

Lesvos, Greece: Migration! | Trip Report

April 22-30, 2022 | by Gerard Gorman



Naturalist Journeys group leader Gerard Gorman, local guides Gina Nichol and Steve Bird, and participants Andy, David, Jeanne, Joanna, Kathleen, Leslie, Sherry, Susan, and Tom.



This was a marvelous tour around an incredibly special place, the Greek island of Lesvos (aka Lesbos) which is situated in the north-east of the Aegean Sea. This is one of Greece's largest islands, some 1630 square kilometers, and is typified by stunning rocky scenery, olive groves, old oak and pine woods, pastures and tranquil settlements, all set in a blue sea. Its fantastic birdlife, both resident and migratory, kept us engaged and enthralled all week.

Fri., Apr. 22

Arrivals | Birding the Hotel | Kalami-Messa Wetlands

As we drove along, we had the sea and saltpans (salinas) on one side and scrubby rocky hillsides, old oak woods and olive groves on the other. Birds spotted as we went included Greater Flamingos, Great and Little Egrets, Yellow-legged Gulls and Crested Larks. As we unloaded, a Cetti's Warbler burst into song by the brackish marsh right in front of our hotel and many Common House Martins were flying around and nesting on the building itself. A wonderful greeting! After checking in, which was straightforward, and freshening up, we walked a short way to a lovely taverna in the fishing port. We were to have lunch here several times as the food and service were superb. There were huge Yellow-legged Gulls flying around and sitting on the fishing boats and an adult Mediterranean Gull on the sea, a good find. We all ordered different things (most choosing fish and seafood dishes) from the extensive menu. Returning to the hotel a singing Crested Lark showed well, before trotting across the road to the beach. After a short break, we set off again.

Our first afternoon was to prove extraordinarily successful. We drove through the town where White Storks were nesting right in the center on a utility-pole, then on to the nearby 'Scops Copse,' a site which lived-up to its



name as two Eurasian Scops Owls were roosting there in eucalyptus trees. These small owls were remarkably well camouflaged, but we all saw them well. A pair of Eurasian Nuthatches popped in and out of a tree cavity with food, a Common Chaffinch was singing, there were Great and Eurasian Blue Tits, and Common Swifts and Barn Swallows flying overhead. The Kalloni Bay area has over sixty wetlands of avian importance and now we visited our first. The Kalami-Messa sanctuary is an area of both saline and freshwater lagoons and marshes. Here we watched Common and Ruddy Shelducks, Garganey, Little Grebe, Black Stork, Purple Heron, Greater Flamingos, Western Marsh Harrier and a range of shorebirds including Ruff and Little Ringed Plover, a Woodchat Shrike and a Whinchat. A 'Steppe Buzzard' (a distinctive subspecies of *Buteo buteo*) and a Northern Lapwing at Messa were especially noteworthy. Andy and I glimpsed a Eurasian Bittern in flight, too. Levant Water Frogs were croaking, and Balkan Terrapins were basking on stones and logs in the marsh. We also found a Spur-thighed Tortoise on a rocky slope by our vans. We also saw our first Scarce Swallowtail butterflies, which are certainly not scarce on Lesbos! In the late afternoon we returned to base following the Lotzaria Track and Tsiknias River, a route we would get to know well.

Our first day was ending, but the birds kept on coming: Little Stint, Common Sandpiper, Spotted Redshank, Little Bittern, Little Owl, Eurasian and Great Reed Warblers, the latter very raucous, and singing Common Nightingales, all recorded. After a buffet dinner we tried to summarize the day's highlights (not easy with so many) with the Scops Owls, European Bee-eaters, Greater Flamingos, Steppe Buzzard and many of the shorebirds being popular.

