THE ISLAND OF KOS AT LEISURE Eleonora's Island

02 – 09 May 2013



Leaders: Mike Witherick and Roger Lawrence

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A Personal Diary

Thursday, 02 May

This year's group started out from two different airports – Birmingham and Gatwick. Both sub-groups enjoyed flights that left and arrived on schedule. The former arrived two hours ahead of the latter and were in time for a normal buffet dinner. The latter were spoilt by having a meal specially set aside for them. Eurasian Scops-Owls were on campus and seemed to call for much of the night.

Friday, 03 May

The group assembled for a 7.30 am buffet breakfast. The weather being warm and sunny, we sat out on the terrace. The problem with breakfasts here is the huge amount of choice – so many different dishes, pastries, etc. to choose from.

We left the hotel at 8.30 am and, after filling up both vehicles with fuel, we made all speed for Tigaki salt lake. To our relief and delight, the lagoon was well-filled with water and with just enough exposed edge to make it interesting for waders. During the course of the morning we visited three different locations around the lake. There were a number of sights (and sounds) that will remain in the memory – such as the 50 or more very vocal Mediterranean Gulls that suddenly appeared and then proceeded to find a thermal that carried them high into the sky. A flock of 15 Gull-billed Terns came in and settled on a patch of very shallow water. A little later a small flock of Whiskered Tern passed over our heads and with them there was a White-winged Tern. There were over 50 Greater Flamingo feeding in the shallow waters. A lone Eleonora's Falcon swooped on some distant waders (possible Ruff); a Lesser Kestrel gave reasonable views, whilst most of the occupants of the lead vehicle had their first views of a pair of European Roller. Our sightings of waders involved four species – Black-winged Stilt, Ruff and Wood and Common Sandpipers. Other birds of note amongst our total morning list of 31 species included Zitting Cisticola, Squacco and Grey Herons, Corn Bunting and Yellow Wagtail.

By midday, such was the heat that birdlife had become rather quiet, so we drove back to the hotel for a very relaxed lunch on the poolside terrace. Some of the party, led by Tom, told Roger and me how good the chilled beer was going down! We rounded off the meal with a communal sharing of two dishes of Greek yoghurt, honey and walnuts – truly delicious! There was plenty of time afterwards for R & R. Gail and Peter were the only ones to brave the cold waters of the pool.

We met up at 3.30 pm and drove up to Old Pyli perched on an outcrop of the Dikeos Mountains. Aerobatic Jackdaws filled the skies. In the pine forest there were Serin and Chaffinch. In the more open habitat above the trees we struggled to find birds — maybe the day was still too hot! Little Owl and Blackbird were probably the best we could manage. As we were about to board the vehicles, we had a golden few minutes when we had in the sky above Old Pyli, three species of raptor (Hobby, Eleonara's Falcon and Sparrowhawk) and two Alpine Swifts all flying together.

Later we drove along the foot of the Dikeos Mountains and saw another European Roller and yet another at a lower level. In the distance, Peter spotted a Long-legged Buzzard, whilst a few minutes later, Roger drew our attention to a European Turtle Dove perched on a telegraph wire along with two Eurasian Collared Doves for comparison.

We arrived back at the hotel at 6 pm and an hour later met up to do the checklist on the poolside terrace. We then retired upstairs for a most acceptable buffet dinner. Afterwards, we went in search of Eurasian Scops-Owl and after a little while we found one conveniently perched on top of a telegraph pole rather than hidden in a tree. On that high note, we retired to our rooms.

Saturday, 04 May

Most of the group opted for an hour of pre-breakfast birding down at Marmari Beach. The small area of wetland held Wood Sandpipers and Ruff, while Cetti's Warblers seemed to be everywhere and more than willing to show themselves. But our best sightings were of two Purple Herons on the ground, and two Blackcrowned Night Herons in flight. A Sardinian Warbler perched obligingly.

