

ORNITHOLIDAY'S TOUR TO GREECE - THE ISLAND OF LESVOS AT LEISURE
Spring Migration Magic

27 April - 04 May 2013



Leader: Colin Bushell

ORNITHOLIDAY'S TOUR TO GREECE - THE ISLAND OF LESVOS AT LEISURE

Spring Migration Magic

27 April - 04 May 2013

A Personal Diary

I am a bit addicted to birding Lesvos in the spring, I have to admit. My fourth tour was another bird-filled trip, even if the weather was a little unfavourable for 'falls' of migrant birds. How many birds flew straight over the island in those clear, cloudless skies again (2012 was much the same) is anybody's guess. Nevertheless there was plenty to keep us busy with a reasonable selection of species, resident breeders and the odd surprise like the cracking male White-throated Robins that conveniently held territory in the west of Lesvos this spring.

27 April

It's an early start today, Ken is already waiting near the check-in desks when I arrive at the south terminal at Gatwick for our flight to Lesvos. Margaret, Barry and Jonnie arrive soon after and with the speedy check-in we can relax, grab a bite to eat and a coffee or two before boarding the plane to Mytilini.

Once again the plane is full of passengers in multi-pocket waistcoats and khaki-coloured clothing; it's not so easy to pick out the Ornitholidays clients for this tour - how those orange luggage labels help on this one! After a flight of just over three hours we are in the heat of the Aegean. It's nice to feel the sun on the back after the dreadful UK spring for weather. A quick look to the sky and a throw away "Perhaps it'll cloud over a bit, with luck" comment is one that will be reviewed on many occasions during the coming week. We meet at luggage collection, all bags accounted for and then collect the van, ready for the short journey across the island to Skala Kalloni.

Navigating the busy Mytilini roads in a trouble-free fashion we are on the open road quickly with our first Lesvos birds appearing and the sound of Common Nightingales ringing out from the hillsides and forests. Black-winged Stilts strut around the pools as we near Kalloni and on arrival at the Kalloni Bay Hotel we just beat the arriving Thomas Cook bus for check-in.

After a "freshen up" break we venture into the field for the first time. A spot of local birding near the hotel allows us to get acquainted with Crested Larks, Wood Sandpipers, Corn Buntings and some more familiar migrants like the Swifts and House Martins that have not yet arrived on our local patches back in the UK thanks to the 'late' spring this year.

Arriving back at the hotel we enjoy a buffet dinner and drinks before a short bird list and some well-deserved sleep. It's been a long day

28 April

Our first full day birding on Lesvos and we head out west (my favourite area on the island) towards Sigrí. First day progress is always slow with so many new species on offer, even along the roadside. Subalpine Warblers sing from the scrub-covered slopes as we ascend to the mountain roads and a Chukar makes us stop on a convenient safe bend to view this sometimes tricky species so early in the tour. Black-eared Wheatears, Red-rumped Swallows and Black Storks overhead are a delight to see and the next series of hairpins has us scanning the horizon as magnificent Short-toed Eagles, Long-legged Buzzards and Common Buzzards drift along the ridge in the clear blue sky.

Blue Rock Thrushes, Crag Martins and a Rock Sparrow are the rewards for a short stop in a deep gorge that always produces the goods en route out west. The Petrified Forest is not normally a venue we frequent, normally favouring the more established birding sites during a very full day in the west. This year a couple of White-throated Robins have set up territory though but there's no sign this morning. Black-headed Buntings, Red-backed Shrikes and two elusive (only seen by the leader) Barred Warblers are here though.

Lunch is taken at the Taverna Australia, favoured by most birding groups. After a good meal we are keen to head out again, even if the sun is still beating down without a cloud in the sky.

Red-backed, Woodchat and Masked Shrikes can be found on roadside wires with single immature male Golden Oriole and two or three European Bee-eaters thrown in for good measure. This Sigri - Faneromeni area is a hotspot for migrants illustrated by the handsome male Collared Flycatcher in tall trees by one of the fords. The shallow trickle is full of Wood Sandpipers by the ford and a nice group of Blue-headed Wagtails feed on the small insects around the margins of the stream. Cetti's Warbler song fills the air here as we leave for the road back to Kalloni, stopping at the foot of Ipsilou Monastery where Isabelline Wheatears and a single Cinereous Bunting can be found.

