

Greece

Lesvos

28 April–5 May 2011

Participants

Penelope Austin

Keith Bamford

Anthony Butler

Joanna Bytheway

Dennis Capewell

Frances Elliot

Daphne Hayward

Graham and Elizabeth Hill

Roger and Rachel Knight

Emma Rees-Williams

Martin and Beryl Shaw



Citrine Wagtail

Leaders Neil Gartshore and Gordon Hay

As this was the first visit to Lesvos for all of the participants there were certainly going to be plenty of new birds on offer. Spring this year was a little strange – some species were about in plentiful numbers, others were conspicuous by their virtual absence. The weather had been wet prior to our arrival and was mixed during our stay with some rain and low cloud conditions, which meant that we had to modify some of our plans as we went along. Never-the-less we clocked up a group total of 155 species by the end of the trip and the rains had ensured that we were treated to a spectacular display of wild flowers.

Day 1: The group gathered at Heathrow at 11.50 for an afternoon flight to Athens, where there was a two hour wait for the connecting flight to Mytilini, eventually arriving on the island at 21.00, local time. After picking up the vans it was off to Hotel Pasiphae in Skala Kallonis for a late dinner and bed.

Day 2: A pre-breakfast look at the marsh and fields in front of the hotel got us off to a good start with plenty of Squacco Herons and Wood Sandpipers on the pools and Cetti's, Sedge, Eurasian and Great Reed-warblers and Eastern Olivaceous Warblers all showing themselves well and seven Black-crowned Night-herons flew over. After breakfast, it was off to the Kallonis Salt pans. Just after turning off the main road the birds came thick and fast. Here, and elsewhere along 'the moat', were a good selection of waders including Kentish Plover, Ruff, Black-winged Stilt and Little Stint, and Common and Little Terns fished close by. In the salt pans, there were 100s of Greater Flamingos and Pied Avocets plus a few Great White Egrets and Gull-billed Terns. To the north, Short-toed Snake-eagle (4), Black Stork and Long-legged Buzzard were picked up over the hills. A stop at the pumping

station for Rufous-tailed Scrub-robin was unsuccessful (there had only been one report, a few days earlier) but there were plenty of Spanish Sparrows nesting in the bushes. More birds caught our eye: Red-footed Falcon, Collared Pratincole, Whiskered and White-winged Terns were hawking over the fields. The main flood area to the south of the pans didn't have too many birds on show – Ruddy Shelduck (20+), Purple Heron and single Black-tailed Godwit and Spotted Redshank were the pick of the bunch. After a break for lunch in the parking area by the racetrack, we headed out on the track into the Alykes Wetland. The highlights here were a pair of Eurasian Thick-knees, single Slender-billed Gull and Eurasian Spoonbill, Tawny Pipit (3) and Greater Short-toed Lark (6). In the distance, Black Tern (3) was picked out amongst a group of terns hawking over the far side of the pans. Leaving the salt pans, we headed back to the hotel via the western side of the Tsiknias River, stopping frequently along the way – more waders and warblers, Little Bittern (2) and our first Black-headed Bunting. On the way back to the hotel the second van picked up a Eurasian Bittern on the pools. Not a bad start with 87 species seen today.

Day 3: Leaving after an early breakfast, we headed out to the west stopping first at the small chapel at Aghios Ioannis. Starting off, a fine male Montagu's Harrier drifted by and European Turtle-dove could be heard. In the scattered scrub on the hillsides and on short walk up to the chapel we quickly added Western Rock Nuthatch, Pied Flycatcher, Black-eared Wheatear and Cretzschmar's Bunting. Next stop the Apothika/Makara turning and a drive down into the valley to the beach where we picked a few birds along the way including Chukar, Northern Wheatear, Whinchat, Woodchat Shrike and Black-headed Bunting. Once we hit the first patch of trees there were a number of Pied Flycatchers and Wood Warblers flitting about. One bird skulking in the undergrowth turned out to be a nice male Barred Warbler. Looking out from the beach a flock of 1000+ Yelkouan Shearwaters was milling around, many actually on the water. A scan around also picked up three passing Cory's (Scopoli's) Shearwaters, a few European Shags and, amongst the Yelkouan Shearwaters, a single Little Gull. On next to Eresos for a lunch stop then out on to the Sigri road. Our first stop just out of town was by a field covered in bright red poppies where there were mainly Spotted Flycatchers and a Eurasian Golden Oriole flashed by very quickly. A slow drive, with frequent stops, picked up single Cinereous Bunting and Rock Petronia plus Little Owl, Icterine Warbler, Western Rock Nuthatch, Tawny Pipit, European Turtle-dove and a good view of Chukar. The Malada ford provided our first Collared Flycatcher and a flock of Purple Herons (7) circled overhead. It was getting late by the time we reached Sigri so it was straight back to the hotel without stopping. 84 species today, with the trip total standing at 122.