Most of the remainder of the morning was spent birdwatching around the military training ground to the west of Mastihari. However, even before we had reached that area, we had added three new birds to the tour list in the form of a 'ringtail' Hen Harrier, a Woodchat Shrike and a Common Stonechat. Possibly for most of the group, the bird of the session was Great Spotted Cuckoo – indeed we saw two of them in separate locations. A Common Cuckoo had been seen a little earlier. A nesting Sardinian Warbler offered some good photo opportunities. A male Montagu's Harrier was seen, as well as two more Eleonora's Falcons. Five European Bee-eaters were seen perched in a small dead shrub. Two species of wheatear – Northern and Black-eared - were sharing the same stretch of potential breeding area; two Whinchats were seen on a nearby wall and a pair of Red-rumped Swallows seemed to prospecting for a nesting site. Cretzschmar's Buntings only gave distant views, but to round off the morning we came across our first Black-headed Buntings.

We lunched back at the hotel and, as usual, were well attended by Zoi. Her good humour added to the pleasure of the meal, particularly when it came to issuing us all with our own small bowl of Greek yoghurt, honey and walnuts. Such was the timing of the end of the meal that I was able to declare a two-hour spell of R and R.

At 4 pm we drove down to the salt lake. I was delighted to see a pair of Spur-winged Lapwing. Almost every year, they attempt to breed here in the same area of meadow adjacent to the shore. We were also to add three more species of wader. There were 18 Little Stint and a flock of some 12 Common Ringed Plovers. Presumably we were seeing two migrant flocks that had decided to stop down for refuelling before resuming their northward journey. Our watching of these waders was somewhat frustrated by the constant passing of tourists – on foot, on bikes, on motor bikes or on quad vehicles. Another addition to the list was a lone Eurasian Coot!

Before returning to the hotel we made a short detour via Marmari Beach again. Ruff and Wood Sandpipers were still present. We reached the hotel a little before 6 pm and did a circuit of the perimeter road before going to our rooms to freshen up before doing the checklist. After dinner, Peter and Janet were anxious that I should go on the internet and check the Championship football results. Apparently they support a team called 'Leicester' and judging from their behaviour they were pleased with today's result!

Sunday, 05 May

The salt lake was our pre-breakfast destination. Wader numbers seemed to be up on yesterday and amongst them there were two newcomers – a Common Snipe and a Temminck's Stint – the latter proving to be quite confiding. However, our best efforts to birdwatch were disturbed by a party of German cyclists who insisted on parking themselves and their bikes right beside us! Today, being the Greek Easter Sunday, there were special red eggs and a sort of saffron bun to mark the occasion at breakfast.

The morning's excursion took us through Kos Town and so to Embros Thermes on the south coast. We parked at the literal end of the road, and enjoyed good views of a Black-eared Wheatear. We also saw our first Raven. We had hoped to find Blue Rock Thrush but perhaps it was the rather windy conditions that made it into a 'no-show' species. However, a very photogenic sight was of a Spur-thighed Tortoise with a youngster dangerously parked on the edge of the road.

Our second stop was at Psalidi where we admired the carpets of blue Statice covering the sandy shingle just above the tide-line. A White-winged Tern in full breeding plumage flew just over our heads. Five Greater Short-toed Larks were seen at close hand from the front vehicle – that is, until another vehicle tried to run them over! A few Sand Martins flew by. The protected stretch of reed-fringed water was remarkable for the number of Common Moorhens and Eurasian Coots and nothing else. At the entrance to the reserve, there were upwards of five kids (non-human) being spit-roasted by picnicking local families – clearly an Easter tradition.

The third stop was along the waterfront in Kos Town. The closeness of Turkey, but a few kilometres away across the narrow straits, came as a surprise to some. After a sleep-killing coffee, we visited the ancient Plane tree, under which it is claimed that Hippocrates taught his medical students, and also overlooked the extensive remains of the ancient basilica and the old port. We had hoped to find some Pallid Swifts, but the only ones we saw were Common. From the promenade, we saw our first Shag.

