

Lesvos

25 April–1 May 2015

Participants

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Led by Neil Gartshore



Rüppell's Warbler

Prior to our arrival it had been a relatively quiet spring with no major movements of migrants passing through and a number of expected species virtually absent. This pattern continued through the week but with some species beginning to arrive during our stay. It was, however, an excellent week with 160 species recorded including the first Demoiselle Crane for Lesvos, Eurasian Griffon, European Roller, Citrine Wagtail and Marsh Warbler to name a few.

Day 1 Our Aegean Airways flight left Heathrow at 12.15 and arrived on time in Athens at 17.50 local time, with the connecting flight to Mytilini leaving at 21.00, arriving on the island at 21.50. We waited a while expecting the van to arrive before realizing that there was an Auto Union office just along from the airport terminal! After picking up the van it was off to Hotel Delfinia in Molivos, our base for the week. After a couple of wrong turns in the towns we arrived just before 23.30and managed to pick up a flat tyre on entering the hotel. Too late to do anything about it we checked in to our rooms and went off to bed with the accompanying sound of a Common Nightingale outside – the only bird of the day on Lesvos.

Day 2 After the long day yesterday we arranged breakfast at 08.30, which gave those who wanted to time to have an early walk around the hotel's extensive grounds. Neil was up at 06.30 changing the tyre so that we didn't waste any time later and then had a walk around the grounds. Amongst the 20 or so species seen were two Chukars and Red-rumped Swallow, which stood out from the familiar birds. After breakfast we headed south to the Kalloni Saltpans, stopping at various sites along the way. First Kavaki, just a couple of miles from the hotel, where a Black-eared Wheatear and Common Cuckoo soon appeared and 'Sylvia' warblers could be heard but not seen. We walked along the inland track and soon picked out Eastern Subalpine Warblers, with the number of birds into double figures. Next a Sardinian Warbler came into view in full song, and at the top of the hill, a fine male Rüppell's Warbler singing from a perch and in flight – a great start to the day. Continuing south our next stop was the Kalloni Raptor Watch Point. The cloud was low so we weren't expecting to see much on the raptor front but did have three Short-toed Eagles, two Long-legged Buzzards and singles of Common Buzzard, Western Marsh-harrier and Red-footed Falcon. In addition,

Cretzschmar's Bunting and Rock Nuthatch were located on the adjacent hillside. Our final birding stop before the saltpans was at the Mini Soccer Pitch where three Eurasian Scops-owls were found at their roost. We needed to stop in Kalloni to replace the tyre – while waiting the group walked a short way out of town and saw nothing but Neil was rewarded with a White Stork flying low over the garage.

We arrived at the Kalloni Saltpans/Alykes Wetland by 12.30 and quickly picked up many new species as we made our way around the southern access road and along the track to the where we had a break for lunch by the horse racing circuit. After lunch we walked out over the 'sheep fields'. Waders were well represented with Pied Avocet, Ruff (200+) and Little Stint (200+) the most numerous, plenty of Wood Sandpipers and Black-winged Stilts, smaller numbers of Common Snipe (2), Kentish, Grey (2), Common Ringed (1) and Little Ringed (1) Plovers and singles of Common Greenshank, Spotted Redshank and Common Sandpiper. Other birds of interest: Great Crested Grebe (3 offshore), Black Stork (5), Glossy Ibis, Eurasian Spoonbill (4), Gull-billed (1), Whiskered, Common, Sandwich and Little Terns, Whinchat, Zitting Cisticola (2), the *flava* and *feldegg* races of Yellow Wagtail and a single flyover Red-throated Pipit. After a quick fuel stop we spent the rest of the afternoon driving along the west bank of the lower Tsiknias River as far as the ford, returning up the east bank. Birds were scattered along its length including Little Bittern, Squacco Heron, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler and singles of Spotted and Collared Flycatchers. Overhead birds included a flock of 10 Black-crowned Night-herons, a Bonelli's Eagle and a Black Kite. At the ford there were a number of people already there – a pair of Eurasian Penduline-tits had chosen the site to nest, their nearly finished nest in full view from the west bank, but no sign of the birds. After a brief wait both birds were heard a short distance from the nest and the male bird was picked up in a bush on the opposite bank giving great views albeit slightly obscured amongst the leaves. The day had remained cloudy and cool with a few patches of rain. When we tallied up the total number of species at the evening roll-call we were surprised to see that we had seen 97 species today.