Day 4: A pre-breakfast visit to Metochi Lake picked up Little Crake (4), Black-crowned Night-heron, Little Bittern and Masked Shrike. After breakfast we drove up the western side of the Tsiknias River. A single Eurasian Curlew was at the river mouth but the second ford provided us with the best number of birds. In the surrounding scrub Common Redstart, Common and Lesser Whitethroats, Garden Warbler and Blackcap were all familiar species. On the river, and in the reeds, we had very close views of Eurasian and Great Reed-warblers, Sedge and Cetti's Warblers while a number Yellow Wagtails hopped around, including one that was initially dismissed as a Yellow but turned out to be a fine male Citrine Wagtail... joined in the same field of view by a Temminck's Stint. Next stop was north of the main road and a walk up the valley. The skies were threatening and just after seeing four European Bee-eaters spots of rain started to fall. We continued on up into the hills where a few more migrants included Northern Wheatear, Pied Flycatcher and Wood Warbler but the rain got steadily worse. By the time we got back to the vans we were all pretty wet so headed back to the hotel to dry off and have lunch there. After lunch, with the rain clearing away, we headed up to Kavaki, stopping at the European Scops-owl site first. The single bird took a bit of finding as it was well tucked into the trunk and obscured by leaves but everyone managed to at least see the bird's body. For the remainder of the afternoon we stood in the lay-by at Kavaki hoping for Rüppell's Warbler. Unfortunately there were no signs of the bird but Subalpine Warbler (3), Eastern Orphean Warbler and Blue Rock-thrush were of some consolation. Out on the water 250+ Yelkouan Shearwaters milled around and were briefly joined by a pod of dolphins or porpoises. Despite the weather we achieved 80 species today (133 trip total).

Day 5: Our plan to head out west after breakfast was slightly delayed with a walk along to the Christou River mouth to look for a possible Pallid Harrier that Dennis and Gordon had seen before breakfast. The original, or possibly another, bird was relocated but the id. wasn't certain – it was probably a Montagu's. Off then to Ipsilou where there was a breezy wind with misty patches of cloud passing through. A stop in the lay-by before the

monastery picked up Isabelline Wheatear and Cirl Bunting. The walk up the windy east side and then down the sheltered west side produced a few birds of interest: Icterine (1), Subalpine (4) and Wood (5) Warblers, Collared (1) and Pied Flycatchers. Two of the specialties were seen – Sombre Tit and Cinereous Bunting – but proved quite hard to get everyone on to. Eurasian Nuthatch, Common Cuckoo, Tree Pipit, Willow Warbler and Common Raven were also added to the trip list. As it was blowing a near gale and the misty cloud continued to roll in we headed off into the Lardia Valley in the hope of Eastern Bonelli's Warbler. Despite being in the right place not a sign of them but Middle Spotted Woodpecker and Blue Rock-thrush were of some consolation. Back to the hotel, and after dinner, we went into the village to look for the Barn Owl nesting there. Lined up outside a bar looking up at a chimney, much to the amusement of a local drunk, we waited a while until the owl put in an appearance. 87 species today (143 trip total).

