff neck aligning the flowers with the sun, lying in strange poses in the grassland. (1)

**Trapdoor spider** (*Cteniza sauvagesi*) catching isopod (*Armadillidium* sp.), April 2009, Sardinia, Italy. Nikon D700, 105 mm/f2.8, R1C1 flash system and SB600 flash, 1/100 f22, ISO 200, remote controller. This shot is the result of a quite long period of study of the behaviour of Sardinian trapdoor spiders, incredibly fascinating species with an outstanding predatory behaviour and ecology. Before taking this photograph, many attempts failed, as the spider attack is sudden and without forewarning. (2)



### — Portfolio



Greater horseshoe bat (Rhinolophus ferrum-equinum), April 2009, Sardinia, Italy. Nikon D700, 105 mm/f2.8, R1C1 flash system, 1/30 f22, ISO 200, handheld. It is always important, when exploring caves, old galleries or mines, to not disturb bats. In some cases, however, it is possible to take a couple of shots without waking them up, such as in this little gallery, where at least three horseshoe bat species alternatively hide in different periods of the year. (1)

Turkish gecko
(Hemidactylus turcicus),
August 2011, Sardinia, Italy.
Nikon D700, 105 mm/f2.8,
R1C1 flash system, 1/200
f40, ISO 400, handheld.
It's not always easy to have a good backlight when photographing vertebrates.
However, in this case,
a fortuitous regulation of the a fortuitous regulation of the flash system and camera setting's permitted me to have a "lit-from-within" effect of the gecko. (2)





— Portfolio





Common Aesculapian snake (Zamenis longissimus), June 2011, Liguria, Italy. Nikon D700, 28-70 mm/f3.5-4.5, R1C1 flash system, 1/160 f14, ISO 200, handheld. Ancient symbol of medicine according to Greeks, this snake can still be observed on pharmacies' signs. It is a beautiful, harmless species that can be found on branches but also on the ground, as this unusually yellow specimen observed on the pebbly shore of a river. (1)

**European hedgehog** (*Erinaceus europaeus*), August 2009, Sardinia, Italy. Nikon D700, 105 mm/f2.8, R1C1 flash system, 1/30 f32, ISO 200, handheld. Hedgehogs usually move at night-time, looking for small invertebrates to eat. When discovered, they often roll up in order to hide their weak points, such as the tender snout. (2)







Horned viper (Vipera ammodytes), April 2010, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Italy. Nikon D700, 105 mm/f2.8, no flash, 1/80 f6.3, ISO 200, handheld. Vipers are very charismatic animals, but horned vipers in particular are brilliant. The function of the little horn on their snout hasn't been clearly explained yet, although some theories say that it makes their look more "evil" against predators. The ashen elegance of this specimen captivated me while lying in the karst areas of north-eastern Italy where this species lives. (1)

**Round-leaved sundew** (*Drosera rotundifolia*), July 2010, Lombardy, Italy. Nikon D700, 105 mm /f2.8, extension tubes, no flash, 1/40 f14, ISO 200, handheld. Carnivorous plants are fascinating evolutive examples of plants catching insects in various ways. This beautiful but very tiny species lives in mountain peat bogs, where it catches small flying insects through little sticky drops, recalling dew. (2)





Scorpion (Euscorpius concinnus), June 2009, Liguria, Italy. Nikon D700, 105 mm/f2.8, R1C1 flash system, 1/6 f22, ISO 200, handheld. 
Italy hosts at least nine scorpion species, and one of them is this black one, fairly common in the woodlands and little towns of central and southern regions. In this photograph I wanted to show a wall of "light flames", recalling the real fires that devour and destroy Mediterranean habitats every summer, with a huge loss of biodiversity.





Red sea star (Echinaster sepositus), August 2011, Sardinia, Italy. Nikon D90, 28-70mm/f.3.5-4.5, Isotta housing, Nikonos flashes, 1/13 f16, ISO 200, handheld. I love depicting movements of nature, and a strong backwash, enriched by the warm colours of the sea star, permitted me to take this shot, while struggling to not report injuries against sharp rocks.