Day 3 After a 07.00 breakfast we headed west, first making a brief stop at Kavaki to look over the sea to get closer views of the Yelkouan Shearwaters and Bottle-nosed Dolphins that we had seen from the hotel earlier – no dolphins but plenty of shearwaters and a single European Turtle-dove. At Petra we turned along the north road towards Sigri. Making occasional stops along the way to Ipsilou Monastery birds were added to our tally: Cirl Bunting, Sombre Tit, Middle Spotted Woodpecker, Wood Lark and Eurasian Hoopoe the best of them. Our final stop near the monastery found Isabelline Wheatear, 11 European Bee-eaters flying overhead and a calling Common Cuckoo. After parking by the main road we headed up to the monastery, going up the south/east side and coming down the north/west side. There were few migrants about but we had excellent views of our main target bird – much to Trevor's delight – Cinereous Bunting, five birds in all including a very close male singing his heart out. Singles of Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Eleonora's Falcon, Common Chiffchaff (singing), Sombre Tit, Blue Rock-thrush and two Wood Larks were the best of the rest. After a break for lunch by the van, we carried on to Sigri and Faneromeni. Once again few migrants were found in this migrant hotspot but Spotted, European Pied and Collared Flycatchers, Wood Warbler (1), Whinchat, Lesser Whitethroat, Common Redstart (one male) and at least three Eurasian Golden Orioles were picked up. With time getting on, we returned back to Molivos the way we came stopping again in the Lardia Valley where we added Long-tailed Tit to the trip list – over 80 species today. Still a little cloudy but mixed with sunny spells and getting warmer today.

Day 4 A clear, sunny, warm day. With reports of a Demoiselle Crane, first seen coming in to roost at dusk yesterday, we headed straight for the Christou River by Skala Kallonis after a 07.00 breakfast. On arrival a quick look at the river added Eurasian Curlew and Great Cormorant to our list before we followed other people to the area where the crane was. Once there we were told 'it has just gone behind that bush!' but it soon came into view as it continued feeding and moving through the field. This was a first for Lesvos and only the 6th record for Greece – a great start to the day. As an added bonus a smart male Red-backed Shrike was picked up on a bush in the same field. After a brief detour to show the group where many of the birdwatchers stay by the Skala Kallonis Pool – wet but still very much overgrown (Little Bittern here) – we

moved on to Metochi Lake. At the lake we soon saw our target bird with a pair of Little Crakes showing well (six in all while we were there). Other birds of interest included a Squacco Heron, Little Bittern and Little Grebe. After Metochi we continued around the corner to the Potamia Valley picking up a Masked Shrike and a Eurasian Hoopoe on the way to the bridge. A short walk up the river wasn't very productive but we had excellent views of a Long-legged Buzzard overhead in very good light. We planned to have lunch at Achladeri Forest so made our way there, stopping briefly at the hide in the northeast corner of the Kalloni Salt pans – a few waders from here including Ruff and eight Marsh Sandpipers. Arriving at the forest by 13.00 we had lunch in the parking area where Masked Shrike and European Serin gave some great views. Then it was off to find our target bird – Krüper's Nuthatch. A nest site had been staked out so it was just a matter of following the instructions into the forest. Once we reached the part of the track where we had to go in amongst the trees some movement in the top of a tree next to the track found the pair of birds feeding as they moved through the trees. Before leaving the forest we added Short-toed Treecreeper and Mistle Thrush to the trip's total and our second Middle Spotted Woodpecker. For the remainder of the afternoon we stayed at the Kalloni Salt pans. Bird numbers and species had changed little from our first visit – a flock of 71 Whiskered Terns, more Marsh Sandpipers, six Spotted Redshanks and three Black-tailed Godwits were the best of the bunch. By 16.30 we decided to head back to the hotel and to stop off at the raptor watch point but before joining the main road we saw a group of people looking out over 'the moat'. A Spur-winged Lapwing had been in the area for a few days but had been quite mobile – but it was now here. Before finally trying to leave, a few other people were arriving to look at the Spur-wing when a shout went up for a Pallid Harrier – a second calendar year bird – a great bird to end the day as we headed back to the hotel to freshen up before dinner. Another day with over 80 species recorded.