Sat., Apr. 23

Metochi Lake | Kalloni Saltpans | Potamia Reservoir

We had an optional pre-breakfast trip at 6.30 am to Metochi Lake seeing, amongst others, Ruddy Shelduck, Black Stork, Little Bittern, Squacco Heron, European Turtle Dove, Eurasian Hoopoe and Eurasian Jay. A Green Toad was heard *churring*, too. We returned at 8am to a buffet breakfast, an array of various breads, pastries, cereals, jams, local honey, yoghurt, eggs and hot dishes. Our first stop after breakfast was at the Kalloni saltpans where we saw many of the birds seen previously but also new species such as a magnificent Great Spotted Cuckoo, fourteen Collared Pratincoles calling and flying over the water and then over our heads (Leslie was especially delighted with this) and two Common Ravens. Raptors included two Short-toed Snake Eagles, a



Eurasian Hobby and an Eleonora's Falcon (early days, but this was to be Tom's ultimate favorite bird). Several Eastern Olivaceous Warblers were singing their scratchy chattering song in track-side scrub. Moving on to the Kalami-Messa sanctuary we found a dozen Great Crested Grebes on the bay, more Greater Flamingos, some pink, some whiter, a Kentish Plover, a Common Snipe and two Red-throated Pipits. A Spur-winged Plover on the Kalami Marsh showed very well and would be the only sighting of this rare bird all week. We headed back via the salt pans, seeing over four hundred Greater Flamingos. These gangly-looking birds often showed more bright red on the wings when they flew. There were many Common Terns, Ruff and Wood Sandpipers and some new birds for our rapidly growing list: Little Terns, a Marsh Sandpiper, ten Curlew Sandpipers and a real rarity here, a Bar-tailed Godwit. After some patience we finally got views of a Zitting Cisticola, a tiny warbler-like bird, doing its display flight and its simple dzip-dzip-dzip song. After an outstanding morning, we headed back at around 1 pm for lunch in the port-side taverna in Skala Kalloni.

Following a short break, we went to the pinewoods at Achladeri in the afternoon to search for Krüper's Nuthatch. This species is a major target for everyone birding Lesvos as the island is the only place in Europe where it breeds. Local knowledge meant that we were soon watching a pair, from a safe distance, busy at their nesting cavity. Other birds in these open woods were Cirl Bunting, Long-tailed Tits, Short-toed Treecreeper and Eastern Subalpine Warbler. A fine male Eastern Black-eared Wheatear and a pair of Masked Shrikes, one eating a dragonfly, were near our vehicles. Although it was mid-afternoon, we also heard a Scops Owl calling. After a sunny, stupendous day with many great birds, as well as Orange Tip, Eastern Wood White and Swallowtail butterflies, Balkan Terrapins, Levant Water Frogs, and a Red Fox, we drove back to our hotel for an hour of rest before a buffet dinner.

Sun., Apr. 24 Christou River Mouth | Coastal Road | Melidia Valley

This morning we had a 7.30 breakfast and then set off for the west of the island. But first, we stopped at the mouth of the River Christou, very near our hotel. The dry and wet mid-flats here hosted our first Stone Curlew (Eurasian Thick-knee), a Black-bellied Plover, not in full breeding plumage, and European Bee-eaters flying high



and low over the ground (Susan could barely hide her excitement). Heading up on a winding road through montane terrain, we made roadside stops to watch 'rock' birds: Western Rock Nuthatch, Blue Rock Thrush and Rock Sparrow. There were both Common and Long-legged Buzzards, too, which we were able to compare. We soon found Cretzschmar's and Cinereous Buntings. Cinereous is one of Lesvos's very special species, indeed it is only found in Europe on a few Aegean Islands and its conservation status is categorized as *Near Threatened*. It is often seen on the ground, on boulders, on low bushes, but we also watched one on a wire.

Cretzschmar's is not as rare, but the bulk of its European population is also in Greece. We also started finding Starred Agamas, stocky robust-looking lizards, sunning themselves on boulders. We also enjoyed the many Eastern Festoon butterflies and watched a couple of False Apollos, large butterflies with almost transparent wings, flitting amongst the roadside rocks and plants. During a 'comfort stop' in a quaint village café with magnificent views over the hills and sea, we saw our first Alpine Swifts. We moved on, leaving the main road, taking a more rugged route through the scenic Meladia Valley. This was to prove very productive, highlights being some real, wild, Rock Pigeons (as opposed to the feral ones living in settlements) and a very confiding roadside Little Owl (which particularly pleased Joanna). A Eurasian Wryneck was spied loitering low in a bush before it flew out and landed on a rock. Everyone scrambled out of the vehicles and scanned the terrain. We got a few more views of this 'unusual' woodpecker before it vanished. It was the only one we would see. Soon after came another memorable sighting as a juvenile Golden Eagle soared over a ridge. It was mobbed by a Long-legged Buzzard, and we could see the huge difference in size between these raptors. We caught our breath and moved on.

