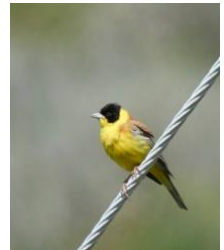


Lesvos, Greece | April 22 – 29, 2023 | Trip Report | by James P. Smith



With local guide Stylianos, host guide James, and guests; Cassie, Dawn, Deb, Dick, Kathy, Martha, Marie, Mike F., Mike W., and Monique



What a tour we had to the beautiful Greek Island of Lesvos! This relatively unspoiled island in the eastern Aegean became home for a week as we explored a rich variety of landscapes ranging from the barren peaks and uplands of the western peninsula to the pine/oak woodlands centered in the heart of the island, the salt pans and wetlands along the southern coast, and the pockets of olives groves and cultivated pastures throughout. Our visit was timed to meet the peak of migration as well as the abundance of non-avian riches to be found on the island in spring. Scarce residents such as Eurasian Scops Owl, Sombre Tit and Krüper's Nuthatch as well as sought-after migrant breeders including Rüppell's Warbler and Cinereous Bunting, and exciting migrants such as Dalmation Pelican and Jack Snipe were among the many highlights discovered on our daily adventures in the field. The popularity of Lesvos among European birders was something to behold as was the easy going nature of the locals that help to make Lesvos such a unique place to be in spring.



Sat., Apr. 22

Arrivals | Mytilene | Kalloni Bay Hotel | Skalla Kalloni Achladeri Forest | Kalloni Salt Pans

This year's tour started a little earlier than anticipated as most of the group had spent one or more nights at the Paradise Boutique Hotel in Mytilene. Kathy, Dawn and Mike flew into Mytilene's rather swish new terminal on the first flight from Athens and by 10 am all ten participants, along with Stylianos our local guide, were heading out from Mytilene westbound towards Kalloni Bay. The day was crisp and clear, and the scene every bit as picturesque as one might imagine a Mediterranean spring morning to be. We passed rolling hillsides covered in oak and pine, boulder-strewn hillsides, olive groves and agricultural fields as we approached the expansive Kalloni salt pans and our first Greater Flamingoes soon came into view!

Arrival at the Kalloni Bay Hotel was greeted by Common Nightingales singing in the grounds and Common House Martins nest building under the eaves. We received a warm welcome from Hellene behind front desk and enjoyed a hassle-free check-in to comfortable, spacious guest rooms. Ocean breezes drifted up from the Gulf of Kalloni and flowering Tamarisk bushes lined an overgrown Kalloni pool, a former hot spot in years gone by though migrant Squacco Herons would be seen there several times during our stay.

Before long we were heading over to Skalla Kalloni for a delightful harbor-side lunch. Several other birding groups had the same idea and we soon settled into the generous communal spirit of the birding scene on Lesbos. Lunch was quite superb with fresh seafood, meatballs, gyros, coke and cold beer all on the menu. Soon afterwards we headed out for the first proper birding of the tour on the northern fringe of Kalloni, a spot colloquially known as the "scops copse". Lines of mature eucalyptus trees were the main interest here and we eventually found a roosting Eurasian Scops Owl neatly camouflaged against the trunk and hidden by its brilliantly cryptic plumage... what an excellent start!

Earlier in the week Stylianos had discovered a nesting pair of Krüper's Nuthatch in the Achladeri forest and the nest had young. Being one of the key species for the trip, we thought it prudent to visit the nest site as soon as possible before the youngsters fledged. Along the way we stopped briefly by the Kalami-Messa sanctuary, an area of saline and freshwater marshes where we found Common and Ruddy Shelducks, Mallard, Great and Little Egrets and a flyover Common Buzzard. As we drove up through the forest of Achladeri increasingly threatening shower clouds gathered over the pine woodland and centered right over the spot where we planned to try for the Krüper's Nuthatch! It began to rain heavily, very heavily in fact and after waiting out the storm for 15



minutes or so a couple of resounding claps of thunder was the final cue to head back down to the lowlands. By way of compensation, we found the most stunning field of flowering poppies and spent some time just enjoying the whole scene. A Woodchat Shrike perched on wires above the poppy field and a little farther down the lane a fine Masked Shrike and a male Cirl Bunting showed close to the roadside. As for the Achladeri forest and the Krüper's Nuthatch... they'd have to wait for another day.

