

# Lesvos

4–11 May 2006

**Participants:**

**Kathleen Buosi**

**Sheila Grayson**

**Raymond Harrison**

**Mervyn Kilby**

**Scott Mayson**

**Jane Rowse**

**Cameron Stewart**

**Susannah Storm-Turner**



**Cretzschmar's Bunting**

**Leader: Bob Buckler**

After a wet spring the island was verdant and covered in blooming flowers, the meadows and marshes held plenty of water and as a result the bird life was fantastic. Birdfinders recorded their highest ever total, finding 177 species including the highly-sought-after White-throated Robin. Other good sightings included Great Snipe, Thrush Nightingale, Barred, Marsh and River Warblers, Ortolan Bunting, Red-necked Phalarope, Slender-billed Gull and Baillon's Crake. The island's 'big five' of Krüper's Nuthatch, Cretzschmar's and Cinereous Buntings, Olive-tree Warbler and Sombre Tit were all seen well. The week's weather was dominated by a steady NE wind, which kept the temperature down and held-up many migrants especially the raptors, but it stayed mainly dry. Torrential rain and a huge thunderstorm on the 8<sup>th</sup> was the turning point in the weather, the wind direction shifted, it got much warmer and the birds just poured through from then on.

**Day 1:** The flight from Gatwick arrived 10 minutes early and the group of 8 were quickly off to the hotel. After a short settling in period and unpacking of telescopes we set off to the saltpans and began our birding by watching a mixed flock of over 100 marsh terns: Black, Whiskered and White-winged were all present and were joined by Little and Common Terns. Large flocks of Little Stints fed alongside the track with Ruff, Wood Sandpiper, Black-winged Stilt, Kentish, Common and Little Ringed Plovers. Deeper into the saltpans, a large flock of Greater Flamingos fed with Pied Avocet, and along the saltpan embankment we found Great Egret, Eurasian Thick-knee and a couple of Common Shelduck. In a roadside seasonal pool at the back of the pans, we found summer-plumaged Spotted Redshank, Gull-billed Terns, 10+ Garganey and two island rarities: an elusive Great Snipe and a distant Red-necked Phalarope. In the sky, we saw our first raptors seeing both Western Marsh-harrier and Montagu's Harrier. Passerine included the ubiquitous Crested Lark and Corn Bunting whilst Black-headed Buntings sang from most bushes. Red-throated Pipits and Yellow (Black-Headed) Wagtails fed in the poolside grass. At the beach area, we saw Black-necked Grebes, Ruddy Turnstone, Greater Short-toed Larks and more Red-throated Pipits, but the highlight for most was the Collared Pratincoles feeding on insects in the short grass. We drove back into Skala Kalloni and visited the

pool opposite our hotel, which was full of birds. Grey, Purple and Squacco Herons dozed in the reedbeds whilst Little Bittern and its rarer cousin Great Bittern stalked frogs within a few meters of the road, Glossy Ibis and Black Stork drifted over and hundreds of hirundines hawked just above the marsh. We returned to the hotel serenaded by Cetti's and Eastern Olivaceous Warblers, which were over shadowed by the melodic efforts of Common Nightingales. What a start! We had amassed 71 species in those first five hours and things boded well for the rest of the week.