Day 5 Another day out in the west, this time heading out along the southern roads, stopping first at the Aghios Ioannis (chapel). We found a good mixture of residents and a few migrants here including Common and Lesser Whitethroats, Red-backed Shrike, Cretzschmar's and Cirl Buntings, Whinchat and Rock Nuthatch. We continued on to the Makara Valley stopping at intervals along the track as we made our way to the beach. Peregrine, Long-legged Buzzard, Eurasian Crag-martin and Alpine Swift were soon forgotten as the highlight of the day was picked up by John as it flew past us – a European Roller. Fortunately the bird landed giving great views, and was still there when we left the valley later. From the beach we could see a regular movement of Yelkouan Shearwater's offshore and managed to pick out a handful of Scopoli's Shearwaters amongst them. A scan out to the island could just make out a couple of Rock Doves (genuine birds, not the feral variety!) A single European Turtle-dove and a singing Eastern Olivaceous Warbler were the only obvious migrants around. Leaving the valley we carried on heading west to Eresos then out along the Meladia Valley road towards Sigri first stopping at the start of the track for lunch where we had Short-toed Eagles and Common Ravens overhead. Making our way along the valley we eventually made it to the ford where we picked up our first Black-headed Bunting (there had been a fall of 200 birds just to the north of Sigri earlier in the morning). The highlight here was a vocal (but quiet) Marsh Warbler which gave a few brief views as it skulked around the undergrowth. Due to the bad state of the track further on we turned back towards Eresos rather than trying to continue on to Sigri. A Tree Pipit was added to the list and a stop to look for Rock Petronia proved fruitless but was more than compensated for when a Great Spotted Cuckoo was picked up in a bush (the only bush in this part of the valley!) Whilst watching the bird a second one appeared lower down in the bush... a good bird for Lesvos. Once out on the main road in Eresos we headed back to the hotel along the northern road, with Red-footed Falcon and Middle Spotted Woodpecker seen on the way. Early cloud and cool first thing soon gave way to clear skies and warmer temperatures with a breeze picking up. Just over 60 species seen today but we also passed the 150th species for the trip.

Day 6 Another clear day, soon warming up with a breeze from early afternoon. The morning was planned around a visit to the Kalloni Salt pans and we weren't disappointed. Almost the first bird of the day was a fine male Citrine Wagtail that had been around for a couple of days. It then became obvious that there had been an influx of Eastern Olivaceous Warblers with six birds singing around the pumping station (and more birds elsewhere). We walked out along the track from the pumping station to find our only Black-headed Bunting

of the day, a Little Owl disappearing in to its nest hole, and then a ringtail harrier passed close by giving excellent views of the features of a 2cy Pallid Harrier – to be followed shortly afterwards by a 2cy ringtail Montagu's Harrier – a good comparison between the two species. A distant flight of Garganeys (7) and a single Purple Heron completed the best birds seen along the track. We then continued along to the entrance of the salt pans where nine Gull-billed Terns flew by before driving past the horse racing circuit for another short walk across the 'sheep fields' where we had good views of Greater Short-toed Lark and distant views of Red-throated Pipit. By 12.30 we left the salt pans and headed to the silos at the head of the Madaros Valley taking a lunch break here. Short-toed Eagles overhead, a Eurasian Hoopoe on wires and a brief snatch of song from an unseen Savi's Warbler, heard by Trevor, during lunch before we headed off. The walk up the valley was pleasant but not too many birds about – the best being a singing Eastern Orphean Warbler out in the open, joined by a female in the same bush. Nearing the top of the hill two Eurasian Hobbies were hawking the sky for insects, soon joined by a third bird with a fourth passing high up. Then a Black Stock and two White Storks flew overhead. We turned back at the top of the hill and as it was already 15.00 decided to head back towards the hotel, first stopping at the Mini Soccer Pitch where we picked up five of the six Eurasian Scops-owls roosting there. Our final stop of the day was at the Kalloni Raptor Watch Point. A pair of Eastern Orphean Warblers, a number of Cretzschmar's Buntings, Whinchat and a pair of Rock Nuthatches appeared around the watch point. Overhead raptors: Long-legged Buzzard (2), Common Buzzard (2), Short-toed Eagle (3), Eleonora's Falcon (1) and a Lesser Kestrel (1). Although we had fewer new trip birds today the quality of the birding remained high with nearly 80 species today.