Despite being rained off in the hills the afternoon light in the lowlands was quite brilliant and we spent the remainder of the evening becoming acquainted with the Kalloni salt pans. Here we found Pied Avocets, Black-winged Stilts and Greater Flamingoes aplenty and at least half-a-dozen roosting Eurasian Spoonbills. By carefully sifting and sorting through the many intriguing old world shorebirds Ruff, Common and Wood Sandpipers, Greenshank, Little and Temminck's Stints, and the only Black-tailed Godwit of the trip were all carefully scoped from the roadside. A White Wagtail bobbed along the muddy fringe of the channel in front of us and several Western Marsh Harriers could be seen quartering the marshes and meadows. As we crossed the Lotzaria track the insistent 'jangling of keys' song of Corn Buntings could be heard throughout the meadows as well as with the plaintive, melodic calls of Crested Lark - both species would feature every day during our time on Lesvos. Dazzling Black-headed Yellow Wagtails and Whinchats were among the more brightly colored migrants on view as we drove the narrow lanes before making it back to the hotel in good time to freshen up. As dusk approached the mellow ambience was neatly enhanced by multiple Common Nightingales singing from the scrub around the hotel, and it was just lovely.

Dinner was buffet, classic Greek cuisine, and plenty of it. After something of a whirlwind start, we got to know each other a little better around the dinner table and settled down to go the through the day's tally reflecting on a brilliant start to the trip.



Sun., Apr. 23

**Skalla Kalloni | Limonos Monastery | Lardia Gorge
Perivolis Monastery | Ipsilou Monastery | Sigri
(Australia Restaurant) | Faneromeni | Meladia Valley
Tsichliondas River | Eressos**

We awoke to the pleasant twittering of Common House Martins around the hotel, some of the group having nesting pairs right above their balconies. Common Nightingales, Cetti's Warblers, European Goldfinches and European Greenfinches were vocal in the early morning singing from the gardens and surrounding scrub. After a 7:30 breakfast we headed out for the western peninsula of Lesbos. The drive featured a steady climb through the picturesque village of Dafia before pausing for thirty minutes or so at Limonos Monastery. Being the first birding group on site we unexpectedly disturbed a Long-eared Owl close to the parking lot as it flew from the pines and low across the meadow, a marauding pair of Hooded Crows in hot pursuit! The poor owl found some relief by flying straight inside a derelict farm building, a smart move since the crows refused to follow and eventually lost interest. Marie picked out a flying European Goldfinch by its yellow wing stripe and a handsome Ruddy Shelduck could be seen in the meadow standing sentinel-like as if on guard duty and may have been nesting close by.

Back in the vehicles we crossed slopes of beautiful Mediterranean scrub with switchbacks offering spectacular views of Kalloni Bay below before stopping at the steep-sided gorge of the Lardia Valley. Short-toed Eagles, Common Buzzards and Northern Ravens soared on the thermals above and the rocky outcrops of the gorge hosted numerous Black-eared Wheatears, a Blue Rock Thrush and a pair of nesting Eurasian Crag Martins. We pressed on through the hills passing through incredibly scenic villages with terracotta-tiled roofing on all the buildings. At Perivolis Monastery we were greeted by a melee of feral cats as well as several Common Chaffinches and a Masked Shrike. Despite the heavy feline presence, the area was full of bird song the most common sound being the '*techa-techa*' calls of Great Tits and the 'tinkling' of European Goldfinches. Male and female Pied Flycatchers could be seen foraging on the far side of the Voulgaris River together with good numbers of Spotted Flycatchers, and Red-rumped Swallows cruised up and down the river offering the best views of their all-important key features. A Persian Squirrel was spotted while others in our party had good but brief looks at a singing male Eastern Subalpine Warbler, and all this enjoyed amid a vociferous chorus of Levant Water Frogs croaking from the Voulgaris River – they were incredibly loud!