A stream valley with scattered bushes and shrubs was a haven for songbirds, particularly warblers. Barred, Eastern Orphean and Willow Warblers, Lesser Whitethroat and Eurasian Blackcap were all seen in quick succession, as well as European Pied and Spotted Flycatchers, and a fine-looking male Black-headed Bunting. It was now time for our picnic lunch, and as we did so another Long-legged Buzzard soaring high overhead was joined by a second year Bonelli's Eagle, another bird that is seldom seen on Lesvos. The picnic was good, the birding top-class. We stopped in the small port of Sigri, meeting Paul, a British naturalist who spent the summer there. He kindly offered us coffee, showed us some moths he had trapped during the night, including a



magnificent Giant Peacock Moth, Europe's largest moth species. We also saw our first Eurasian Jackdaws here. This gentleman then took us to a secluded grassy site amongst the olive groves that he had found just out of town with some endemic Lesvos Orchids and a rare hybrid orchid that was yet to be classified. Several Violet Carpenter Bees buzzed around, alarming for some, but the truth is, despite being one of the largest bees in Europe they are seldom aggressive and will attack people only if provoked. We were to see these impressive insects every day. We began to head back to base. On the way we had repeat views of various raptors, warblers and buntings, and found a few Northern Wheatears and two Isabelline Wheatears. Back at our hotel there was a special treat at dinner. As it was the Greek Orthodox Easter, we were presented with chocolate eggs and specially baked traditional 'Easter Bread'.

Mon., Apr. 25 Tsiknias River | Perasma Reservoir | Aylkes Grasslands

As on previous mornings a Cetti's Warbler and a Common Nightingale were both singing loudly by our hotel as we prepared to set off on today's pre-breakfast adventure at 6.30 am. We had now visited the salt pans several times, at various times of day and to different corners, and every time we saw something new. We were also getting more and better views of the other birds, and several of the group mentioned that that was good; we were learning. Shorebirds were numerous: Pied Avocet, Black-winged Stilt, Common, Marsh and Wood Sandpipers, Common Greenshank and Little Stint. There were over 350 Greater Flamingos, and we scoped a new bird for our trip, four Dalmatian Pelicans, one in breeding plumage with a bright orange bill. This was a 'life bird' for most, but Jeanne was especially delighted. After breakfast at the hotel at 8 am, we first drove to the lower reaches of the Tsiknias River. Here our first Lesser Grey Shrike was spotted, eating an unidentified insect and being mobbed by a Blue Tit. We also saw another Eurasian Hoopoe (much to David's delight, as it was a main target for him) and passerines such as European Greenfinch and European Goldfinch. Moving further up the valley we saw two Short-toed Snake Eagles, another Eurasian Hoopoe, and our main target Middle Spotted Woodpecker, the only 'true' woodpecker (not counting Eurasian Wryneck) on Lesbos. A pair were nesting quite low down in an olive tree right by a farm track, so we observed from a safe distance, which could not be said for a shepherd on a motorbike and his feisty dogs!



We then drove northwards to the beautiful coast between Kavaki and Molivos. Starred Agamas occasionally popped their heads out from between rocks here. Back to the birding, some had brief views of a Chukar on the rocks as we scanned the sea. Seven Mediterranean Gulls were spotted flying around an offshore island and four European Shags and some Yelkouan Shearwaters skimming over the blue water. It was a picturesque place to be birding. Further north along the coast, at almost the most northern point of the island, we had our picnic on a hill overlooking the sea towards Turkey. Many Yellow-legged Gulls were around the fishing boats far below. Closer-by, a pair of Eurasian Jays seemed to be nesting and we also saw a few Eurasian Linnets, flying and sitting on a fence. Raptors included five Short-toed Snake Eagles, five Long-legged Buzzards and a Western Marsh Harrier.