Day 7 This was our last full day so we headed out towards Sigri again with info of a sighting of Olive-tree Warbler near the Aghios Taxiarchis (church), east of Skalochori. Initially parking on the road, and walking along it, we eventually realized we had to walk down a track off the main road, and past a pond and small bridge long this track. With the group gradually spreading out as we tried to find the spot, Trevor eventually reached it first and immediately saw a grey bird sitting under a tree... an Olive-tree Warbler! By the time the rest caught up the bird had gone with no further sign of it (may have been a female as we heard no birds singing). By way of consolation we had good views of Eastern Olivaceous and Eastern Subalpine Warblers. Next we moved on to the Lardia Valley and parked in the next layby up from the smelly layby 'dump' and soon picked up a Middle Spotted Woodpecker coming in to a nest in the valley with great views of both birds coming and going. A scan of the opposite hillside picked up a Cirl Bunting competing with a Rock Petronia for the choice perch on a large rock formation and further up the hillside, a pair of Rock Nuthatches was visiting their nest hole on another rock face. Our next stop was along the Petrified Forest road near Sigri to search for Chukar – and just after the turn on to the road two birds crossed it and made their way up the hillside. We continued along the road to the Petrified Forest car park before heading back to the main road and down into Sigri and along to Faneromeni beach where we had lunch. Not too many birds around but great views of Lesser Grey and Red-backed Shrikes, three European Bee-eaters overhead, a Greater Short-toed Lark in a song flight and three Lesser Kestrels hawking over the fields. There were only a few other migrants about in ones and twos, including Spotted and Collared Flycatchers, Eurasian Golden Oriole and Yellow Wagtail. A Spur-winged Lapwing was the best bird here. After lunch we checked out the Lower Ford – only a Little Bittern and a male Blackcap of note. As it was getting hotter we decided to head back to the Lardia Valley for another look at the woodpeckers. The birds gave great views coming/going to/from the nest hole every few minutes but we were soon distracted as two Short-toed Eagles flew over the ridge, then a third. John soon realised that that the third bird was actually a Eurasian Griffon (a scarce bird here). The bird landed in a tree on the skyline, which upset the local Common Buzzard who promptly began to mob it. Tired of the attention the vulture took to the air and drifted off to the east but almost immediately our attention was taken over by an Eleonora's Falcon giving a great aerial display along the ridge. With time getting on we went back to the Aghios Taxiarchis track for another look. As we passed the small pond two Grey Herons and a Black Stork took to the air and eight Wood Sandpipers remained on the pool edge. No sign of the Olive-tree Warbler but Red-backed, Lesser Grey and Woodchat Shrikes were seen in the same field of view, a Sombre Tit came down on to the open ground and a Common Nightingale sang in full view rounding off another great day. Sunny and hot, another day with over 70 species recorded.

Day 8 Our flight home wasn't until late afternoon so we had the opportunity of a final morning's birding before leaving for the airport after lunch. On a walk around the hotel grounds before breakfast at 08.30 we soon clocked up 20 species including Masked Shrike and European Turtle-dove. After breakfast we headed along the road to the Kavaki layby for a final couple of hours birding before lunch and the journey back to the airport. Alpine Swift, Peregrine and Eurasian Crag-martin were all seen but the star bird here once again was Rüppell's Warbler. At least two birds were seen flying to and fro and perched up on bushes and overhead wires. At one stage a fine male landed on top of a bush within 10 metres! – a fitting bird to end a fantastic week birding on Lesvos. Although we certainly missed any big movements of migrants, and some expected species weren't seen, we had caught up with the main specialities of Lesvos including Isabelline Wheatear, Rüppell's Warbler, Krüper's Nuthatch, Sombre Tit and Cinereous Bunting. We had seen the first Demoiselle Crane ever recorded on the island and caught up with scarcer species including Eurasian Griffon, European Roller and Great Spotted Cuckoo. Our final tally for the week was 160 species. All that remained now was lunch, loading up the van and the journey to the airport where the flight back to Heathrow, via Athens, went to time arriving there at 21.50 where the trip ended.

Neil Gartshore
Birdfinders