29 April

It is another fine morning but we have a difficult start to the day with vehicle problems preventing us birding in the early morning anywhere away from the hotel. We make the best of our morning, birding around the Kalloni Pool with fine views of Little Bittern and Eastern Olivaceous Warblers right outside the hotel while waiting for the mechanic to arrive.

With van problem seemingly resolved we head out to the nearby saltpans after revising our day's itinerary slightly. The wetlands are rather dry this year explaining the relative paucity of wetland bird records for the tour but there are still many Greater Flamingos, Pied Avocets, Ruff, Wood Sandpipers, a Green Sandpiper and even a Stone Curlew. With little standing fresh water tern sightings are restricted to just a single Whiskered and distant White-winged Terns, the latter not seen by all members of the group unfortunately. With a few Whinchats and some Black-headed Buntings on show there's little evidence of any large arrival of passerines (the weather is just *too* good still) but the Lesser Grey Shrikes seen today are a quality species for sure.

Lunch is taken in our usual taverna in Skala Kalloni and after a brief stop at the hotel we're back in the field searching the Lower Tsiknias River Valley for migrants. Migrants are still few and far between but a quick look at some plains near the beach produce our only Short-toed Larks of the tour at the end of the afternoon.

30 April

With no change in the weather (still glorious) we take the opportunity to search for some of the island's resident specialities this morning. The Achladeri Forests are a great place to find Kruper's Nuthatch and as usual there's a 'stake-out site' for our target bird this year. The stump used two or three years ago as a nest site is the place to be again this year and the birds appear soon after our arrival. The male visits the nest hole on several occasions allowing excellent scope views for all at a sensible distance, without us disturbing the birds. A fine male Masked Shrike is a momentary distraction, perching on cables on in the canopy of pines in the morning sunshine.

After a while we set off into the forest with the sound of Common Blackbirds and Cirl Buntings on the slopes above us while Ken continues photographing the nuthatches. European Serin is the only really interesting species found and there's no sign of the hoped-for Short-toed Treecreepers this morning.

A brief stop at Mesa and the Kalloni Saltpans fails to produce anything new so we head into town for lunch. Post lunch birding is a very successful affair with Barry displaying exceptional owl-finding technique, locating two Long-eared Owls (one a chick) in no time at all. A superb Eurasian Scops-Owl is soon located nearby and Ken points out that we can indeed see three individual owls from one spot this afternoon.

01 May

We have another day to try the 'West is best' theory as we head out towards Sigri again. The Lardia Valley is superb this morning with singing Cirl Buntings, Rock Sparrows, Blue Rock Thrushes, Eastern Bonelli's Warblers, Cretzschmar's Buntings and some Sombre Tits. If only the latter had stayed that little bit longer on the wires to let the group see them! The sound of Woodlarks, Cinereous Buntings and a Eurasian Hoopoe can be heard on the slopes of Ipsilou as a Levant Sparrowhawk passes overhead. Isabelline, Northern and Black-eared Wheatears belt out their scratchy songs with the more mellow calls of European Bee-eaters somewhere above us. The hillside has a few Spotted Flycatchers, Wood Warblers and a very elusive Eastern Bonelli's Warbler but no big arrival of birds once again. The fine weather does mean there's plenty of song though, including an Olive-Tree Warbler way below the road.

The customary feast at Taverna Australia is followed by checking the Faneromeni area where many Black-headed and Blue-headed Wagtails fill the fields and our only Temminck's Stint of the tour is located on one of the fords with Wood Sandpipers.

Heading back towards Ipsilou we stop for a nice flock of several Lesser Kestrels that are joined by at least two male Red-footed Falcons before taking the track to the Petrified Forest once again. This time the White-throated Robin shows well, if only briefly. What a bird! A super male with his peachy flanks, dark mask, white eye-brow and throat showing in glorious evening sunshine. A fitting end to the day indeed.