**Day 2:** We made an early start and visited a large reed-fringed pool a few kilometres from Skala Kalloni. There were several Black-crowned Night-herons roosting at the far end and we found a Little Crake clambering through the reeds on the opposite bank at the water's edge. The air was alive with hirundines, which were joined by Common Swifts, and the reeds held Sedge, Reed, Great Reed, Cetti's and Eastern Olivaceous Warblers all trying to out sing each one another. As we made our way around the poolside track another small crake appeared in an open area, this proved to be an exciting find as the bird was a Baillon's Crake; everyone had prolonged views of this Lesvos gem. Next we drove further down the track to a rocky outcrop where a Western Rock Nuthatch had constructed its elaborate dome shaped nest of mud. The nest was literally roadside and the hard-working parents gave us fantastic views as they fed their young. After breakfast we headed south to an area known by the British birdwatchers as Derbyshire. We firstly walked a track that had stony citrus shrubs on one side and open marsh on the other. Our first sighting was of a European Roller, which sat radiant in the morning sun – what colours! Next we saw Northern Wheatear and many Whinchats, whilst Cirl Buntings sang from nearby trees and Eurasian Golden Orioles could be heard distantly up ahead. Twenty or more European Bee-eaters hawked insects from the telegraph wires and shrikes were everywhere, mainly Red-backed but also Woodchat, Lesser Grey and Masked Shrikes. As we entered an area of open farmland we found Lesser Whitethroat, Eastern Orphean Warbler and a probable Marsh Warbler, but that one got away before a clear view was had. A few raptors appeared above the distant hills: Long-legged Buzzard, Short-toed Snake-eagle and Common Buzzard were joined by two Common Ravens and Hooded Crows. Making our way back to the bus a Tawny Pipit appeared on the marsh and Black Storks, Purple and Squacco Herons and Ruddy Shelducks were all flyovers. Next we stopped on a long causeway that overlooks shallow lagoons and the beach on one side and an open flat plain with a large rocky outcrop in its centre on the other side. There we had distant views of a Black-eared Wheatear. Moving further round the southern perimeter of the gulf of Kaloni we arrived at Achladeri and a known Krüper's Nuthatch nest site. As we disembarked from the van a family party of the highly-sought-after Krüper's Nuthatch gave excellent views as the three newly-fledged chicks were fed by very busy parents. A stroll in the pinewoods produced very little, but we did see European Serin, another Masked Shrike appeared and Common Chaffinches were everywhere. We then drove further down south until we reached Vatera, a seaside town on the south coast, where along a river just outside the town we found Black-headed, Blue-headed and Grey-headed versions of Yellow Wagtail. Several Little Bitterns were seen and a flock of Little Egrets fed in larger open pools. Waders were varied with Common, Green (a good bird for Lesvos), Wood and Curlew Sandpiper, Little and Temminck's Stints and Common and Little Ringed Plovers, a lovely site to visit! And as we returned to the bus a Common Kingfisher flew by. Lastly, we drove to Agios Fokas a rocky peninsular from which open sea can be viewed. We had distant sightings of both Yelkouan and Cory's Shearwaters and a Great Cormorant flew past. An unusual sighting of a Dunlin on the rocks proved to be our only sighting of this species. Returning along the track we stopped to view a Middle Spotted Woodpecker at its nest site, a Hoopoe flew by and Common Redstart, Spotted Flycatcher and Eurasian Jay were also seen. We returned home via the salt pans where we saw much of the same species as the previous day. After dinner, we visited a tree-lined street in the village where we heard European Scops-owls calling. They responded to our tape-lure and showed very well for a few minutes before we drove to the centre of the village to watch a Barn Owl flying around its nest site. A great ending to another superb day on Lesvos.

**Day 3:** This proved to be the best day of the tour both in terms of species seen and of their rarity value. We took the road west towards Eresos, stopping at "Devils Bridge" hoping to see our first Cinereous Bunting,

which proved elusive, although we did see Little Owl, Subalpine Warbler, Black-eared Wheatear, Western Rock Nuthatch and distant Eurasian Golden Orioles. Driving on, we took the coast track from Eresos towards Sigri and stopped at the ford at mid-point. What a fantastic place with birds everywhere and a great variety too. Firstly, we concentrated on the area where a White-throated Robin had been seen earlier and sure enough the bird appeared and gave us excellent views – what a lovely bird. Before this, we had seen Cretzschmar’s Bunting, Rufous Bush-robin, Eurasian Golden Oriole, Barred and Wood Warblers, Common Chiffchaff, Blackcap, Common and Lesser Whitethroats, Pied Flycatcher, Whinchat, Sombre Tit and lots more. Dragging ourselves away we travelled a further kilometre to an old chapel. As soon as we got out of the car we were greeted with the sound of a Thrush Nightingale. This bird eventually came out in full view and began to forage within a few feet of us where it caught several caterpillars: this bird stayed out in full view for over an hour! In the trees above we found more Wood, Willow and Icterine Warblers and a good find; Marsh Warbler. Driving into Sigri, we watched a flock of Eurasian Jackdaws before moving into the cultivated area near the Faneromeni Ford. At the upper ford we found Collared Flycatcher and as we walked along the track we disturbed a Great Snipe, but instead of flying off it simply walked a few yards and continued to feed. Another great bird and more photographic opportunities. Further along the track we had distant views of Lesser Kestrel, Red-footed Falcon and Long-legged Buzzard. Shrikes were everywhere again and we found Lesser, Red-backed and Woodchat Shrikes in the same bush! On another tree we saw European Bee-eater, European Roller and Eurasian Golden Orioles, what an array of colour. There were many European Bee-eaters, Hoopoes and European Rollers passing through the valley and at one time, five European Rollers perched together lining the telephone wire! The afternoon was drawing to a close so we set off back towards Kalloni. We had planned two stops along the way – the first at the crossroads of Sigri, where the Eresos and Andissa roads meet. There we saw two pairs of our target species Isabelline Wheatear whilst a couple of Tree Pipits were an added bonus. Finally, we stopped off at the Lesvos “Grand Canyon” where we had a wonderful half-hour watching Eurasian Crag-martins and Blue Rock-thrush. The day proved to be the best ever with over 100 species seen, I have never seen such a diverse and colourful array of species in all the years I have visited this wonderful island.