We arrived back at the hotel a little after midday and at 12.30 pm met up for another relaxing lunch. Zoi was in her usual jovial form. Two hours of R and R followed before meeting up for the afternoon excursion. This involved visiting two of the deeply-cut valleys behind Kardamena. The first proved to be very quiet birdwise, despite some very good habitat. The second had recently suffered an extensive fire, but it did produce some good views of possibly the bird of the tour – a Lanner. Given the paleness of the bird's body, plus some other characteristics, we thought that it might have been of the Middle Eastern race. Before reaching the first of the valleys, we had had good views of a Long-legged Buzzard being harassed by a very persistent Western Jackdaw.

Some of us rounded off the day with another visit to the salt lake. Nothing much had changed from the morning, except that we heard the calls of a Common Greenshank. We met poolside for the checklist and then went upstairs to enjoy another excellent supper – the moussaka and the ouzo cream were delicious!

Monday, 06 May

There was a full turnout for a spell of pre-breakfast birding. This concentrated on two locations around the shores of the salt lake. At the first, we gained the impression that there had been an emigration of waders overnight. As we left, however, a lone female Red-footed Falcon was spotted on a telegraph post. At the second location, we found a male Eurasian Teal – an unusual record for this time of the year. A Eurasian Hobby headed purposefully northwards.

After breakfast, we spent much of the remainder of the morning birdwatching along the foot of the Dikeos Mountains to the east of Zia (a tourist honeypot complete with trashy souvenir shops). On the way there, we stopped to listen to a Common Nightingale in full song. At the same spot, we saw our first Coal Tits. In the pine forest just beyond Zia, we watched a number of Spotted Flycatchers and heard European Serins. Below the tree-line, we took a track leading off the road. This led us to an area of olive groves and scrub. Here a displaying Subalpine Warbler gave some good views as it periodically perched on tree tops. But probably the sight that will be remembered longest was of a European Roller and a Eurasian Hoopoe perched within a foot of each other in a dead tree. We then moved on to a spot where last year I had seen Eastern Orphean Warbler. Sadly, we were not in luck this year, but a passing Eleonora's Falcon provided some compensation.

The next stop was in more open country and here we revelled in some really close views of Cretzschmar's Bunting. Peter seemed particularly pleased. From there, we dropped down the hillside and stopped for an outside-the-perimeter-fence view of the remains of Hippocrates medical school at Asklepio.

At the salt lake, we saw our first Common Greenshank and a Temminck's Stint again showed well. From there it was a matter of dashing back to the hotel for a relaxed lunch followed by some R and R. At 3.30pm we left the hotel and, having passed the airport, drove through Plakias Forest, a small area of pines renowned as the home of a large feral population of Peafowl. Beyond there, on open ground, we watched three male Red-footed Falcons hawking for insects. Several Lesser Kestrels were doing the same thing. Our route back to the hotel took us across the military training ground again. There were no new birds, but our sightings included European Roller, Black-eared and Northern Wheatears, Whinchat, Woodchat Shrike and European Bee-eater.

The rest of the day followed its now established pattern of checklist in the bar area and then upstairs to a leisurely buffet evening meal. What was noticeable tonight was the fact that seven of the group were drinking retsina - a real taste of Greece! I did not gain the impression that Mary was greatly impressed!

Tuesday, 07 May

Pre-breakfast visits to the salt lake and Marmari Beach suggested that the only change in the bird situation was a net reduction in wader numbers. Possibly our best sighting was of some seven Squacco Herons.

After breakfast we set off to explore the west end of the island, namely the Kefalos Peninsula. There was little or no evidence of migration, so the excursion became more of one of admiring some splendid coastal scenery. We had several good views of Black-eared Wheatears, including a pair at a nesting hole. Interestingly, most of the birds seen today were of the 'throated' form. We maintained our record of seeing Eleonora's Falcons every day. Steppe Buzzard and Lesser Kestrel were also spotted, along with Woodchat Shrike, Spotted Flycatcher and Red-rumped Swallow. Some briefly saw a Wood Warbler.

We lunched overlooking the sea at Agios Theologos. Most took advantage of the chance to have some fresh fish – so-called 'White Snapper'. After the meal, we hastened back to the hotel for a spell of relaxation before meeting up at 4 pm for yet another visit to the salt lake. Before we reached there, we spent some time watching a Black-headed Bunting. At the lake, our best sighting was of a Stone Curlew flying out across the water. Ruff numbers were up, but Greater Flamingos down to only 12.