02 May

Another day, another car! Our Citroen Jumpy fails to jump into action again this morning so a replacement is called for. Our programmed early visit to Metochi for crakes is cancelled but at least we know about the vehicle before it's too late and our 'new' one arrives soon after breakfast.

The northern town of Kavaki is our venue today with Rüppell's Warbler on the menu. We arrive at the traditional site only to be met by the male on cables, singing in full view. Indeed there appears to be at least three males holding territory audible from the layby this year. He is soon replaced by a handsome male Black-headed Bunting and then a Common Stonechat, all using the same cable as a song post. Blue Rock Thrushes and Eurasian Crag Martins are minor distractions and with the fine weather and offshore wind there is little chance of shearwaters so we head for lunch at a local taverna.

The afternoon is spent taking the mountain road to the west watching Turtle Doves, Common Nightingales and Eastern Bonelli's Warbler in the Ladia Valley before taking yet another look at the male White-throated Robin. Several Common Cuckoos on the slopes of Ipsilou include one of the brown phase females with Pied Flycatcher new for the tour too.

With everyone now well satisfied with their views of White-throated Robin we head back to Skala Kalloni for a late dinner.

03 May

Our final full and yet again, very hot and sunny day, sees us staying fairly locally for our birding. Our first stop is the beach beyond Kalloni salt pans, a traditional territory of Rufous Bush Robins. These delightful birds do not keep us waiting long this morning, a male perching close as we wait quietly by a clump of Tamarisks. We have splendid views of this subtle, yet attractive species in song before heading away to watch handsome summer plumaged White-winged and Whiskered Terns. Although quite dry the pools still hold a nice selection of egrets and Ruddy Shelducks and a nice Western Marsh Harrier quarters the plains in the distance. Many Kentish Plovers, Little Stints and of course the ubiquitous Wood Sandpipers line the channels of the salt pans as well as the best showing of Curlew Sandpipers of our tour, with a dozen birds in a Ruff flock.

It's our final afternoon of the tour and after a very enjoyable lunch by the harbour we head inland and to the hills. Our best views of Eastern Bonelli's Warbler are enjoyed here as well as a party of Long-tailed Tits that always seem tricky to see on the island. Masked Shrike and numerous Subalpine Warblers are enjoyed.

Back at the hotel it's time for drinks and ice cream.

04 May

Pre-breakfast birding at Metochi Lake is the order of the day although once again it's fairly quiet even at this early hour. Cracking views of Little Bittern and our first Black-crowned Night Herons of the tour are the highlights but no crakes are found this morning unfortunately.

A leisurely breakfast back at the hotel is followed by some time for packing and preparing for the journey home. We say our goodbyes to the staff at Kalloni Bay Hotel, load the van for the last time and we're away to Mytilini for the final time.

On arrival in Mytilini the car hire representative is waiting and we manage to check-in early prior to the main arrival by Thomas Cook. With time to relax we enjoy a coffee or two before our flight back to Gatwick that

arrives just a little later than expected. Baggage is retrieved successfully and we say our final goodbyes before heading home after a very enjoyable tour to one of Europe's premier birding localities.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the staff at the excellent Kalloni Bay Hotel who made our stay so comfortable and were very helpful in many ways. The owners and staff at our two favourite tavernas (Dionysos in Kalloni and Australia in Sigri) were as accommodating as always and the food excellent.

Jonnie, Ken, Margaret and Barry were fabulous birding companions and great fun to be with in our leisure time too. I thoroughly enjoyed your company and thanks for your patience with the vehicle problems!

Colin Bushell
Ornitholidays
29 Straight Mile
Romsey
Hampshire SO51 9BB
Tel: 01794 519445
Email: info@ornitholidays.co.uk

July 2013

Itinerary and weather

The weather during this tour was fine, hot and sunny every day. Temperature 22 - 34 degrees Celsius and we experienced NW winds virtually the whole tour.