After our *al fresco* lunch we headed west, skirting the sea, towards Eftalou. We stopped to watch a Red-backed Shrike and scanned the sea getting splendid views of over 250 Yelkouan Shearwaters going back-and-forth in small parties. Cleopatra's, beautiful, big, yellow butterflies, were on the wing here, too. The road went up a slope and our lead vehicle suddenly stopped to avoid a European Glass Lizard that was crossing the road. These magnificent reptiles are often mistaken for a big snake (being up to 140 cm long) but they are a limbless lizard. Unusually, it did not slither off into the undergrowth but allowed us to pick it up and take its photo before we released it safely into the undergrowth. Passing through the quaint town of Molivos (aka Mythimna) which has a famed medieval fort, we reached the Perasma Reservoir where there were ten Ruddy Shelducks, six Little Stints and more Yellow-legged Gulls. Our final stop was back near Kalloni Bay at the Aylkes wetland-grassland. Our main target was Greater Short-toed Lark and after first seeing them far off, they flew in much closer. We also saw another Stone Curlew (aka Eurasian Thick-knee) and three Whimbrels on the shore. A brief stop by the Tsiknias River on the way back to our hotel turned up a Garganey, Temminck's Stints and several Western Yellow Wagtails of the *feldegg* 'black-headed' subspecies.



Tues., Apr. 26

Filia Mast | Polichnitos Salt pans

We started the day on our now tried and tested pre-breakfast route around the Kalloni salt pans. We found the 'usual suspects,' flamingos, terns and shorebirds in good numbers: around one hundred Pied Avocets, one hundred Ruff, 50 Wood Sandpipers and 50 Black-winged Stilts (Sherry remarked how elegant these birds are). Colorful European Bee-eaters, always big favorites, were everywhere, flying high, swooping low and perching on wires and fenceposts. Corn Buntings, Crested Larks, Great Reed, Eurasian Reed and Eastern Olivaceous Warblers and Common Nightingale sang as they had done every morning along the river. The Great Spotted Cuckoo (were there two in fact?) called but did not show this time. After breakfast we went inland to the 'Filia Mast' a lightly wooded hill with a telecommunication tower on its peak. A Blue Rock Thrush sang from high on the mast and Cirl Buntings from lower down in bushes. Suddenly two Hawfinches flew in, landed briefly in a tree, and then left. A short but significant sighting of an uncommon Lesvos species.

A Common Cuckoo darted by, and a Eurasian Hoopoe called incessantly from a grove and was also finally located. After a little effort everyone finally got onto a Sombre Tit which had played 'hard-to-get'. The place was alive with butterflies, too: Scarce Swallowtails, a Swallowtail, Eastern Festoons, Large White, Clouded Yellow, Red Admiral, Painted Lady and others. After lunch we decided to visit a completely new set of salt pans by the settlement of Polichnitos to the south-east of Kalloni Bay. This proved an inspired choice as we added some new species to our trip list, all seen very well, too: a Dunlin, a Slender-billed Gull (surprisingly, the only one seen during our week) and a dozen Sandwich Terns. Of course, there were also many Greater Flamingoes, Yellow-legged Gulls and Common Terns here, and we had exceptional views of five close Curlew Sandpipers in nice rusty plumage. We drove a narrow coast road from here and stopped to watch and compare Little and Temminck's Stints, too tiny 'peeps' and a majestic Black Stork with a big bright red bill and crimson legs looking for food in a pool. Close to here, a European Roller spotted perched on a wire was surely a candidate for 'bird of the day.'



Before getting back to our hotel we checked another saltpan where a flock of Ruff at first confused us as they were seemingly ‘swimming’, feeding phalarope-style. A kettle of storks, both Black and White, soared above. This had been a super day for butterflies, with eleven species positively identified, although there were probably more, but we were usually preoccupied with the many birds. Another brilliant non-bird and non-butterfly find today was a Mediterranean Chequered Scorpion, found beneath a rock. In the evening Eastern Tree Frogs (aka Oriental Tree Frogs) called boisterously from the marsh outside as we went for dinner.

