

Lesvos

29 April–6 May 2010

Participants

Graham Beevor

David Edwards

Alan Graham

Kay Mantripp

Gary and Jean Trew

Led by Neil Gartshore



Little Bittern

With clear blue skies, rising temperatures and watercourses quickly drying up, we had no chance to experience the fall of birds for which Lesvos is renowned. Everyone had a list of species they hoped to see during the week, including Graham who wanted nine to complete his 500 for the Western Palearctic: no pressure there then! By the end of the tour our tally fell short of Birdfinders' record for the number of species seen in the week, but we did find all of the island's 'big five'. This was the first visit to Lesvos for all members of the group and all were suitably impressed by the islands scenery and birdlife.

Day 1: With a departure time from Gatwick of 09.30, six of the group met there at 07.30 (the 7th member of the group was already on the aircraft as it flew in from Manchester). The flight took off promptly for Mytilini Airport landing just after 15:00 local time. After picking up our bags and joining our minibus, we were off along the coast and into Mytilini to fill up with fuel. Immediately we were lost trying to find our way through the town's narrow roads! After a couple of circuits around one-way systems we finally found the road for Kalloni. Once we hit the coast again we stopped at an old road bridge where we could see birds flying around Kalami Marsh – a chance to stretch our legs and to start birding in earnest. The most noticeable birds here were a number of Squacco Herons (circa 10), Black-winged Stilts (8) and about 50 Whiskered Terns, with two White-winged Terns amongst them. Whilst enjoying this first stop all the terns resting behind the marsh suddenly took flight and the cause was soon apparent – a Lanner Falcon. Singles of Black Stork and Western Marsh-harrier flew by before we left to find the hotel. After checking in and freshening up, we took a walk along the road to look at the Skala Kallonis Pool in front of the hotel – now in desperate need of some management. A few more birds were added to the list to end our first day on Lesvos including Wood Sandpiper, a superb male Red-backed Shrike, singing Common Nightingale, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler and the local race of Eurasian Jay.

Day 2: We started our first full day with a pre-breakfast walk from the hotel to the Christou River viewing platform on the main road. A Eurasian Hobby sitting on the marsh provided great views but waders were pretty thin on the ground: only a handful of Kentish Plovers, and Common and Wood Sandpipers. Common Terns were fishing along the river and a Western Marsh-harrier drifted by. The best bird of the walk was seen from the viewing area – a single Eurasian Thick-knee. On the way back for breakfast, three Gull-billed Terns were seen flying along the beach. After breakfast, we headed off to the Kalloni Saltpans eventually getting there after a few short 'detours' (ok, so we got lost!). From our first stop, just off the main road, we could see

plenty of Greater Flamingoes and Pied Avocets on the salt pans, whilst 'the moat' produced a number of Black-winged Stilts and Little Terns. Further stops along the road soon added Ruff, Great Egret and Purple Heron. A short wait at the pumping station picked up the well-watched Rufous-tailed Scrub-robin along with plenty of Spanish Sparrows. Next stop was the main flood area to the south of the pans and a popular stop for the visiting birders. Garganey, White-winged and Whiskered Terns and Glossy Ibises were in good numbers, with the occasional Black-tailed Godwit, Spotted Redshank, Common Greenshank and Temminck's Stint amongst the waders. A Western Marsh-harrier flew over flushing the birds, enabling us to pick up the Great Snipe that had been around for a few days, although views amongst the group were mixed. Other birds from this spot included a Short-toed Snake-eagle overhead, five Red-throated Pipits and two Red-footed Falcons on the wires, and six Collared Pratincoles both on the ground and in flight. We finished the morning with a short walk around the sheep fields at the end of the saltpan track. Another Red-throated Pipit, Greater Short-toed Lark and Tawny Pipit were the highlights here. Just before we left the salt pans to return to the hotel for lunch we had our first of what were to be many Black-headed Buntings – a fine male.

After lunch we headed off to Metochi Lake. This wasn't the best time of day to visit this site but a walk around the area provided new birds starting with a Long-legged Buzzard overhead and a single female Little Crake on the lake. On our walk along the roads circling the lake we picked up Western Rock Nuthatch, soon followed by Masked and Woodchat Shrikes. Further on a Little Bittern flew by, quickly disappearing into the vegetation – tantalising views but missed by Kay (the main bird she wanted to see on the trip!) Leaving the lake we headed to the Eurasian Scops-owl site at the mini soccer pitch. A single bird was eventually seen well... once we had found the right tree. With a little time left before needing to get back for dinner, we carried on the road north to the raptor watch point, mainly to see where it was rather than in expectation of seeing raptors this late in the day. We picked up another Western Rock Nuthatch here and our first Cretzschmar's Bunting of the trip, ending our first full day's birding with 74 species on the day.

