

Lesvos, Greece: Migration!

with Naturalist Journeys

April 20 – 24, 2024

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The beautiful Greek island of Lesbos is the place to be to witness the spectacle of Europe's spring migration. This is the "Point Pelee" of Southern Europe for birds returning from their winter in Africa. Join Naturalist Journeys at the peak of migration. Birding on a Greek island ... is this real? Unpack once, set your watch to island time, and fill your day with birds!

From the little town of Skala Kalloni, we explore the island's varied countryside, historic villages, and friendly people. This is the third largest island of the chain (large enough to have extensive pine and hardwood forests), much less visited than the other islands, and a place people describe as feeling like the "real Greece." Meals here are a true bonus to the birding. Whether searching out the island's special birds, like Krüper's Nuthatch and Cinereous Bunting, or marveling at the continual stream of fabulous birds, there is no shortage of memorable sightings. We also take time to enjoy some of the island's 70 species of orchids.

Weather always plays a part in the spectacle of migration. With clear skies and fine conditions, birds may fly over the island and we spend time looking at the resident European birds and shorebirds. If there are winds or storm fronts, we may have incredible "falls" of birds. Either way, birding Lesbos is a fantastic experience. From the slopes of Mount Olympus, to the island's sparkling rivers and lakes, to picturesque fishing villages alongside beautiful golden beaches, we witness landscapes that have inspired artists for many years. And, best of all, your visit is timed with the birds!

Tour Highlights

- ✓ Unpack once and relax at our comfortable and eco-friendly hotel
- ✓ See terns and waders on the pond right next to our hotel
- ✓ In salt pans see Pallid Harrier, European Roller, Little Owl, and dozens of Red-footed Falcon
- ✓ Bird nearby sheep fields for Short-toed, Golden or even Lesser or Greater Spotted Eagles
- ✓ Watch for rare Cinereous Bunting on Lesbos' volcanic western side
- ✓ Picnic at Ipsilou Monastery, built in 800 AD and a good place to see migrant fallouts
- ✓ Explore around the town of Sigri looking for hundreds of shrikes and buntings in the shadow of a pretty Turkish castle
- ✓ Walk the eastern side's pine forests for Krüper's Nuthatch
- ✓ Enjoy pre-breakfast walks to a nearby pond for Little, Spotted, and Baillon's Crakes

Tour Summary

8-Day / 7-Night Greek Birding Tour w/ expert local guides

\$TBD, from Mytilene

Airport is Mitilini Airport Odysseas Elytis (MJT)

Day-to-Day Itinerary

Sat., April 20 Arrival in Lesbos

Welcome to Greece! Arrive today in Mytilene, the capital of Lesbos. Also known as Lesbos, this 600+ square-mile island in the Aegean Sea is renowned for its ancient history, incomparable natural beauty, and tradition of hospitality. You may wish to arrive early to take in the capital's fabulous art museum and to appreciate the local

shops and galleries. Mytilene is a city on seven hills, crowned by a castle, and is a manageable size to explore. Home to the University of the Aegean, there are concerts, cafes, a lively market, and waterfront.

After your arrival, we make our way to the small fishing village of Skala Kalloni, the base for our tour. If we have time before dinner we take a short walk to see how the spring migration of countless birds is progressing. Our hotel is perfectly located beside wonderfully bird-rich habitats, includes a reed-fringed pool right next to the hotel, which can be a magnet for water birds and marsh terns.

Accommodation at Kalloni Bay Hotel (D)

Sun., April 21 – Fri., April 26 Birding & Exploring Lesbos

Skala Kalloni is a classic fishing village, known for its sardine fishery. Its rich agricultural valley is backed by thousands of olive trees on the hills, and like Canada's Point Pelee, birdwatchers gather here from all over the world. This is the perfect location from which to explore this wonderfully scenic island; we can enjoy short drives to a variety of habitats that attract overwhelming numbers of migrants! If conditions are right you can witness breathtaking numbers of birds and it is not unusual to see hundreds of Red-backed Shrikes and Black-headed Buntings, or up to fifty Red-footed Falcons perched along telegraph wires.

From the moment you step outside the hotel door you are in bird heaven! The pond beside our hotel can be alive with Whiskered, White-winged, and Black Terns hawking insects just a few meters in front of us. A further search of reedy edges can produce Glossy Ibis, White Stork, Little Bittern, Squacco Heron, Garganey, Black-winged Stilt, and occasionally something more unusual such as Great Bittern, Great Snipe, or Spotted Crake. Streams of Barn Swallow can often be accompanied by a few Red-rumped Swallow, Sand Martin, and wheeling flocks of Common Swift that could have Alpine and Pallid among them. Yellow Wagtail of several very distinct races, including the very smart Black-headed, vie for our attention, while Spanish Sparrow, Turtle Dove, and a raptor or two make the first hour of birding all you had hoped for.