- | | |
|----------|---|
| 27 April | Gatwick - Mytilini. Transfer to Hotel Kalloni Bay. Local birding Cristou River and Kalloni Pool. |
| 28 April | Western Lesvos: Lardia Valley, Ipsilou, Sigri, Faneromeni Ford and Petrified Forest. |
| 29 April | Kalloni Saltpans after a late start due to van problems. Afternoon Tsiknias River (lower). |
| 30 April | Achladeri Forest, Mesa and Kalloni Saltpans in the morning. Afternoon near Kalloni and Papiana for owls. |
| 01 May | Western Lesvos: Lardia Valley, Ipsilou, Sigri Fields, Faneromeni Ford and Petrified Forest. |
| 02 May | Cristou River early morning. Northern Lesvos (after change of vehicle): Kavaki. Afternoon travelling west to Lardia Valley, Ipsilou and Petrified Forest. |
| 03 May | Kalloni Saltpans, 'Scops Copse' and mountain road between Dafia and Filia. |
| 04 May | Metochi Lake before travelling back to Mytilini for flight back to Gatwick. |

CHECKLIST OF BIRDS SEEN DURING TOUR

No of days recorded	Abundance Scale
1 2h means seen on 1 day and heard on 2 other days. Max 8 days.	maximum for any one day
	1 = 1 - 4
	2 = 5 - 9
	3 = 10 - 100
	4 = 100 - 1000
	5 = > 1000

SPECIES	No of days recorded	Abundance Scale	SCIENTIFIC NAME
---------	---------------------	-----------------	-----------------

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

Common Shelduck	3	1	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>
Ruddy Shelduck	6	3	<i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>
Mallard	3	1	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Chukar	1	1	<i>Alectoris chukar</i>
Great Crested Grebe	1	1	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>
Great Cormorant	3	1	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
Little Bittern	4	1	<i>Ixobrychus minutus</i>
Black-crowned Night-Heron	1	3	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>
Squacco Heron	6	3	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>
Little Egret	5	3	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
Great Egret	2	2	<i>Egretta alba</i>
Grey Heron	4	2	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Purple Heron	3	1	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>
Black Stork	7	3	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>
White Stork	6	3	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>
Greater Flamingo	3	3	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>
Short-toed Eagle	4	2	<i>Circus gallicus</i>
Western Marsh Harrier	1	1	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>
Long-legged Buzzard	2	1	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>
Common Buzzard	2	1	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
Levant Sparrowhawk	1	1	<i>Accipiter brevipes</i>
Common Kestrel	3	3	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
Lesser Kestrel	3	2	<i>Falco naumanni</i>
Red-footed Falcon	1	1	<i>Falco vespertinus</i>
Common Moorhen	5	3	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Pied Avocet	3	3	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>
Black-winged Stilt	4	3	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>
Stone Curlew	5	1	<i>Burhinus oedicephalus</i>
Little Ringed Plover	4	1	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>
Kentish Plover	6	3	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>
Curlew Sandpiper	1	1	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>
Temminck's Stint	1	1	<i>Calidris temminckii</i>
Little Stint	4	3	<i>Calidris minuta</i>
Wood Sandpiper	6	4	<i>Tringa glareola</i>
Green Sandpiper	1	1	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>
Common Greenshank	2	1	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>
Common Snipe	1	1	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>
Ruff	3	4	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>
Yellow-legged Gull	8	4	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>
Little Tern	2	2	<i>Sterna albifrons</i>
Common Tern	5	3	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>
White-winged Tern	1	3	<i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>
Whiskered Tern	3	3	<i>Chlidonias hybridus</i>
Rock Dove	3	2	<i>Columba livia</i>
Eurasian Collared Dove	8	3	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>