Day 3: Leaving after an early breakfast, we headed out to the west. A quick stop at Parakila Marsh didn't produce much – a small unidentified duck quickly disappearing into the reeds and two recently-fledged Cetti's Warblers. Next stop was the small chapel at Aghios Ioannis. In the scattered scrub on the hillsides we found European Turtle-dove, Eurasian Golden Oriole and Cretzschmar's Bunting, and then our first target of the day, Sombre Tit (in the olive trees near the chapel). The short walk up to the chapel also produced Black-eared Wheatear, Western Rock Nuthatch and a single male Collared Flycatcher.

Continuing on, we made a few roadside stops, (best bird, Chukar), and eventually left the main road and headed for Apothika/Makara. At the next junction where the road turned off to Apothika there were wheatears everywhere, both Northern and Black-eared. We carried along down the valley to Makara, making frequent stops until we hit the beach. A few new birds were added to our list including Little Owl, Eurasian Linnet, European Stonechat and Eurasian Jackdaw. After initial brief views of a *Sylvia* warbler we eventually identified it as Eastern Orphean Warbler. From the beach, looking skyward over the distant ridge, we picked up Long-legged Buzzard, Lesser Kestrel, Red-footed Falcon, Alpine Swift, and Common Raven through the heat haze. European Shag and Yelkouan Shearwater were seen over the sea, Rock Dove was picked out on the nearby island and a Eurasian Hoopoe flew across the beach.

Pressing on, our next stop was the river near Skala Eresou where there was a staked out Eurasian Penduline-tit nest. It was easily found and we had a couple of decent views of the birds as they came to/left the nest. After a brief lunch stop on the beach and a couple more stops along the river it was time to head off to the Malada Valley. The turn off to the valley in Eresos was missed, continuing our habit of making unplanned detours around small towns and villages! Eventually retracing our steps, we found the correct turning and were out on the road to Sigri. This was a spectacular drive along a dirt road through open countryside. Frequent stops soon picked up good birds: our first Cinereous Bunting, plus Western Rock Nuthatch, Wood Lark, excellent views of Rock Petronia and the occasional migrant particularly where there were areas of scrub (Pied and Collared Flycatchers, and Common Redstart). Red-backed Shrikes were everywhere (we

probably saw 100+ along the length of the valley). The Malada ford provided excellent views of Squacco Heron and Little Bittern and a single Common Kingfisher. Further along the road Western Marsh-harrier and Hen and Pallid Harriers were picked up and a large number of hirundines hawked the fields. A stop at the old sanatorium as we approached Sigri found our first Lesser Grey Shrike and a Peregrine flew across. As time was pressing we needed to head straight back to the hotel but occasional stops on the Sigri to Ipsolou Monastery road added Isabelline Wheatear, Common Cuckoo, Eurasian Hobby and a group of about 30 Red-footed Falcons perched on wires – a fitting end to the day.

Day 4: For the second day we headed out to the west again after an early breakfast. We made a brief stop at Potamia Valley where an Olive-tree Warbler was on territory. The bird was heard but unfortunately no sightings. Without making any further stops we carried on to Ipsolou Monastery. At our first stop on the road, as the monastery came into view, we had Isabelline and Black-eared Wheatear, Eurasian Golden Oriole and Eurasian Hoopoe. Parking at the bottom on the monastery road we walked up the hill. A few migrants were about, but in very small numbers – Collared, Pied and Spotted Flycatchers, Wood Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat and Blackcap. Other birds included a single Eleonora's Falcon flying through (much to David's delight), Middle Spotted Woodpecker, Subalpine Warbler, Sombre Tit, a single Eurasian Nuthatch and Cinereous and Cretzschmar's Buntings.

Leaving the monastery we continued on to Sigri, stopping at a roadside 'bandstand' for lunch. On reaching Sigri we turned off toward the Faneromeni area to look for the fords and the other recommended spots here. The highlights included 70 European Bee-eaters birds flying through, a field full of Yellow Wagtails (of various races), Lesser Grey Shrike and a single Spur-winged Lapwing. The fords had virtually dried up with the river mouth producing the most birds including Ruff, Little Ringed Plover, Curlew Sandpiper, Little Stint and a male Little Crake. Leaving Sigri we took the north road through the Lardia Valley towards Petra and on to the Rüppell's Warbler site at Kavaki. Arriving there we walking up the hill behind the road where we picked up a few Subalpine Warblers and eventually Rüppell's, but because of the low sun our views were mixed. As is often the case, when we returned to the car we had some fantastic views of this species!

Day 5: Our choice of a pre-breakfast drive out to Metochi Lake proved the right one: six Little Crakes (including two males) and a Baillon's Crake were stunning and a selection of warblers: Great and Eurasian Reed-warblers and Sedge and Cetti's Warblers provided variety. Before returning for breakfast, we called in again to Potamia Valley – once again we heard the Olive-tree Warbler but no sightings. After breakfast it was off to Achladeri Forest. The Krüper's Nuthatch was too easy nesting right next to the car park! What a stunning bird. The temperature was rising once again so a walk through the forest provided some relief along with Masked Shrike, Short-toed Treecreeper, European Serin and Cirl Bunting. During lunch here two Wood Pigeons flew by – it's amazing how excited you can get with common birds!