We pressed on to Ipsilou Monastery set atop a volcanic peak at some 511 m above sea-level and offering commanding views of the Turkish Coastline to the north. Founded in 800 AD it's the oldest of the many monasteries on Lesvos. The surrounding boulder fields hosted plenty of Black-eared and one or two Isabelline Wheatears, two species very much at home in the barren environment. The monastery itself offered one of the few bathroom stops in the area and conveniently provided fabulous views of a territorial Rock Sparrow singing from a roof top right by the parking lot as well as a male Common Linnet on the lower slopes. We ran into three British birders who reported a major fall-out of migrant flycatchers and warblers, though we only saw a couple of Pied Flycatchers and Blackcaps during our brief stay.

Continuing west across volcanic slopes the small coastal town of Sigri came into view. It was a pure picture-postcard setting as we looked down on a village of terracotta-tiled roofs surrounded by colorful fields of mustard, poppy, thistle and olives and beyond that, an azure Aegean Sea. There was no better setting to have lunch and we settled down at a popular taverna in the heart of the village. It was outdoor dining and a brisk north-westerly wind came straight off the Aegean making for a chilly but enjoyable meal; fish soup, deep fried meatballs and the house specialty, a giant gyro about the size of a dinner plate were all on the menu!

After lunch we explored Faneromeni, an area of fields, olive and fig groves just to the north of Sigri. The area is characterized by narrow country lanes lined by centuries old drystone walls and meadows filled with an abundance of flowering plants. A large flock of Western Yellow Wagtails popped up from the longer grasses in the sheep fields and we had nice views of Pied Flycatchers, Woodchat and Masked Shrikes. A close passing raptor proved to be a Long-legged Buzzard, especially gratifying after viewing several Common Buzzards earlier in the day. Most the group elected to stretch their legs and walk the lanes, but a few chose to stay close to the vehicles. A couple of gaudy yellow-and-black Golden Orioles passed over the track and a male Red-footed Falcon cruised overhead just as a Common Cuckoo moved silently across a boulder-strewn hillside landing briefly for good views in a Giant Fennel. A small, vegetated stream in the valley below proved attractive for migrant Collard Flycatchers and a number of handsome male Spanish Sparrows. Non-avian highlights included the bizarre snake-like European Glass Lizard along with Scarce Swallowtail, Painted Lady and Red Admiral among the butterflies noted. On the way back to vans Stylianos sparked up conversation with one of the elderly farmers, a poignant reminder of just how easy-going local attitudes are when dealing with birders visiting their land. We'd be hard pressed to find a friendlier place for birding anywhere in Europe!

By mid-afternoon it was time to start the journey back to Kalloni Bay and new a route that would take us along the incredibly scenic Sigri – Eressos Road. The terrain was stark, windswept and dominated by boulder scree and



narrow, vegetated water courses. Though the vegetation was scant it did harbor a handful of migrants such as Whinchat, Common Redstart and Collared Flycatcher, all of them quite skittish in the blustery north-westerly winds. Black-eared Wheatears were plentiful, and we came across several singing Cretzschmar's Buntings perched atop the boulders. Two Woodlarks feeding along the track in front of the vehicles was a nice bonus after checking many Crested Larks and raptors just 'hanging' on the wind included our first Lesser Kestrels and a couple of Short-totod Eagles.

Another large flock of Western Yellow Wagtails, maybe 50 or 60 strong, fed around a sheep herd roaming around the highest point along the track before we descended finding lush vegetation in the valley below. A brief stop turned up a female Red-backed Shrike by the chapel and several Ruddy Shelducks way out in the meadows. As we tackled the ford crossing at the Tsichlinda River, Stylianos stopped in the middle of the river bed to check a couple of feeding wagtails one of which was a Western Yellow (Blue-headed race *flava*) and the other a stunning male Citrine Wagtail! We paused to enjoy the Citrine as it fed on bugs among the boulders sensing that it might be the only one of the trip....and it was! A final stop in the Meladia Valley found a pair Rock Sparrows occupying a former Western Rock Nuthatch nest along with views of a male Red-backed Shrike and an Eastern Orphean Warbler in the vegetation close by. Throughout the day Yellow-legged Gulls were ever-present whether in the lowland fields or the steep sided slopes of Ipsilou Monastery and this handsome gull would feature in many different habitats throughout the tour.