The rest of the day passed in a most convivial manner with plenty of good chat at the table immediately after the evening meal.

Wednesday, 08 May

The group opted out of doing any pre-breakfast birding. Nonetheless, we still breakfasted at the normal time and left the hotel at 8.30 am to spend the day on the nearby island of Nisyros. The inter-island crossing, on a fairly crowded boat from Kardamena to Mandraki, took a little over an hour. Today, for a change, the skies were overcast. Sadly, the sea was very quiet and during the crossing we only saw one Scopoli's Shearwater, one Shag and a small number of Yellow-legged Gulls. Before leaving Kardamena, we saw a White Wagtail on the breakwater.

On landing at Mandraki, Michelle informed us that we would be taking the 12.30 pm bus up to the caldera. In the circumstances, and given the need to a loo, we decided to have a coffee at the taverna where it had been arranged that we should have lunch. We were made most welcome and placed our orders for what was going to be a late lunch. Afterwards, we navigated our way through narrow alleys to a spot on the edge of the village where on some previous tours I have seen Eastern Orphean Warbler. We were not in luck, but did see a Large Tortoiseshell butterfly and two Eleonora's Falcons.

Our bus to the caldera was mainly occupied by a group of Dutch tourists. During our 45 minutes in this vast natural crater, we walked quickly to a partially wooded part of the caldera floor. Here we found Blue Tit, Spotted Flycatcher, Cretzschmar's Bunting and Black-eared and Northern Wheatears. A large flock of Alpine Swifts put in a brief appearance. We returned to Mandraki and then walked briskly to our luncheon venue where we were quickly served with either moussaka or pizza. The cold beer went down a treat.

Our return crossing left on time. The north-westerly wind made it a rather chilly experience, and the sea proved to be even more bird-less. We arrived back at the hotel a little after 5 pm and retired to our rooms to warm up and relax. The checklist was followed by our last evening meal together – another relaxed and convivial time.

Thursday, 09 May

Pre-breakfast birding today was an all-male event. We checked out three different locations around the salt lake and added two new species to the tour list, namely Common Tern and Great Reed Warbler – the latter showing particularly well. The complete absence of Greater Flamingo was significant – presumably the remaining immatures had decided to push on northwards.

It was the clients' choice that we should spend our last session of birding in the military area beyond Mastihari. In the event, it proved a good one, despite initially seeing nothing but Peafowl in Plakias Forest. Immediately beyond the forest, we came across a small flock of Red-footed Falcons occupying the same stretch of telegraph poles as a few days ago. Two Eleonora's Falcons maintained our record of seeing that species on every day of the tour.

At the start of the unmade track, we were welcomed by a Black-headed Bunting. Perhaps the star bird of the morning – a splendid male Lesser Grey Shrike in full breeding plumage – was spotted a short distance

further on. It posed well, first on a fence and then on some wires. In the same vicinity, there were Greater Short-toed Lark and Black-eared and Northern Wheatears. Two Stone Curlews were then seen in flight in the usual location. A little further on, we began to realise that there were more European Rollers around today, and eventually we managed to come across one that allowed us to watch it through the scope and Peter to photograph it. Nearby, a Cretzschmar's Bunting was heard and seen, and I glimpsed a Common Cuckoo. A wheel trim shed by my vehicle caused us to stop at a spot where some 20 European Bee-eaters were gathering in a bare tree. We had not been watching them for more than a few minutes when they all took off and noisily climbed to quite a height and so to embark on the next stage in their migration. Some Alpine Swifts were seen flying quite close to the ground.

We rounded off the excursion with a visit to the waterfront at Mastihari in the hope of finding Audouin's Gull. Lunch today was a special occasion, not just because it was our last meal together, but also because it was Jennifer's birthday. To mark the occasion, Tom treated us to a glass of retsina or two, and the firm provided a birthday cake.

