



LESVOS

TRIP REPORT

April 20 - 27, 2019



Photos: Little Owl, Yellow Wagtail (feldegg), Black-winged Stilt, birding the Kalloni Salt pans.



Sunrise Birding LLC

LESVOS, GREECE

www.sunrisebirding.com

European Spring Migration Tour Report

April 20 – 27, 2019 Guides: Steve Bird, Gina Nichol

HIGHLIGHTS (as voted by the group):

The stunning flower fields

White-winged Terns

Hoopoes in numbers!

Broad-billed Sandpiper

The great birding!

Flamingos

Ipsilou Monastery

Petrified Forest Museum

Black Kite

Ferruginous Ducks

Scops Owl

The Kalloni Saltpans

The Ouzo

Great Spotted Cuckoo

Little Owl

Studying the Yellow Wagtails

Once again, the charming island of Lesvos captured the hearts of our group. This year, the flowers were outstanding with sprawling fields of reds, yellows, whites, pinks and mixed colors seemingly everywhere. We witnessed visible migration as birds arrived daily, sometimes hourly and in some cases, we could see them coming in off the sea. Our hotel was lovely and comfortable and offered great food and the friendliest staff. We visited tavernas, Ipsilou Monastery, the Petrified Forest museum and birded farm tracks to build our list of species. On two nights during the tour, we enjoyed socializing at our hotel with other birders on the island.



Day 1

By late afternoon everyone had arrived and settled into our lovely hotel. For an hour or so, we birded around the Skala Kalloni Pool, right across from the hotel. Despite the strong wind, we saw a **Great Bittern**, our first Squacco Herons, a Common Moorhen and a few Purple Herons in the pool. From the tower in the hotel parking lot, a few of us saw a Little Crake working in the reed grasses. We met for a lovely dinner and toasted our week ahead and the promise of an exciting spring migration on this wonderful island.



Day 2

We awoke to a stunningly beautiful morning with clear blue skies and no wind. As the sun rose, we headed for the northeast corner of the Kalloni Saltpans where we found Ruddy Shelducks and a Woodchat Shrike perched on an open branch waiting for the sun to come over the ridge. We scoped our first **Flamingos** and Pied Avocets and spotted a Kentish Plover on one of the sand bars. Two Black Storks flew over and as the sun warmed us, there we Barn Swallows, Sand



Martins and a few Common Swifts flying low over the water. We began to study the Yellow Wagtails that were present and noted how much the Little Egrets looked like our Snowy Egrets.

We returned to the hotel for breakfast and then headed to the Tsiknias River mouth and scoped some Cormorants and Sandwich Terns. In a fit of fearlessness, we crossed the Tsiknias River ford which had been covered with silt from recent storms making the crossing an unknown entity. We conquered the ford (though it was quite deep!) and continued on the Lotzaria track where we found Whinchats and several Crested Larks.

Continuing past the Saltpans we went to the Sheep fields where we found a flock of Greater Short-toed Larks and got good views as they fed nearby us on some dry grass stalks. Toward the shoreline, we scoped a Black-necked Grebe and we noted many flying Flamingos over the salt pans. We got good views of the effervescent Corn Buntings and Yellow-legged Gulls were

in abundance. As we walked back to the gate, we were followed by an inquisitive Donkey. At the same time, a group of Mediterranean Gulls flew over offering good views.

At the Kalloni Salt pans we had Ruff, Little Ringed Plover, Marsh Sandpipers, our first Wood Sandpipers and Black-winged Stilts. We enjoyed prolonged views of all of these and then moved on to the Kalloni Mini soccer pitch where Steve miraculously found a well camouflaged **Eurasian Scops Owl** perching on the side of a eucalyptus tree over the road. We admired this beautiful creature for a while and looked for others but it wasn't until Michele spotted a Jay in an olive grove on the other side of the road that we found another owl. We moved toward the road to get better views of the Jay and as we were scoping it, Steve looked up at the eucalyptus next to us and said "There's one!" and pointed to a Scops Owl in open view on the trunk.



After this delight we found ourselves back at the hotel for lunch which was interrupted by a Whiskered Tern which flew over the Skala Kalloni Pool several times.