Common eiders (Somateria mollissima), February 2011, Lombardy, Italy. Nikon D700, 70-200 mm/f2.8, 1.4x converter, no flash, 1/500 f5, ISO 200, handheld. Very common in northern Europe, eiders are quite rare to be seen in Italy (only as migratory specimens for short periods). However, two males settled some years ago in a single locality, and did remain there, courting mallard females (Anas platyrhyncos) and competing each other for them with their funny displays.





Mouflon (Ovis [orientalis] musimon), October 2010,
Lombardy, Italy. Nikon D700, 70-200 mm/f2.8, 1.4x
converter, SB600 flash, 1/160 f6.3, ISO 800, handheld.
Mouflons are wonderful wild sheep that have been
introduced to Lombardy in the seventies, due to hunting
reasons; here, they suffer strong snowfalls and compete
with local ungulates. Wearing a mimetic suit, I was able
to observe fighting males, courtship and parental cares;
in this occasion, the old male looked at me in an
interrogative way, during the "flehmen" (curling
of the upper lip in order to better perceive female's smell),
just before going on with its hot pursuit of partners.



# Yellow-legged

**gull** — (Larus michaellis), April 2010, Sardinia, Italy. Nikon D700, 70-200 mm/f2.8, 1.4x converter, no flash, 1/800 f8, ISO 200, handheld. Yellow-legged gulls are becoming more and more common in anthropized environs, although it is still possible to find them at the seaside. This confident specimen inspired me with its grave look and noble profile.



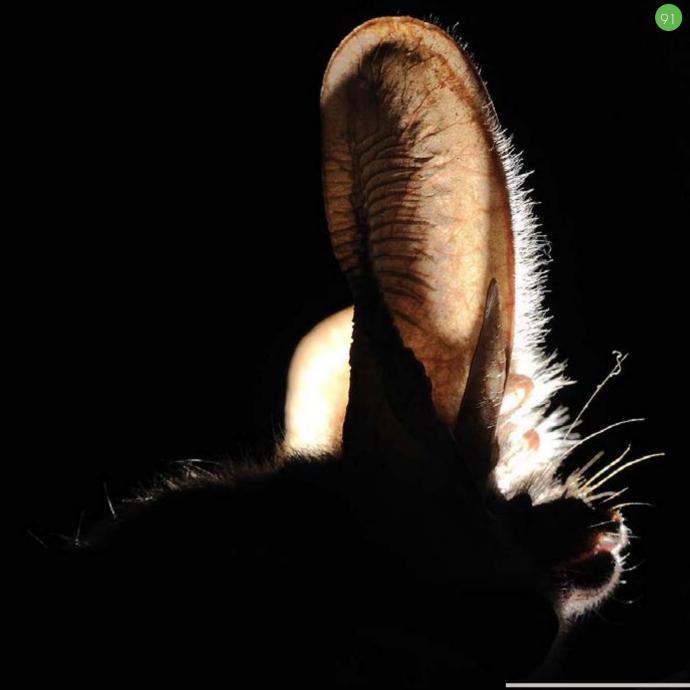




## Long-snouted sea horse =

(Hippocampus guttulatus), August 2009, Sardinia, Italy. Nikonos V, 35 mm/f2.8, close-up lens, Nikonos flash, Fuji Velvia ISO 50, handheld. I love sea horses, and wanted to photograph one since I found a dying specimen when I was a child. Finally, in 2009, I found this wonderful, reddish-pink female inside a cave at a depth of 10 m, and managed to take some shots although my flashes didn't work well due to a synchronization problem. The next summer I met this specimen again, in the same environs, this time with a little ascidian grown on a side.





#### Alpine long-eared bat

(Plecotus macrobullaris), September 2011,

Piedmont, Italy. Nikon D700, 105 mm/f2.8,

R1C1 flash system, 1/60 f16, ISO 200,
handheld. Long-eared bats are among
the most interesting and beautiful Italian bats.

Discerning species is not always easy,
but in this case the fur coloration and
morphological characters were quite
unmistakable. I decided to use a backlight
because I wanted to give importance
to the huge, semitransparent ears.