Day 6: A pre-breakfast walk into Potamia Valley from the bridge didn't produce much. Just after starting back Neil caught a brief view of Sombre Tit but again it was hard for most of the group to get on to and Graham's find of a Middle Spotted Woodpecker proved just as difficult to pick up. After breakfast it was off to Achladeri Forest. A stop on the way found a group of Glossy Ibises close to the road but the best sighting was of a pod of Bottlenosed Dolphin swimming out in the bay. Not long after getting to the forest and checking out last year's Krüper's Nuthatch nest site (the birds had only been seen irregularly around the stump this year) the rain started. We walked in to the forest a short way finding Short-toed Treecreeper but the heavens had now opened so it was back to the building in the car park for shelter. A flock of about 30 European Bee-eaters flew through, a male European Serin obliged by sitting on the top of a tree, as did a Short-toed Snake-eagle, and a Masked Shrike showed well. With the heavy rain continuing we decided to head to the Kalloni Saltpans to eat lunch in the hide there. Fortunately the rain eased and stopped (good job as the hide was locked). We spent the rest of the afternoon here and walked out to the end of the Alykes Wetland again... picking up Fan-tailed Warbler or, if preferred, Zitting Cisticola. Birds were similar to our first visit on day two but numbers were generally smaller: Montagu's Harrier (4), Lesser Kestrel (1), Red-footed Falcon, Eurasian Hobby, Collared Pratincole (4), Eurasian Thick-knee (2), Slender-billed Gull (1), Greater Short-toed Lark (8) and a single Red-throated Pipit were the pick of the bunch. We made our way back to the hotel via Tsiknias River. After dark, a Barn Owl flew over the hotel pool. 88 species today (150 trip total).

Day 7: After an early breakfast we headed up to the Lardia Valley to try for the Eastern Bonelli's Warbler again, this time we were successful with a bird singing and two seen. The highlight here though had to be a pair of Middle Spotted Woodpeckers visiting their nest hole. Driving on towards Sigri a stop to watch two Black Kites flying around a hillside also produced a group of 22 Common Ravens. At Sigri we turned off to the Faneromeni area. It was obvious that there had been a reasonable fall of migrants: Whinchats and Spotted Flycatchers were everywhere (as they had been all week), Wood and Icterine Warblers, Collared and Pied Flycatchers, Tree Pipit, European Bee-eaters (ca.70) and 10 Lesser Kestrels (10) were the pick of the bunch. For lunch it was off to a taverna in Sigri. By early afternoon it was raining again so we decided to head back through the Lardia Valley towards Kallonis. By the time we got to Kallonis the rain had just about stopped so we continued on to Metochi Lake and took a circular walk around it. Common Starling (2) was new for the week and a Western Rock Nuthatch nest by the road was an interesting find. Later, for the second night, the Barn Owl flew over the hotel pool. 91 species today (154 trip total).

Day 8: Our flight home wasn't until 16.20 so we didn't have to leave for the airport until after lunch. As we had missed the Krüper's Nuthatch earlier in the week we decided to head back to Achladeri Forest to spend what time we had left looking for it. As the birds had moved from the tree stump nest site we had been advised to look a little further up into the forest. We waited for a while in the suggested area but nothing appeared and everyone gradually spread out along the track. A few other birds were picked up around the forest including Wood Lark, Subalpine and Wood Warblers, Collared Flycatcher, Short-toed Treecreeper, Eurasian Golden Oriole and Masked Shrike. Before everyone has drifted off instructions were given to be back at the vans by 11.00. By 10.45 Neil started to make his way back to open up the vans and as he approached the tree stump saw something on itone then two Krüper's!! Daphne, Tony and Dennis were within signaling distance and managed to see the birds as they flew off the stump and moved through the

trees. By the time the others arrived the birds has disappeared into the forest. A great bird to finish the trip on (our 155th species) but it was disappointing that everyone couldn't get on to it. After packing and lunch at the hotel we said goodbye to Keith who was having another week on the island and headed off to the airport. After checking the bags in we sat by the sea in the fresh air before having to go through to the departure lounge – Gordon managed to find a Sardinian Warbler while we waited. The trip ended after the flight, via Athens, landed at Heathrow just after 21.00. 65 species today (155 trip total).

Neil Gartshore