In the afternoon, we drove up to Kavaki which was still receiving a brisk wind. We had a Subalpine Warbler here and great views of a pair of Black-eared Wheatears before moving on to Perasma Reservoir which hosted lots of Yellow-legged Gulls. As we were watching the local scene, a Cirl Bunting appeared on the top of a bush and sang emphatically offering great views. On the way back toward Skala Kalloni, we had nice views of a male Stonechat. Just past the soccer pitch, we had three Great Spotted Woodpeckers cross our path in the quickest way ever. We pulled over to try and track them down but they had vanished.

We made a quick pit stop at hotel and continued on toward the Kalloni Saltpans. At the Tsiknias River mouth there were Sandwich Terns and beyond the sand bar there were four Great Crested Grebes. Continuing on, we had a nice adult male Greenfinch and on the Lotzaria Track we saw several **Whinchats** and a large group of Spanish Sparrows.



We received word of a flock of ducks offshore so went to the old pier where a group of Garganey was showing in great afternoon light. They were only outdone by the Ferruginous Ducks that were glowing chestnut in the sun offering marvelous views. After enjoying the duck show, we moved on to the Saltpans where the beautiful evening light was illuminating the recently arrived Ringed Plovers, Ruff, Curlew Sandpipers, Black-tailed Godwits, Little Stints, Flamingos and Common Shelduck. Steve spotted a Stone Curlew perched on one of the berms bisecting one of saltpans and that attracted the attention of several birders and groups who enjoyed views of this new arrival. Migration was definitely in process!

Day 3

Today we had an early breakfast and set out toward the western part of the island. The sky was crystal clear blue making for a spectacular day as we drove along the coast. Gina spotted a Rock Nuthatch on top of a rock outcropping and so ensued our first stop of the day. As we positioned ourselves to see the nuthatch, we noted some calls from down toward the shoreline. Following the calls, we found Orphean Warblers and a Sombre Tit on a large bush overlooking the sea.

Our next stop was along the road where the habitat looked good for some specialty species. It wasn't long before we heard the song of a **Cinereous Bunting** and watched it as it sang and moved around among the rocks. Not to be outdone, a Cretzschmar's Bunting was also seen well and we saw the first of many Black-eared Wheatears.



We made our way through Eresos and the rough track toward the Meladia Valley. Along the way, in the bushes that provided cover, we found Lesser Whitethroat and Blackcap, and in the reeds along a small stream we had Great Reed Warbler and a family of Stonechats. We walked the road and found a nice looking Woodchat Shrike, Common Whitethroat, Long-legged Buzzards and a Woodlark singing on a powerline. A couple of raptors flew overhead and Steve pointed out the features that made them "Steppe" Buzzards.

Steve moved the van ahead as we continued our walk up the road. As he walked back toward us, he motioned enthusiastically for us to look at a large bush just down the hill that he called "The Tree of Life". From his side, he could see a Great Spotted Cuckoo perched just inside the foliage. We moved up to get an angle and indeed the bird was perched inside so we got the scope on it. In a few moments, the bird flew out of the bush and up to a Hooded Crow nest on top of a power pole above us. The Cuckoo messed around in the nest for a few seconds

and then flew off down and away along the stream corridor. Was it prospecting the nest? Laying an egg? Parasitizing the Hooded Crow nest?

After reviewing that sighting and trying to surmise what had happened, we moved up to the ford near the fig orchard. There was a White Wagtail on the ford but the star was a Collared Flycatcher that perched in the open and sallied back and forth over the stream catching flies. Overhead, there were Alpine Swifts and a Cetti's Warbler that landed briefly and belted out its ardent call.

We continued to **Sigri** and enjoyed our picnic lunch overlooking the beach and then went for a coffee in town. As we sat in front of the café, a flock of at least 50 Jackdaws flew over. We moved on toward the Faneromeni Ford stopping for a Hoopoe that was feeding along the road but flew off quickly. We picked up Spotted Flycatcher and Common Reed Warbler along the road and at the Ford we had Sedge Warbler, Common Whitethroat, and Red-rumped Swallows.