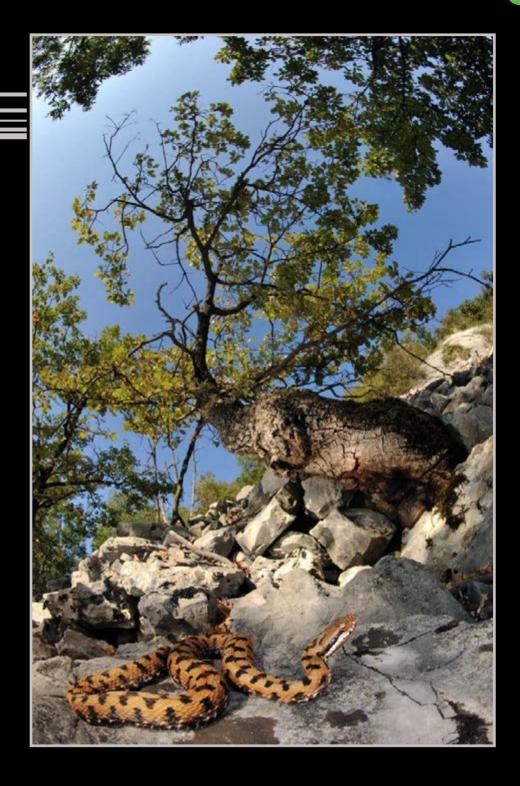
— Portfolio

Freshwater crab (Potamon fluviatile), April 2011, Tuscany, Italy. Nikon D700, 20 mm/f2.8, extension tube, R1C1 flash system, 1/3 f22, ISO 200, handheld. The freshwater crab is a fascinating endangered crustacean that lives in non-polluted rivers of central and southern Italy. It has quite a character, and at the minimum sign of threat, it opens its pincers trying to pinch the aggressor. As they are edible, this specimen was lucky I'm a photographer and not a cook, otherwise its attempts would have been vain... (1)

Praying mantid (Mantis religiosa), August 2007, Sardinia, Italy. Nikon F100, 105 mm/f2.8, extension tubes, no flash, Fuji Velvia ISO 100, tripod. Praying mantids always look at observers with their large eyes, in a way that seems to say "Hey, I'm keeping an eye on you!". That's what I wanted to show in this old picture: the insect hiding behind a stem, but always inspecting the observer. (2)

Asp viper (Vipera aspis francisciredi), September 2011, Lombardy, Italy. Nikon D700, 16 mm/f2.8 fisheye, R1C1 flash system and SB600 flash, 1/40 f22, ISO 200, handheld. I don't like to always take full frame portraits of my subjects. Instead, I wanted a "theatrical" scene, showing the oak tree on the background. The tiger-like viper, here, is just something more, an animal integrated in its wonderful calcareous environment in the Prealps.





Dice snake (Natrix tessellata), July 2009,

Ticino canton, Switzerland. Nikonos V, 12 mm/f2.8
fisheye, no flash, Fuji Velvia ISO 50, handheld.
Even in summertime, mountain rivers' water is quite cold; however, in this case I only had to take 36 shots (slides) so, wearing only swimming trunks, I managed to take some underwater shots of these fish-eating snakes.





Agile frog (Rana dalmatina), March 2009, Lombardy, Italy. Nikon D700, 20 mm/f2.8, R1C1 flash system, 1/50 f22, ISO 200, handheld. During spring, dozens of frogs can gather in the same little pond, in order to lay eggs and mate, just for a few days. In this period, it is possible to meet several specimens that, also on sunny days, move in the undergrowth towards the water, such as this male near a dogtooth violet (Erythtronium dens-canis). (1)

Asp viper (Vipera aspis francisciredi), March 2011, Lombardy, Italy. Nikon D700, 105 mm/f2.8, extension tubes, no flash, 1/2000 f3.2, ISO 200, handheld. At the beginning of the "herping" season, daylight period is quite short, so it is possible to have grazing light even though it isn't properly sunset. Asp vipers are endangered in northern Italian lowlands due to anthropization and human persecution. (2)