The afternoon was spent packing and settling room accounts. At 5.30 pm, the Birmingham brigade was driven to the airport to catch their mid-evening flight. The remaining four of us were able to have our evening meal in the hotel before checking in for our flight to Gatwick. Much to our delight, the Gatwick flight left on time and arrived early.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the Meras family and the staff of the Hotel Palladium from making us feel so welcome and for providing such excellent service. Thanks to you all for coming on this tour - we could not have wished to have been with a nicer group. Roger and I hope you enjoyed your time in Kos as much as we did. Hopefully, we will meet up again in the not-too-distant future. Thank you, Roger, for your help and good company during the tour. Thank you also to Peter Monahan for the photographs used in this report.

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July 2013

Itinerary and Weather

02 May UK > Kos

03 May am: Tigaki salt lake

pm: Old Pyli & foot of Dikeos Mountaims

Fine 28°C

04 May am: Marmari Beach > military training ground west of Mastihari

pm: Tigaki salt lake > Marmari Beach

Fine 26°C

05 May am: Tiugaki salt lake & Marmari Beach > Embros Thermes > Psalidi > Kos Town

pm: > valleys behind Kardamena > Tigaki salt lake

Sunny; fresh NW wind 26°C

06 May am: Tigaki salt lake > Zia > Asklepio > Tigaki salt lake

pm: > Plakias Forest > military area west of Mastihari

Fine 29°C

07 May am: Tigaki salt lake & Marmari Beach Kefalos peninsula (lunch at Agios Theologus)

pm: Tigaki salt lake

Fine 26°C

08 May > Kardamena > Nisyros (Mandraki & Mandraki) > Kardemena

Overcast; fresh NW wind 19°C

09 May am: Tigaki salt lake > Plakias Forest > military training ground > Mastihari

pm: > UK Overcast 19°C



Southern Comma



Spur-thighed Tortoises

CHECKLIST OF BIRDS SEEN DURING TOUR

No of days recorded

Abundance Scale
(no. seen on best day)

1 2h means seen on 1
day and heard on 2
other days 3 = 10 - 100 4 = > 100

The sequence and nomenclature of this list follow Collins Bird Guide 2nd Edition 2010.

SPECIES	No of o		Abundance scale	SCIENTIFIC NAME
Ruddy Shelduck	6		3	Tadorna ferruginea
Mallard	5		2	Anas platyrhynchos
Eurasian Teal	2		1	Anas crecca
Little Grebe	1		1	Tachybaptus ruficollis
Scopoli's Shearwater	1		2	Calonectris diomedea
Shag	2		1	Phalacrocorax aristotelis
Black-crowned Night-Heron	1		1	Nycticorax nycticorax
Squacco Heron	6		2	Ardeola ralloides
Little Egret	6		3	Egretta garzetta
Grey Heron	2		1	Ardea cinerea
Purple Heron	4		1	Ardea purpurea
Greater Flamingo	5		3	Phoenicopterus ruber
Hen Harrier	1		1	Circus cyaneus
Montagu's Harrier	1		1	Circus pygargus
Long-legged Buzzard	2		1	Buteo rufinus
Common (Steppe) Buzzard	$\frac{2}{2}$		1	Buteo buteo
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	1		1	Accipiter nisus
Common Kestrel	1		1	Falco tinnunculus
Lesser Kestrel	7		2	Falco naumanni
Eurasian Hobby	2		1	Falco subbuteo
Eleonora's Falcon	7		1	Falco eleonorae
Lanner	1		1	Falco biarmicus
Common Moorhen	6		2	Gallinula chloropus
Eurasian Coot	4		3	Fulica atra
	6		3	
Black-winged Stilt	5		3	Himantopus himantopus Charadrius hiaticula
Common Ringed Plover	1		3 1	
Grey Plover	5		1	Pluvialis squatarola
Spur-winged Lapwing	2			Vanellus spinosus
Curlew Sandpiper			1	Calidris ferruginea
Temminck's Stint	2 5		1 3	Calidris temminckii
Little Stint				Calidris minuta
Common Sandpiper	1		1	Actitis hypoleucos
Wood Sandpiper	5	11.	2	Tringa glareola
Common Greenshank	2	1h	1	Tringa nebularia
Common Snipe	1		1	Gallinago gallinago
Ruff	6		3	Philomachus pugnax
Mediterranean Gull	1		3	Larus melanocephalus
Yellow-legged Gull	7		3	Larus michahellis
Gull-billed Tern	1		3	Gelochelidon nilotica
Common Tern	1		1	Sterna hirundo
Whiskered Tern	3		2	Chlidonias hybridus
White-winged Tern	2		1	Chlidonias leucopterus
Rock Dove (Feral Pigeon)	6		2	Columba livia
Eurasian Collared Dove	7		2	Streptopelia decaocto
European Turtle Dove	4	1h	2	Streptopelia turtur
Great Spotted Cuckoo	1		1	Clamator glandarius
Common Cuckoo	2		1	Cuculus canorus
Little Owl	1		1	Athene noctua
Eurasian Scops-Owl	2	5h	1	Otus scops

