

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. ●

Spallanzani's mantid

(*Ameles spallanzania*), August 2009,
Sardinia, Italy. Nikon D700, 105
mm/f2.8, extension tubes, no flash,
1/13 f3.5, ISO 400, handheld.

While looking for an intriguing corner
during nocturnal landscape shots, my
eye was caught by the shape of this
small mantid on a branch. As the
latter was quite high, the temptation
of aligning my eye, the mantid and
the full moon was strong.





1

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)





Ischyropsalidae
(*Ischyropsalis* sp.),
October 2011,
Lombardy, Italy. Nikon
D700, 105 mm/f2.8,
extension tubes,
R1C1 flash system,
1/50 f5, ISO 200,
handheld. Harvestmen
seldom attract wildlife
photographers,
but this genus
is beautiful and very
interesting: chelicera
are well developed
in thorny pincers,
which are used to catch
small invertebrates,
including snails.



2

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
flash system and camera
settings permitted me to have
a "lit-from-within" effect
of the gecko. (2)





By-the-wind sailors (*Velella velella*), April 2010, Sardinia, Italy. Nikon D700, 105 mm/f2.8, no flash, 1/13 f22, ISO 200, tripod. Flowing is a natural feature. Life and death follow each other, and a huge hydrozoan stranding gives a blue colour to their end in the backwash.



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)





Languedoc's scorpion

(*Buthus occitanus*), January
2010, Provence, France.
Nikon D700, 105 mm/f2.8,
SB600 flash, 1/50 f45,
ISO 200, handheld.

At night many creatures
come out from their shelters.

This beautiful species
is one of the most venomous
scorpions in Europe,
although its sting
only causes local effects.




1

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)

2



A detailed photograph of a grass snake (Natrix natrix) resting on a large, wet, mossy rock in a forest stream. The snake's body is coiled, showing its characteristic pattern of dark spots and bands on a lighter background. Its head is raised, and it is looking towards the right. The background is a soft-focus view of the stream, with water flowing over rocks and surrounded by dense vegetation and tree roots. The lighting is natural, highlighting the textures of the snake's scales and the wet rocks.

Grass snake (*Natrix natrix*),
June 2010, Lombardy, Italy.
Nikon D700, 70-200 mm/f2.8,
no flash, 1/1.6 f18, ISO 200, tripod.
Not so far from home, it is possible
to find real “jungle corners”,
as someone told me about
this one. The polished pebbles,
the reddish roots, the flowing
water, and the beautiful snake,
all together. This photograph
won the “Animal portraits”
category in the prestigious Veolia
Environment Wildlife Photographer
of the Year 2011 contest.

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.

Cone-head mantid

(*Empusa pennata*), May 2009,
Sardinia, Italy. Nikon D700,
16 mm/f2.8 fisheye, extension tube,
R1C1 flash system, 1/80 f22,
ISO 200, handheld. Undoubtedly
the most beautiful Italian mantid,
this species is usually found
in quite dry habitats, such as the
Mediterranean maquis.
Young stages are characterized
by a curly abdomen, as well
as the typical horn on the head
(also observable on adults).



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 platyrhynchos*) 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.





Red night

December 2010, Sardinia, Italy. Nikon D700, 20 mm/f2.8, no flash, 30sec. f2.8, ISO 500, multiple exposures, torch, tripod. Nocturnal landscapes are not always moon and stars. Sometimes, light pollution can be used as advantage and addition to create a particular atmosphere; in this case, the red mammillated clouds fit well with the rocky outcrop just behind a beach, that I illuminated using a torch in order to give a more majestic impression.

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.



2



1

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.



Thyrranian wall lizard (*Podarcis tiliguerta*), August 2009,
Sardinia, Italy. Nikon D700, 20 mm/f2.8, extension tube,
R1C1 flash system, 1/50 f22, ISO 200, handheld.

This quite colourful species is among the fastest lizards
I've ever seen. In this Sardinian area, they thrive
on steep rocky cliffs meters above the sea, while the other
local species (*P. sicula*) is synanthropic and stays near houses.
I needed two summers in order to take this shot.



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 (*Erythronium 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)



Mediterranean giant devil ray

(*Mobula mobular*), August 2009, Sardinia, Italy.

Nikonos V, 35 mm/f2.8, no flash, Fuji Velvia ISO 50, handheld. One of the most spectacular encounters I've ever had: swimming, several miles away from the coast, with a huge 2-2.5 m wide devil ray, a very rare endemic species. Unfortunately, I only could take 9 shots of this beautiful animal, then I finished my film (as I had used the other 27 shots the previous day, with sponges...). The elegance of these beautiful cartilaginous fishes is nowadays endangered by human fishery activities and pollution.



**Rhinoceros beetle**

(*Oryctes nasicornis*),
July 2009, Lombardy,
Italy. Nikon D700,
105 mm/f2.8,
extension tubes, no
flash, 1/25 f22, ISO
200, handheld.

In my opinion,
rhinoceros beetles are
wonderful little jewels
(as my email address
can confirm), and
every year I look for
them. Males in
particular, with their
horn on the head,
are attractive and
sometimes give visual
cues as silhouettes.