We started back toward home stopping in an area that was good for Isabelline Wheatear. As Steve described that this was good habitat and told his story about the Pope's underwear, Gina pointed out an Isabelline Wheatear that was perched on top of a roadside pergola. We got out to get better views but the bird vanished. After a bit of looking we continued along the road and finally got good views of Isabelline and Northern Wheatear.

Back at the Kalloni Saltpans for the late afternoon show, we saw Slender-billed Gulls, Spotted Redshanks, Whiskered Terns, a Kentish Plover, Squacco Herons and the Stone Curlew that had been seen yesterday.

Day 4

This morning we went to Metochi Lake before breakfast. The area surrounding the pond had

been severely cut back making viewing of the reeds around the pond very easy. Over the course of a half an hour, we found five Little Crakes (2 males 3 females), several Little Grebes and Eurasian Coots, and a Masked Shrike perched on a distant tree.

After breakfast we made some stops for supplies in Kalloni and we enjoyed the active nest of White Storks right in the middle of town. Then Steve got a report of some Red-footed Falcons at the Salt pans so we searched them out. There were 15 of these stunning birds including 5 males and 10 females. It's a good thing we made this little diversion, as it was the only time we saw Red-footed Falcons all week.

We drove up to Kavaki, the picturesque site overlooking the sea, where we saw a group of 50 Yelkouan Shearwaters flying close to shore. An Audouin's Gull flew along the cliff in front of us and we scoped a Chukar up the hill. A Subalpine Warbler showed well but we missed our target, Rüppell's Warbler. Gina saw a Mediterranean Monk Seal swimming close to shore but it disappeared around the headland before the others saw it.

After lunch in Petra, we birded the road to Skala Sikimineas and found a Masked Shrike in some oaks. A Tree Pipit was singing and Steve found it perched in an oak and with the scope we were able to study the distinctive lines on its flanks that make it a Tree Pipit.

As we finished with the Tree Pipit, a Hoopoe appeared on an open branch for a few seconds and then flew up the hill. We searched the area to no avail. Then another Hoopoe flew over the van and down the hill. Again this bird was stealth but we were slowly building our mind images of the bird.

We made a short stop in Skala Sikimineas which was closed up perhaps due to the cold weather. We continued on up over the hill and found three more Hoopoes and enjoyed good views of them perched. Working the Napi Valley we found a Cirl Bunting and a flyover raptor proved to be an Eleonora's Falcon that had been reported just a few moments before over Filia mast. The valley was quiet so we made our way back to the Kalloni Salt pans. All of yesterday's birds were still in attendance and new arrivals included **Temminck's Stint**.

Day 5

This morning after breakfast we headed out the Kalloni Salt pans under overcast skies. The sun was peeking through a little, creating great reflections on the water and the Flamingos looked elegant as usual. New to the scene was Little Tern and we



scoped a distant Gadwall. The Temminck's Stints were in the moat, close enough to see the breast band and yellow legs.

We moved on to Achladeri forest and found Short-toed Treecreeper, Long-tailed Tits, Coal Tits, Chaffinches and a flyover Wood Pigeon. We listened intently for our target, the Krüper's Nuthatch, a species that depends on the Turkish Pines in this forest and soon Steve heard one call. We followed the call and eventually got views of the bird as it moved from pine cone to pine cone. It flew off but soon we picked up on a second bird which did the same.

Pleased to find our quarry and moved on toward Polichnitos. As we passed through Polichnitos town, we stopped for a pair of **White Storks** nesting on top of stack just outside the village.



Continuing on to Vatera, we had Sardinian Warbler as soon as we got out of the car. We looked at the Well of Achilles and Temple of Dyonisis archeological sites and enjoyed a picturesque picnic lunch in a flower filled field overlooking the sea. There were flocks of Yelkouan Shearwaters flying by close to the shore offering good views. The two Steves picked out a distant Scopoli's Shearwater and there were a few Shags to look at.