Common Swift	5		3	Apus apus
Alpine Swift	4		3	Apus melba
Eurasian Hoopoe	1	1h	1	Upupa epops
European Bee-eater	5		3	Merops apiaster
European Roller	6		2	Coracias garrulus
Crested Lark	7		3	Galerida cristata
Greater Short-toed Lark	2		1	Calandrella brachydactyla
Common Sand Martin	2		1	Riparia riparia
Barn Swallow	7		3	Hirundo rustica
Red-rumped Swallow	2		1	Hirundo daurica
Common House Martin	7		2	Delichon urbica
Yellow Wagtail	1		1	Motacilla flava
White Wagtail	1		1	Motacilla alba
Common Nightingale	_	1h	1	Luscinia megarhynchos
Northern Wheatear	6		1	Oenanthe oenanthe
Black-eared Wheatear	6		1	Oenanthe hispanica
Whinchat	3		1	Saxicola rubetra
Common Stonechat	1		1	Saxicola torquata
Common Blackbird	2		1	Turdus merula
Sardinian Warbler	5		1	Sylvia melanocephala
Subalpine Warbler	1	1h	1	Sylvia cantillans
Cetti's Warbler	3	3h	2	Cettia cetti
Zitting Cisticola	5	1h	1	Cisticola juncidis
Reed Warbler	5	1h	2	Acrocephalus scirpaceus
Great Reed Warbler	1		1	Acrocephalus arundinaceus
(Eastern) Olivaceous Warbler	7		1	Hippolais pallida
Wood Warbler	1		1	Phylloscopus sibilatris
Spotted Flycatcher	4		2	Muscicapa striata
Great Tit	1	1h	1	Parus major
Coal Tit	1		1	Periparus ater
European Blue Tit	1	1h	1	Cyanistes caeruleus
Lesser Grey Shrike	1		1	Lanius minor
Woodchat Shrike	4		1	Lanius senator
Common Magpie	7		2	Pica pica
Western Jackdaw	6		3	Corvus monedula
Hooded Crow	7		3	Corvus cornix
Common Raven	2		1	Corvus corax
House Sparrow	7		3	Passer domesticus
Common Chaffinch	3	1h	1	Fringilla coelebs
European Greenfinch	6		3	Chloris chloris
Eurasian Serin	1		1	Serinus serinus
Cretzschmar's Bunting	4		1	Emberiza caesia
Black-headed Bunting	3		1	Emberiza melanocephala
Corn Bunting	6		2	Miliaria calandra

MAMMALS

European Rabbit Oryctolagus cuniculus

BUTTERFLIES

Large White Painted Lady Common Swallowtail Meadow Brown
Small White Red Admiral Scarce Swallowtail Large Tortoiseshell
Clouded Yellow

REPTILES

Spur-thighed Tortoise Starred Agama Balkan Green Lizard

This list represents those birds and other animals seen by party members of this tour.



Lesser Grey Shrike



Red-footed Falcon



Sardinian Warbler

Front cover: Spur-winged Lapwing



Great Spotted Cuckoo

Purple Heron



Red-rumped Swallows



Black-eared Wheatear

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