A good meal was most welcome after a long day in the field and the hotel served a buffet of traditional Greek dishes; baked chicken with oregano, Soutzoukia, Briam, Tzatziki, black-eye pea salad, and apple pie for dessert! Stylianos led us through the tally where we learned that Mike W had seen a Red Fox on the beach earlier that morning....nice!

Mon., Apr. 24

**Skalla Kalloni | Alykes Wetlands | Kalloni Salt Pans
Achladeri Forest | Agiassos | Kalami Marsh | Potomia
Reservoir**

The seasonal Alykes Wetlands would provide the focus this morning and after breakfast we headed east towards the Kalloni salt works where the marsh could be watched from a dirt road that ultimately led down to the Gulf of Kalloni. The birding was busy as hoped and enlivened by good views of Common and Ruddy Shelducks, White and Black Storks, Little Egrets and several flocks of shorebirds, most of the latter being Wood Sandpipers and non-breeding plumaged Ruffs. As the day warmed up several northbound European Bee-eaters brought a splash of real color as they flew in from the Gulf, some of them alighting on wires above the meadows, and a party of



three Collard Pratincoles hawked for insects over the wetlands before they drifted west. An intriguingly small 'cormorant' perched on the pilings just offshore turned out to be an immature European Shag of the Mediterranean race '*desmarestii*' and was duly scoped for the most satisfactory views, time well spent since it proved to be the only Shag of the entire tour.

Meanwhile, Stylianos had been on a mission and dutifully returned with packed lunches for the day as we set off to check the eastern side of the salt pans. Singing Corn Buntings and Crested Larks were common place but a couple of flyover Greater Short-toed Larks and Red-throated Pipits required an experienced ear to pick them out. The berm alongside the eastern salt pans offered views of flower filled meadows to the east and extensive salt pans to the west. Awesome male Black-headed Yellow Wagtails dazzled us along the berm and the incessant 'zit-zit-zit' song flights of Zitting Cisticolas was a near constant as we birded there. Stylianos mentioned the Cisticolas had made a comeback on Lesbos after several years of absence and this tiny passerine with a big voice cooperated admirably for scope views.

The salt pans were teeming with life. Perhaps as many as 350 Greater Flamingoes, flights of Common Shelducks and Great Cormorants, flocks of resting Common Terns and good views of busy, foraging Little Terns. All of the gulls that we'd seen to date had been the large white-headed Yellow-legged Gulls, so two smaller 'hooded' gulls resting on the water were bound to attract attention. They turned out to be Mediterranean Gulls in breeding plumage! Though not too rare on the island they were certainly scarce enough to generate some excitement and we finished off a stellar session at the salt pans with a Common Sandpiper along the channel and an Osprey flying over the vehicles.

It was a beautifully crisp Aegean morning and the favorable weather conditions inspired a second attempt at seeing the Krüper's Nuthatch. Before long we were back in the Achladeri Forest with affable Common Chaffinches and Blue Tits for company right next to the vehicles. Stylianos did a short recon to check on the Krüper's Nuthatch nest found a few days earlier and thankfully the nest was still active – phew! Spotting scopes were suitably trained on the nest with the adults making frequent visits to a surprisingly open cavity in a Turkish Pine, the feathery nestlings clearly visible inside. In a day or two the youngsters would have certainly fledged and the timing of our visit was just about perfect. Krüper's Nuthatch has a patchy distribution with populations in Turkey, Georgia and south-west Russia but the Lesbos population is by far the most accessible to European birders and one of the major attractions of any visit to the island but their numbers remain small and the species has a relatively thin distribution. We left the birds in peace though not before spotting several species of orchid



on the forest floor; Green-winged and Provence Orchids being two species identified retrospectively from photos.