Skala Kalloni is perched on a wide bay with views of two mountain ranges. All week, we only have short distances to travel with some of the best birding sites literally on our door step. The east and west rivers with their weedy Tamarisk-lined banks can hold a whole host of interesting species. Depending how shallow the river is, it can attract endless numbers of European Bee-Eater, waders including Wood Sandpiper, Green and Common Sandpiper, Little Ringed Plover, Ruff, Temminck's and Little Stint, Squacco Heron, White and Black Stork, Little and Great Egret, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Gull-billed Tern, and the elegant Ruddy Shelduck. Along the edges, we can look for Common Nightingale and Eastern Olivaceous, Great Reed, and Cetti's Warblers. Sometimes we get Savi's and River Warblers here and by the end of the week, the superb Black-headed Bunting and flocks of dazzling European Bee-Eaters have appeared.

Between the East River and the nearby saltpans, several arable fields can attract flocks of Marsh and Montagu's Harriers and occasionally we see a few ghostly Pallid Harrier, as well as gorgeous groups of Collared Pratincole, Lesser Gray and Woodchat Shrikes, European Roller, Little Owl, and up to fifty Red-footed Falcon. Crested Lark and Corn Bunting are common and the area always holds a surprise or two. The saltpans yield many more wading birds with Wood Sandpiper being the most common, along with elegant summer plumaged Marsh Sandpiper, stunning plum-colored Curlew Sandpiper, close views of Temminck's and Little Stints, Kentish Plover, huge flocks of Ruff, Spotted Redshank, Pied Avocet, Little Gull, Spoonbill, Greater Flamingo, and the motionless

Stone Curlew. Over the years, groups have seen Dalmatian Pelican, Spur-winged Plover, Cream-colored Courser, Black-winged Pratincole, and Caspian Plover ... so once again we could have a nice surprise! This area is also traditionally a good spot to see the attractive Ruddy Shelduck.

The surrounding sheep fields can hold flocks of Greater Short-toed Lark, Tawny Pipit, Citrine Wagtail, and Red-throated Pipit with beautiful brick-red throats. Up to four races of Yellow Wagtail keep us working hard and we constantly keep an eye out for raptors and terns passing overhead. This is a great place for seeing some of the more unusual species such as Caspian Tern, Lanner Falcon, Short-toed Eagle, Honey Buzzard, Golden or even Lesser or Greater Spotted Eagle.

Heading inland from the salt pans, we can drive into a beautiful wooded valley full of oaks and olive trees. It is here that we should see our first Masked Shrike, Sombre Tit, Middle-spotted Woodpecker, Pied Flycatcher, Long-legged Buzzard, or even a Rufous Bush Robin. As Hoopoe lazily drift by and Golden Oriole fill the valley with their flutey calls we look for the shy and difficult Olive Tree Warbler, a bird that is a late arrival and only really possible toward the end of our stay.

We also explore the wild rocky north coast, making a few stops to look for breeding Ruppell's Warbler and Eastern Orphean and Bonelli's Warblers, plus Blue Rock Thrush, Black-eared Wheatear, Peregrine Falcon, Goshawk, Crag Martin, Rock Nuthatch, Alpine Swift, and along the coastline the rare Audouin's Gull, and flocks of Yelkouan Shearwater with even the possibility of the potential "new" Scopoli's Shearwater. With views of the Turkish coast in the distance, this area sees many migrants leaving the island and a nearby inland lake can be a great place to find Ortolan Bunting, Hobby or something a little unusual such as Thrush Nightingale, Rufous-tailed Rock-Thrush, Great-spotted Cuckoo, or the rare White-throated Robin.

The western side of the island with its arid volcanic hillsides is home to one of the birds everyone wants to see: the rare Cinereous Bunting. Lesvos is one of the best places in the world to see this little-known species, and we hope to find them singing from the rock strewn hillside. Here too are Cretzschmar's Bunting, Rock Sparrow, Isabelline and Black-eared Wheatears, Blue Rock Thrush, and more chances for Rock Nuthatch. We learn a bit about the local geology here, too, including the local petrified forest.