Wed., Apr. 27 Lardia Valley | Ipsilou Monastery | Sigri Petrified Forest

Passing through the Lardia Valley we encountered roadworks and heavy machinery, so we did not make too many stops but pushed on. When we did stop, we found our first Eurasian Crag Martins, but they flew swiftly over us and away. Never mind, we’d catch up with those later. There were also Red-rumped and Barn Swallows together in flight and an Eastern Bonelli’s Warbler in a bush which did its best not to be seen. A House Sparrow was also seen making a nest in a cavity, presumable that of a Western Rock Nuthatch. Further on we came upon two European Turtle Doves, another Eurasian Hoopoe and both Northern and Isabelline Wheatears.

We reached the impressive Byzantine Monastery of Ipsilou at around 10 am and this was to prove to be one of the cultural and birding highlights of our trip. Located above the village of Andissa, 15 km from Eressos, its full name is the Monastery of Agios Ioannis Theologos. Founded in 800 AD it is the oldest monastery on Lesbos and perched on the top of the highest peak in the Ordimnos Range, at 511 m above sea-level, and resembles a castle with its high stone walls and arched gates. From the walls we watched Alpine, Common and Pallid Swifts, it was good to be able to compare them, and Red-rumped and Barn Swallows and Common House Martins swirled in the skies, too. Raptors such as Short-toed Snake Eagle and Long-legged Buzzard and about twenty Common Ravens were also observed. Below the hill Woodlarks and Eastern Black-eared Wheatears sang and a Rock Sparrow, a Blue Rock Thrush and a Golden Oriole were seen by some. Some of us were taken inside the buildings by a helpful custodian. Nevertheless, although it was such a beautiful place to visit and bird (and according to Joanna see ‘a cute kitten’) we moved on. We made another stop to watch and listen to an Eastern Orphean Warbler that was mimicking other birds, and then a Masked Shrike which did similar. A Cretzschmar’s



Bunting burst into song here, too. This was top-quality roadside birding! When we arrived in Sigrí it was beginning to get hot, so we took 'time-out' in the cool rooms of the Natural History Museum of the Lesvos Petrified Forest. This modern, excellent exhibition which focuses on the geology of the region, is a Greek Natural Monument and a UNESCO designated Global Geopark. The fossil trees, leaves, seeds, fruits and other exhibits, detailing the area's volcanic history, are labelled in both Greek and English. We learned that the Petrified Forest was created around twenty million years ago by powerful volcanic activity. After a stroll in the museum's herb and shrub garden, where there are some standing petrified tree trunks, we took our picnic in the shade of the coffee shop's veranda. We then went to the farmland and beach near Faneromeni where we saw two Rock Pigeons, a dozen Spanish Sparrows, a Tawny Pipit and an Eastern Orphean Warbler perched in a tall, aptly named, Giant Fennel. Three Lesser Kestrels and a female Red-footed Falcon flew over and around 150 Yelkouan Shearwaters and a few of the larger Scopoli's Shearwaters were spied out at sea. On the drive home a Chukar was spotted right by the roadside, the best view we were to get. More Starred Agamas, which once again would not pose long enough for good photos, and a couple of Snake-eyed Lizards, a much smaller, slender species, with transparent eyes, were also found today.

Thurs., Apr. 28 Potamia Valley | Limonas Monastery | Achladeri

Today's optional pre-breakfast trip to the salt-pans at 6.30 am saw us watching many of the shorebirds - Pied Avocets, Black-winged Stilts, Wood Sandpipers, Ruff and the like - and terns we had now begun to really get to know. But there were also some new delights. Five Ruddy Turnstone were scoped, five dainty White-winged Terns flew close to us, and a beautiful female Red-footed Falcon posed on a wire. The real highlights, however, were a Red-throated Pipit (we could actually see its rufous face and throat) and a Spotted Crake that both fed out in the open on small ponds. The crake in particular was a splendid view as this bird is often a skulker. After breakfast we checked out the bush-lined track along the Tsiknias River again where a Lesser Grey Shrike, in breeding plumage with a pinkish flush on its breast, showed well.