An enjoyable al fresco lunch at a picnic site within the forest was next with Spanakopita (savory Greek pie with crispy layers of phyllo pastry filled with spinach and feta cheese) as well cheese croissants, salad and fruit cup were all very well received after a full morning in the field. Requests for bathrooms and sweet treats were a little more difficult to satisfy until we drove down to the tiny settlement of Agiassos. Stylianos knew of a small taverna in the village serving traditional sweet preserves and Greek coffee which turned out to be an inspired and fun choice! A pair of Gray Wagtails was found nesting under the bridge by the taverna, a species only rarely recorded on our Lesvos tours and European Serins, Eurasian Jays and Eurasian Crag Martins were all on view along with abundant Common Chaffinches and the ever-beautiful song of Common Nightingales emanating from the surrounding orchards.

Returning to the Gulf of Kalloni, a slightly elevated spot known as the 'Mesa' overlook gave views of the Kalami Marshes and a number of wetlands best viewed by scanning from the 'Old Bridge'. Eurasian Coot, Common Moorhen, Little Grebe and several Striped-necked Terrapins were all seen from this spot. Though somewhat backlit, a Ferruginous Duck was viewed from the Old Bridge too, apparently quite a rarity on Lesvos and a "good island bird". A rather rufous but distant Common Buzzard raised some discussion as to whether it might be the eastern form *Buteo buteo vulpines* commonly referred to as 'Steppe Buzzard'. This highly migratory subspecies of Common Buzzard would admittedly be very rare on Lesvos but this bird ticked all the right boxes and looked like a strong candidate. The evening drew to a close with a visit to the old Potomia Reservoir, a lovely secluded spot nestled amid the fields and olive groves of the lower Potomia Valley. Olive-tree Warblers could be heard singing as we stepped out of the vehicles though we'd have to come back to those on a morning visit later in the week. A male Little Bittern, a male Little Crake and a Little Grebe were among the species teased out of the thick vegetation on the far side of reservoir, all of them viewed with a scope in perfect evening light. Another fabulous day finished off with a fine buffet supper of beef and carrots, pork and peppers, and Gigantes (Greek giant baked beans) as well as the traditional Greek salads, and again we went through the all-important checklist with Stylianos.



Tues., Apr. 25

**Skalla Kalloni | Agra | Eressos | Meladia Valley | Sigri
Petrified Forest Museum | Environmental Center of
Skalla Kalloni**

After a hearty buffet breakfast, we headed out, once again, for the rugged terrain of the western peninsula. The volcanic slopes of Agra provided our first stop and offered commanding views over the Gulf of Kalloni and the Aegean Sea. It was an evocative spot to say the least and somehow fitting that our arrival was greeted by a blustery north-westerly wind. A number of rock-dwelling species call this windswept landscape home and with some patience we did pretty well at seeing most of them. The spotting scopes proved crucial when it came to views of Blue Rock Thrush, Western Rock Nuthatch and a singing Cinereous Bunting, the latter being something of a ventriloquist as it sounded much closer than it actually was! Fortunately, the handsome Cretzschmar's Buntings were much closer and more cooperative, one of them perching directly alongside a Sombre Tit for several minutes. The latter is a bona fide chickadee look-alike and one of the island's more subtle target species. High-flying raptors overhead included Long-legged Buzzard and a Peregrine. The day was off to a fine start! It was impossible to ignore the impressive geology of the region as we continued west with fine views of pyroclastic flow right alongside the road and the Pithari Volcanic Dome situated between Messotopos and Eressos. The charming village of Eressos also provided an opportunity for a much-needed pit stop and hosted several coffee shops serving the best Espresso Freddo on the island! After a short but welcome break we climbed again heading over the Eressos volcanic dyke, passing Mount Kofinas and down into the Meladia Valley via multiple switchbacks. Black-eared and Isabelline Wheatears, and Cretzschmar's Buntings were scattered throughout the rugged terrain and we were so high up it was possible to look down on passing Ruddy Shelducks and Yellow-legged Gulls flying through the valley below. Several stunning male Black-headed Buntings sang from exposed perches in the lower valley and had clearly arrived since our first visit two days earlier.