After lunch, we drove through Vatera town and found another showy Sardinian Warbler and a fairly cooperative Eastern Olivaceous Warbler. On the way out of town we had Short-toed Eagles and a Buzzard. In Polichnitos, we had a quick coffee in the seaside village and then drove by the saltpans which held Black-winged Stilts, Pied Avocets, a Greenshank, a few Ruff and a female Garganey. We stopped to look at two harriers that were coursing over the fields. On further inspection, they turned out to be Montagu's.

On the way back we found a Spoonbill at Mesa pool and then moved on to the Saltpans where we saw a flock of 22 Collared Pratincoles flying over the fields and landing somewhere toward the beach.

In the evening we birded along the Tsiknias River and found a Nightingale that allowed great views and caught Reg and Marilyn up on the Eastern Olivaceous Warbler. Gina scoped a Little Owl on a farm building cross the river and we found another Little Owl on a barn further along the Lotzaria track. A stop at the sheep fields got us six Night Herons, nice looks at Ruddy and Common Shelducks and more Flamingos.

Driving by the saltpans, we had Little Tern and stopped to scope some Spotted Redshanks on a sand bar with some Gull-billed Terns and Black-headed Gulls.

Day 6

Today we headed west again toward Sigrí. Just out of Dafía town, we had a Blue Rock Thrush that perched long enough for views from the van. We stopped at the Grand Canyon and found Crag Martins, a quickly disappearing Bonelli's Warbler, a vocal Chaffinch, and a Cirl Bunting perched on the power line above us. Gina scoped a distant ridge and found a Rock Sparrow which was seen well through the scope.



Our next stop was at the Byzantine Ipsilou Monastery where we found Collared and Pied Flycatchers in a large evergreen on the walkway up. At the top of the monastery, the Alpine Swifts were flying right over our

heads almost in arm's reach. Other birds in attendance were Blue Tit, Black-eared Wheatear, singing Cinereous Bunting and a Blue Rock Thrush. We stopped below the monastery for an Isabelline Wheatear and noted a large dark raptor flying near the monastery. Steve yelled "**Black Kite!**" and we watched the bird as it circled around the monastery and floated over our heads heading south.

Continuing west, we had more Rock Sparrows above us along the road and found a few more Isabelline Wheatears on the road to the old Petrified Forest museum. As we neared the end of the road, we stopped to look at a little oasis of trees which held Orphan Warbler, Whinchat and Spotted Flycatcher as Lesser Kestrels soared above.

We arrived in the village of Sigrì where the flock of Jackdaws was moving over the village. As we entered the Petrified Forest Museum, we picked up a Spur-thighed Tortoise that was moving in the road and Steve moved it to a safer spot.

After enjoying the museum, we moved to Faneromeni Beach and found Savi's Warbler, Reed Warbler and a Red-veined Darter. The Lesser Kestrels were hunting nearby putting on a show as they grabbed insects mid-flight and ate them on the wing. A Marsh Harrier interrupted them briefly but they continued hawking as soon as the harrier drifted by.

We relished a picnic lunch on beach and then explored the back roads of Sigrì where we found Red-backed Shrike, Black-headed Bunting, and Pied and Collared Flycatcher. We circled back toward the Meladia Valley where we found a Common Kestrel taking a dust bath in the road. Near the fig orchard, Steve spotted a Lesser Grey Shrike that perched for a long time allowing great views in the scopes. Moving down the hill, we found a Little Owl near a large barn (the usual spot).

Back toward Skala Kalloni, we stopped at the Christou River where a **Citrine Wagtail** (female) was being seen with some Red-throated Pipits.



Day 7

After breakfast we traveled up to Kavaki to find Rüppell's Warbler. We'd already tried a couple of times during the week and missed it, so today, our last full day, failure was not an option. It had rained overnight and as we arrived it was beginning to clear. The famed bush where it seemed everyone else had seen the bird was empty. In a minute, Gina spotted the bird up the hill on top of a bush singing. We had great scope views and showed the bird to some other photographers who were waiting for it.

The Rüppell's dropped out of sight, perhaps because a Peregrine Falcon with prey was flying by toward the cliff face overlooking the sea. We had great views of a pair of Black-eared Wheatears and a Blue Rock Thrush perched on a rock overlooking the water. As we stood, we could hear Bee-eaters as they flew high over us in the clouds. Three flocks moved over us including a large group of more than 30 birds. One group dropped low enough under the horizon to allow their color to be seen but most remained high in the sky and continued on heading south.