In the Potamia Valley we finally had good views of Eurasian Crag Martins, wonderful in fact as they flew at eye-level before swooped under and out of a bridge where they were presumably nesting. A gang of Balkan Terrapins were basking on rocks in the creek and with the weather warming up, Eastern Festoon and Scarce Swallowtail butterflies were out in numbers, too. A little further on into this very pleasant and leisurely walk, Eurasian Blue, Great and Sombre Tits were seen in quick succession in a lightly wooded sheep-grazed pasture. We then stopped at the Limonas Monastery as a Long-eared Owl had been reported from there. This was one of several species that the local 'birding grapevine' had helped us locate. We found the bird, but it was hard to get good looks as it hid deep in the foliage of a tree. A little Owl perched on the wall of a nearby building was much easy to see. After a taverna lunch we set off to the Achladeri pinewoods again, our main objective being to find European Serin, as somehow this little finch had escaped us so far. We got brief views, but the bird did not show well, merely showing us its bright yellow rump as it disappeared into a line of roadside trees. In the pinewoods proper, we found two Krüper's Nuthatches and a Short-toed Treecreeper, which really pleased Tom as he had not seen this species on our previous visit. Other birds included a dozen or so Common Chaffinches and European Goldfinches and a handsome male Eastern Black-eared Wheatear. As we left the pinewoods a big Balkan Green Lizard, about 40 cm long, posed for photographs on a dead tree. Although it was vivid green and the tree bark dark, it probably thought it was camouflaged.

Fri., Apr. 29

Departures

Several of the group had early flights so two airport transfers were organized, one after breakfast, one after lunch. The airport at Lesvos's capital Mytilene is small so check-in was straightforward. Those of us on the afternoon run had our last meal in our favourite taverna overlooking Kalloni Bay. There were many highlights during our trip, of all kinds, not only birds, but nevertheless on our last evening we attempted to summarize them. Kathleen particularly enjoyed the Woodchat Shrikes and the visit to the Petrified Museum. Joanna's ultimate trip bird was the Little Owl and her favourite site the Ipsilou Monastery. David's bird highlight was the Eurasian Hoopoe and place also the Ipsilou Monastery. Susan put the European Bee-eaters top and the friendliness of everyone as her favourite overall non-bird thing. Leslie particularly liked the Collared Pratincoles and, once again, the Ipsilou Monastery. Jeanne's favourite birds were the Dalmatian Pelicans, and she enjoyed



the overall scenery of the island. Tom's top bird was the Eleonora's Falcon and the Ipsilou Monastery his favorite place. Sherry said she had adored the Black-winged Stilts and the varied landscapes. Andy put the European Bee-eaters top of his list and watching the feeding mullets as his favorite non-bird event. Thank you everyone for making this tour so successful!

Photo Credits: Group Photo (Gerard Gorman - GG), European Bee-eaters (GG), Scenic (Andy Jones - AJ), Eurasian Scops Owl (GG), Turtle (AJ), Scenic (AJ), Purple Flowers (AJ), Red Flower (AJ), Spur-winged Plover (GG), Greater Flamingos (GG), group Lunch (Susan Rosegrant - SR), Pink Flowers (AJ), Kruper's Nuthatch (GG), Red Flowers (AJ), What a View! (Leslie Loeffel - LL), Black-headed Bunting (GG), Horses (Kathleen Pasierb - KP), Scenic (AJ), Birding (KP), Pied Avocet (GG), Glass Lizard (SR), Purple Flower (AJ), Greenery (SR), Scenic (LL), Beach (KP), Citrine Wagtail (GG), Red-backed Shrike (GG), Boats (SR), Ipsolu Monastery (LL), Petrified Tree (GG), Flower (AJ), Posing Group (KP), Panoramic (KP), Coastal (KP), Balkan Green Lizard (GG), Old building (SR), Black-winged Stilt (GG), Crested Lark (GG), Short-toed Treecreeper, Balkan Terrapins (GG), Group (KP), Great Spotted Cuckoo (GG)