After lunch we spent the afternoon working our way back to the hotel via Kalami Marsh, Kalloni Salt pans and the east bank of the Tsiknias River. Birds at the salt pan flooded area were in reduced numbers compared to the visit on the 30th. The highlight here was a single Marsh Sandpiper and more good views of the pumping station Rufous-tailed Scrub-robin plus a few other waders including Curlew Sandpiper, Little Stint, Common Greenshank and Spotted Redshank, then back to the hotel for dinner.

Day 6: With the target species 'ticked off', except for a sighting of Olive-tree Warbler, we decided to head over to the west again. First a stop by roadside pools a few kilometres before Eresos (European Roller had been reported here). No luck on the roller but a few nice birds including Common Redshank, Little Bittern, Purple Heron, Common Whitethroat, Short-toed Snake-eagle and Eleonora's Falcon. The most unusual bird was an almost black Wood Sandpiper that caused some initial confusion. Next the Faneromeni area again – significantly less birds about than our last visit (and more birders!). Only six European Bee-eaters, a handful of Yellow Wagtails and the Spur-winged Lapwing still in the same spot, plus six Whinchats, a few Alpine Swifts and a single Collared Pratincole.

After lunch on the beach, a seawatch produced a constant passage of Yelkouan Shearwaters (at least 1000) and two Cory's (Scopoli's) Shearwaters. We then headed back to Ipsilou Monastery. Walking up once again, the birds were similar as before but we had good views of Blue Rock-thrush, Collared Flycatcher and Sombre Tit. It was very hot once again so we headed back to the hotel by mid-afternoon but as we were passing Potamia Valley we tried again for the Olive-tree Warbler. We didn't have to wait long – at 17.30 out popped a bird giving us good views... and Graham his 500th Western Palearctic species.

Day 7: We spent our final full day close to the hotel. We took a pre-breakfast drive along the eastern side of the Lower Tsikimas River where an Eastern Olivaceous Warbler caused some debate whether it might be a Marsh Warbler (but unfortunately not). Four Temminck's Stints were of interest. After breakfast, we returned to the Tsikimas River and headed to the upper section for a walk. A single White Stork, 14 European Bee-eaters, Lesser Whitethroat and brief views of Middle Spotted Woodpecker were the best of the birds. Next stop the raptor watch point and the welcomed shade of the bandstand. Whilst here we picked up a few raptors: Short-toed Snake-eagle, Common and Long-legged Buzzards, Eleonora's and Red-footed Falcons and Northern Goshawk plus Eurasian Golden Oriole, more European Bee-eaters and Subalpine Warbler. The heat was once again draining so after a quick stop for another look at the Eurasian Scops-owl, we headed into Skala Kallonis for a local lunch of sardines and a welcomed beer.

After a pleasant break we went back to the Kalloni Salt pans. Yet again there were few birds about with nothing to add to the list except a Common Coot. Before heading back to the hotel, we returned to the Upper Tsikimas River to see if we could get better views of the Middle Spotted Woodpecker. A bird was still active in a small olive grove giving short views. Just as we decided to leave it flew out of the olive grove, across the river and landed in a tree in full view for a few moments.

Day 8: We made a final visit to Metochi Lake before breakfast. No Baillon's Crake this time but more great views of Little Crakes – at least three males and four females. Numbers of other species were down compared to the previous visits but a Common Nightingale in full song showed well. Our intention was to have a leisurely breakfast before leaving at 10.00 but at 09.00 news of a Citrine Wagtail on the flood at the salt pans changed this. After running around gathering everyone together we left immediately. Unfortunately, no sign of the wagtail but an immature Little Gull provided some consolation and we had a chance to see some of the week's great birds again before finally having to head back to the airport. The journey back wasn't straightforward – a local protest blocked the main road and we were diverted along a narrow dirt track... following a huge truck! Dust flew everywhere, passing oncoming vehicles was tight as we blindly followed the vehicles in front. Eventually we came out on a road north of Mytilini and the remaining few miles to the airport passed without any more problems and we actually arrived before all of the tourist coaches. With David leaving the group at check-in on a direct Manchester flight, the rest continued on to Gatwick where the tour ended.

As Lesvos was a new destination for all of the party we were all suitably impressed with the island. Although migration was disappointing due to the 'good' weather, we caught up with all of the specialities, finishing on 146 species for the week. Opinions were divided on 'the best bird of the week' as we were spoilt for choice: single votes for Glossy Ibis, Little Bittern, Baillon's/Little Crake, Eleonora's Falcon and Rufous-tailed Scrub-robin were piped to the post with two votes for Krüper's Nuthatch... a worthy winner!

Neil Gartshore