**Day 4:** Our early morning destination today was the “Dead Goat Pit” trail above the East River. Rufous Bush-robin was our target and was quickly located, along with Eastern Orphean Warbler, Western Rock Nuthatch and Cretzschmar’s Bunting. The views from the trail are stunning and an early morning visit is not to be missed. After breakfast, we made a quick stop at the salt pans before setting off to tour the Napi Valley. This scenic area holds a good variety of species and is often used by migrating raptors. Indeed, we found Eurasian Hobby, Red-footed Falcon, Common Kestrel and a number of Long-legged Buzzards and Short-toed Snake-eagles all along this verdant countryside. Further sightings of Red-footed Falcon preceded our first European Honey-buzzard. We searched the olive groves and eventually caught up with an Olive-tree Warbler but not after being tricked by a Masked Shrike with its near-perfect imitation. Eurasian Golden Orioles seemed to be everywhere whilst Hoopoes and European Turtle-doves also put in an appearance. Following our picnic lunch and more Olive-tree Warbler sighting, we moved onto the East Coast where the dry *Cistus* shrub holds a small population of Sardinian Warblers, which were promptly seen! A European Shag in the bay was a new species for the trip and two Tawny Pipits were a pleasing find. From the east coast, we drove 20km to Petra where we searched the hillsides for Rüppell’s Warbler. One showed well and gave us a series display flights to boot. We also found a surprise, a rather flighty Ortolan Bunting. We returned to Kaloni via the salt pans but ended up at the inland lake looking for a reported Isabelline Shrike, which unfortunately eluded us.

**Day 5:** A second visit to the inland Lake before breakfast resulted in disappointment again as we failed to locate the shrike but we did hear a distant River Warbler and another Thrush Nightingale. The rest of the morning was spent driving to Sigri for a return visit to the ford along the coast road to Eresos although a violent thunderstorm curtailed most of the bird watching until lunchtime. The sun then came out and so did the birds. We had a wonderful couple of hours and found Rufous Bush-robin, Little Bittern, two Little

Crakes, Great Reed-warbler, two Marsh Warblers, Thrush Nightingale, Icterine Warbler, Collard Flycatcher and two more Ortolan Buntings, which were bathing at the ford. We then made the trip to the Ipsilou Monastery and on the way we found our first Eleonora's Falcon, good numbers of Lesser Kestrels and more Red-footed Falcons. On the wooded slopes below the monastery, we found Common Cuckoo, Cinereous Bunting, two more Collared Flycatchers and over 50 Spotted Flycatchers. In the rocky valley along the Eresos road we heard European Nightjar calling. We also found four more Cinereous Buntings but failed to see Rock Sparrow, which was our target species. We went home happy however, after another fantastic day.

**Day 6:** A third attempt to see the elusive "shrike" left us frustrated again, the bird was probably miles away by now. After breakfast and with renewed vigour, we set off for Agiasos to visit the hills above this picturesque village. Here, we found a very English countryside and the valley rang out with the songs reminiscent of home. Common Chaffinch, European Robin, Winter Wren, Common Blackbird and Great Tit were all heard whilst Common Buzzards soared overhead. Further down the valley along a stream in the Pinewoods, we found Grey Wagtail, and the woods yielded Long-tailed Tit, Short-toed Treecreeper and European Serin. At Dipi Larsos marshes, we found Kentish and Little Ringed Plovers and some very tall *Orchis laxiflora*. Back at the saltpans, we heard about a Spur-winged Lapwing, which had been seen along the West River. Unfortunately, by the time that we arrived the bird had gone. Finally, we spent a little time successfully looking for Tree Frogs near the Kalloni Pool before retiring for the day.

**Day 7:** The raptor day! After visiting the West River before breakfast, we set off for a popular raptor watch point along the Molivos road. Within a 2-hour period we saw nine different species of raptor including Black Kite, Northern Goshawk, Western Marsh-harrier, Eleonora's Falcon and two European Honey-buzzards giving their "wing clapping" display flight. A singing Wood Lark was also a welcome additional to our tally. What a great morning and the weather was perfect. In the afternoon, we watched the sky's over the Napi Valley where we saw two Eurasian Hobbies, numerous Red-footed Falcons, Eleonora's Falcon, Long-legged Buzzard and Short-toed Snake-eagle. Windy conditions then hampered our birdwatching and sightings of small passerines were few and far between. A European Roller was found as we moved along the head of the Valley to another raptor watch point. Having recorded no further species we headed back to the hotel via the saltpans and the East River.

**Day 8:** We only had time for a pre-breakfast outing, which found us on the east side of the saltpans. There was a noticeable drop in the number of birds there, many had now left for breeding grounds further north although Curlew and Wood Sandpipers, Little Stints and Ruffs remained in smaller flocks. Good views of a Rufous Bush-robin topped the morning. Soon it was time to return to the hotel, pack our bags and set off for the airport.

We had a fantastic week the best ever Birdfinders trip, recording 177 species and some real quality sightings to augment a brilliant tour!