Ipsilou Monastery is one of our favorite picnic stops; set on top of a small hill we can enjoy superb views of the west coast. Dating from 800 AD, it is the oldest monastery on the island, with tall walls and arched gates. If weather condition are right, this spot receives amazing falls of migrant birds; we saw a flock of 27 Levant Sparrowhawks very low over our heads on one tour and often get Honey and Long-legged Buzzard and Short-toed Eagle. The surrounding trees and bushes can hold Collared, Spotted, and occasionally Semi-collared or Red-breasted Flycatchers, Golden Oriole, Chukar, Wood Lark, and Wood, Eastern Bonelli's, Icterine, Barred, and other warblers. This is also a good spot for butterflies with Southern Festoon nearly always present.

The west coast itself especially, around Sigri, is a very fertile area that can be exceptionally good for migrants with incredible numbers present on a good day. The village is marked by a Turkish Castle at the harbor, built in 1746. It's not unusual to see hundreds of shrikes or buntings and careful searching can reveal Wryneck, Great

Snipe, Levant Sparrowhawk, Collared Pratincole, Great Reed Warbler, and Lesser Gray Shrike, while flocks of Red-footed Falcons and Lesser Kestrels hunt over the fields.

Lesvos is very rich botanically, with two species of pine, as well as oaks, laurels, rhododendron, chestnuts, and other tree species. The island's proximity to Asia Minor (Turkey) and complexity of microhabitats in the mountainous terrain create biodiversity. The Persian Squirrel is a notable mammal. Weasels, foxes, and hares are here, and in the wetlands, otter.

The pine forests on the eastern half of the island hold the other star bird: the diminutive but delightful Krüper's Nuthatch. It is not always easy to see, but we make a special effort to catch up with this highly localized bird, which is on the western edge of its range here. In addition to the nuthatch, we can also find Short-toed Treecreeper, Serin, Woodchat Shrike, and some very good flowers including many species of orchid.

Another area where we traditionally take a pre-breakfast walk, is around a small pond where Little Crake and sometimes Spotted and Baillon's Crake can be seen very well. There are often a few Black-crowned Night-Heron and Squacco Heron to be seen, while Red-rumped Swallow pose on the reed tops where they have spent the night. Reed, Sedge, and Great Reed Warblers can certainly be heard, and we will search for Savi's and possibly River Warbler, as well as Little Bittern. This is a magical place for photography in the early morning light.

Birding this beautiful unspoiled island is not the only thing that will have you wanting to return. The setting is stunning, wildflowers and butterflies abound, and the sense of history we find while wandering is magical.
Accommodation at Kalloni Bay Hotel (B,L,D)

Sat., April 27 Departures

After some morning birding, we depart the area and head back to Mytilene for international flights out. (B)



Local Guide Stylianos Zannetos

Stylianos received his Bachelor of Science in Forestry and Natural Environment from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and his MSc from the University of the Aegean where he is currently working toward his PhD in Environmental Sciences. Stylianos is an accomplished field researcher and his PhD work is focused on the small mammals of Lesvos island. Stylianos works as a freelancer environmental consultant and field researcher for companies in Greece and Europe conducting wildlife surveys. He has a strong passion for leading groups of birdwatchers and wildlife photographers to various wetlands and natural places of Greece. In his spare time, he enjoys wildlife photography and bird ringing.

Tour Details

Plan Ahead!

Protect yourself with Allianz Travel Insurance. Please note, starting in January 2017, Naturalist Journeys pays 100% of your flight carbon offset.

Cost of the Journey

Cost of the journey (main tour) is \$TBD DBL / \$TBD SGL, from Mytilene, Greece. Tour cost includes all accommodations, meals as specified in the itinerary, professional guide services, other park and program entrance fees and miscellaneous program expenses.

Tour cost does not include: round-trip transportation from your home city to Mytilene, optional activities, or items of a personal nature like laundry, telephone charges, maid gratuities, or beverages from the bar.

Travel Information

The airport for this tour is Mitilini Airport Odysseas Elytis (MJT). Most flights route through Athens.

Arrival: By mid-day on April 20, 2024.

Departure: At leisure on April 27, 2024.

Tour Pace

This is a standard birding tour with regular birding walks. We usually break the day into two parts with a pre-breakfast excursion, followed by a full day out with picnic or taverna lunch. Weather can be unsettled; expect everything from bright and sunny weather to some cooler weather with the chance of an odd shower so prepare for all eventualities.

Photo Credits

European Kingfisher, Tom Dove (TD); Collared Flycatcher, courtesy Sunrise Birding; Little Owl, Steve Bird (SB); Stonechat, TD; Greater Flamingo, SB; Hoopoe, Gerard Gorman (GG); Great Spotted Woodpecker, Pieter Verheij Photography (PV); Cinereous Bunting, SB; Squacco Heron, Peg Abbott (PA).

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