Our next stop was at the Filia mast where the sheep had obviously spent some time (smelly and messy!). Subalpine Warblers dominated here and there were a few Blue Tits. Gina scoped the oaks and found a Bonelli's Warbler and we took in the amazing fields of flowers and the great view of Filia village.



We returned once again to the Kalloni Salt pans and Steve spotted a Spoonbill in the distance. We moved position to get a better view. We went up into a hide and by the time we got set up, the bird had gone to sleep hiding its distinctive bill. But again, failure was not an option. So we held a vigil until the bird woke up and preened showing its bill. In the meantime we scoped five Slender-billed Gulls and a Curlew.

We enjoyed lunch at a tavern in Skala Kalloni and then stopped at the Skala Kalloni pool where we could see Purple Heron, Little Bittern, Squacco Herons and a Great Egret.

In the afternoon, we drove out to a site called Mikri Limni where the pine forest meets a reedy pond. As we got out of the van, a Black Stork took flight and soared around us before disappearing over the pines. We walked up the road and found Short-toed Treecreeper which was seen well. Gina noted a nest box and scoped a Great Tit perching near it. A little further, we heard the call of Krüper's Nuthatch so we searched for nearly an hour for this elusive bird. Every time we were about to give up, it called again, until we finally caught a glimpse of it moving among the pine cones.

On the way back we stopped at "Serin corner" and right away got on a view of a perched Serin. We hoped for more views and waited around but the bird was not cooperative. Instead we had scope views of a Chaffinch and a Greenfinch on top of the tall cedars.

Our last stop of the day was at the Kalloni Salt pans where we scoped some Little Terns and Slender-billed Gulls. Steve spotted some White-winged Terns perched on sticks in the second pool so we moved on and enjoyed great views of the perching birds. We got word that a Broad-billed Sandpiper had been seen on pool three, so we headed there. When we got there it was a **full on "twitch"** with numerous cars, vans and 60+ birders all scoping the big collection of shorebirds that were feeding actively in the pool.



Some of the Ruff were beginning to change color, there were dark Curlew Sandpipers, Little Stints, Marsh Sandpipers, Dunlin, and Pied Avocets. But where was the star bird? Some of the birders were already on it while panic ensued for others who could not locate it. Then someone said, "It's flying" and our hearts sank. But fortunately, the bird circled around and returned to the middle of the flock where it was well seen by all. It was a rarity for sure and a life bird for Gina! We stayed with it on the scopes until it flew again out of sight.

In the meantime, the White-winged terns had taken flight and were feeding on insects above the pools and coming over our head offering stunning views. We took it all in as this was our last evening at the Salt pans and the birding was great!

As the sun was beginning to set, we headed over the bumpy Lotzaria track toward our hotel. A flock of eleven Grey Plovers flew in off the sea heading for the salt pans - a dramatic and real time illustration of visible migration! At the little farm near the ford, the Little Owl was out perched on a power line. We made our last crossing of the ford, still unsure of where the actual track was underneath us. But we prevailed and headed to the hotel for our last evening.

At dinner we reviewed our sightings and highlights of the week and enjoyed the free flowing Ouzo.

Day 8

This morning Patrice, Reg, and Marilyn left on the early flight. As we drove to the airport, the sun was coming up offering a last chance to say goodbye to Lesvos in the beautiful morning light. Later in the morning, the two Steves took advantage of the time to do a little more birding and found some Common Snipe in the sheep fields. In the afternoon, we drove Steve and Michele to the airport to catch their flight to Athens where they were going to spend another week exploring.

This will be remembered as an exceptional year for flowers on Lesvos. Everywhere we went it seemed that the fields were carpeted with color providing a dramatic backdrop to this beautiful island. The birds didn't disappoint either. We had many great sightings of passerines, shorebirds and raptors and witnessed migration in action. Memories of this week will be long cherished! Thanks to our great group for sharing this special week with us!

Gina & Steve