European Turtle Dove	3	1	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>	
Common Cuckoo	2	1	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	
Long-eared Owl	1	1	<i>Asio otus</i>	
Little Owl	1	1	<i>Athene noctua</i>	
Eurasian Scops-Owl	2	1	<i>Otus scops</i>	
Common Swift	8	3	<i>Apus apus</i>	
Eurasian Hoopoe	2	1	<i>Upupa epops</i>	
European Bee-eater	6	1	<i>Merops apiaster</i>	
Middle Spotted Woodpecker	3	1	<i>Dendrocopos medius</i>	
Crested Lark	8	3	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	
Woodlark	-	3h	1	<i>Lullula arborea</i>
Greater Short-toed Lark	1	1	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>	
Sand Martin	1	1	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	
Eurasian Crag Martin	2	3	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>	
Barn Swallow	8	4	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	
Red-rumped Swallow	6	3	<i>Hirundo daurica</i>	
Common House Martin	8	3	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	
White Wagtail	3	1	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	
Yellow Wagtail	5	3	<i>Motacilla flava</i>	
Black-headed Wagtail	5	2	<i>Motacilla (flava) feldegg</i>	
White-throated Robin	2	1	<i>Irania gutturalis</i>	
Rufous Bush Robin	1	1	<i>Cercotrichas galactotes</i>	
Common Nightingale	7	1	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>	
Northern Wheatear	3	2	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	
Isabelline Wheatear	3	2	<i>Oenanthe isabellina</i>	
Black-eared Wheatear	5	3	<i>Oenanthe hispanica</i>	
Whinchat	5	2	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>	
Common Stonechat	3	1	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>	
Mistle Thrush	1	1	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	
Common Blackbird	7	2	<i>Turdus merula</i>	
Blue Rock Thrush	3	1	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>	
Blackcap	2	1	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	
Eastern Orphean Warbler	2	1	<i>Sylvia crassirostris</i>	
Rüppell's Warbler	1	1	<i>Sylvia rueppelli</i>	
Subalpine Warbler	4	1	<i>Sylvia cantillans</i>	
Cetti's Warbler	7	1	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	
European Reed Warbler	6	2	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>	
Great Reed Warbler	3	1	<i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i>	
(Eastern) Olivaceous Warbler	6	2	<i>Hippolais pallida</i>	
Olive-tree Warbler	-	1h	1	<i>Hippolais olivetorum</i>
Willow Warbler	-	1h	1	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>
Wood Warbler	2	1	<i>Phylloscopus sibilatrix</i>	
Eastern Bonelli's Warbler	3	1	<i>Phylloscopus orientalis</i>	
Spotted Flycatcher	2	1	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	
Pied Flycatcher	1	1	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>	
Collared Flycatcher	1	3	<i>Ficedula albicollis</i>	
Great Tit	7	3	<i>Parus major</i>	
Eurasian Blue Tit	4	1	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	
Long-tailed Tit	1	2	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	
Krüper's Nuthatch	1	1	<i>Sitta krueperi</i>	
Western Rock Nuthatch	3	1	<i>Sitta neumayer</i>	
Lesser Grey Shrike	2	1	<i>Lanius minor</i>	
Red-backed Shrike	5	3	<i>Lanius collurio</i>	
Woodchat Shrike	4	3	<i>Lanius senator</i>	
Masked Shrike	4	1	<i>Lanius nubicus</i>	
Eurasian Jay	7	2	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	
Western Jackdaw	2	3	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	
Hooded Crow	8	3	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	
Common Raven	4	1	<i>Corvus corax</i>	
Golden Oriole	2	1	<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>	
House Sparrow	8	4	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	
Spanish Sparrow	4	3	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>	
Common Rock Sparrow	-	1h	1	<i>Petronia petronia</i>

Common Chaffinch	8	3	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
Common Linnet	3	2	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>
European Goldfinch	8	3	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
European Greenfinch	2	1	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>
European Serin	1	1	<i>Serinus serinus</i>
Cretzschmar's Bunting	3	2	<i>Emberiza caesia</i>
Cirl Bunting	4	1	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>
Cinereous Bunting	3	1	<i>Emberiza cineracea</i>
Black-headed Bunting	7	3	<i>Emberiza melanocephala</i>
Corn Bunting	8	3	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>
OTHER SPECIES			
Persian Squirrel	2	1	<i>Sciurus anomalus</i>
Balkan Green Lizard	4	1	<i>Lacerta trilineata</i>
Levant Water Frog	2	1	<i>Pelophylax bedriague</i>

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



Little Owl



Eurasian Scops-Owl



Long-eared Owl



Long-eared Owl juvenile

© Ornitholidays



Black-headed Bunting



Rufous Bush Robin



Chukar



Red-backed Shrike



Black Stork



Cinereous Bunting



Yellow Wagtail



Wood Sandpiper

Front cover: Rüppell's Warbler

All photographs © Colin Bushell