The ford and water course of the Tschliondas River looked busy with birders hungry to catch a glimpse of a White-throated Robin (*Irania gutturalis*) seen and photographed by a British couple the previous day. The robin is a major rarity on Lesbos but also notably scarce and thinly distributed throughout its breeding range in Southern/Eastern Turkey and the Middle East. Indeed, it's a bird so rare that our local guide Stylianos had never seen one! Despite the news being posted in a timely manner and lots of eager birders searching, the White-throated Robin proved to be a one-day-wonder and photos from the scene showed it to be a stunning male.



While the robin was a no-show the timing was good for an enjoyable walk along the Meladia Valley amid the fig groves, sheep fields, patches of mustard and fennel, all bordered by tumbling drystone walls. Migrants were few on this day though we did observe several handsome Whinchats while local breeders were represented by Ruddy Shelducks, Eurasian Crag Martins, Rock Sparrows and a couple more singing Black-headed Buntings. An al fresco lunch by the chapel was neatly complimented by high-flying Short-toed Eagles, Long-legged Buzzards and a Peregrine overhead. Ironically, just as we'd packed everything away and pulled the vehicles onto the track to continue, Stylianos spotted something large fly into a distant flowering Tamarisk. Thankfully the bird cooperated and remained on the upper right of the shrub for a while. It was a Great Spotted Cuckoo, a parasitic species and a scarce migrant on the island seen on only a handful of Lesvos trips. Scope views revealed the cream-colored breast, dark cap and crest, and extensive white spotting on the gray-brown upperparts....a nice bird indeed!

We pressed on to beautiful Sigri and the Natural History Museum of Lesvos Petrified Forest. After a day spent exploring the wilds of the western peninsula the surprisingly modern, air-conditioned building offered an enjoyable break. There was a short but very informative lecture and time to explore the immaculate exhibits both inside and outside the museum. For those inclined coffee, coke and snacks were available too and the museum's patio offered awe inspiring views over Sigri, Nisiopi Islet and the eastern Aegean. Indeed, the whole site is a magnificent Natural Monument and a designated UNESCO Global Geopark. Flocks of resident Western Jackdaws often flew past the museum at eye level offering nice views of the distinctive gray-headed and dark-capped appearance, these birds being of the east European form '*soemmerringii*' replete with the white half collar that showed up surprisingly well, even on birds in flight. Mike W and Stylianos had the great fortune to be outside and looking up when an Eleonora's Falcon flew overhead migrating north, something of a scoop since it proved to be the only Eleonora's of the whole tour. Leaving Sigri we once more climbed the exposed rugged uplands of the Petrified Forest Geopark just as Mike W spotted a pair of Chukar from our moving vehicle! We pulled over to a safe spot to enjoy immaculate views of these beautifully marked and surprisingly obliging partridges. The journey back to the hotel was most notable for skittish birds being seen all-too-briefly by the roadside. The first vehicle had a close encounter with a singing Cinereous Bunting and the second vehicle had a Eurasian Hoopoe fly across the road at a spot that was simply too awkward to park.



In the evening most of the group attended a fabulous talk on the conservation efforts taking place on Lesvos competently delivered by Eleni Galinou of the Kalloni Environmental Center after which we returned to the hotel for supper (Papoutsakia on the menu!) and, of course, the day's tally with Stylianos.

Wed., Apr. 26 Skalla Kalloni | Charamida | Loutra | Kalloni Salt Pans (east) | Tsiknias River

The day dawned overcast and cloudy with scattered showers and a fairly blustery southern wind coming straight off the Gulf of Kalloni. The change in weather was notable but wouldn't impact on our plans and so, after breakfast, we ventured south-east skirting around the Gulf of Gera and hugging the scrub-filled southern slopes of the island in search of *Sylvia* warblers. Rüppell's and Sardinian Warblers, both dark-headed species and known to be real skulkers, were on the agenda for the morning. Birding the southern edge of the Amali Peninsula proved difficult in the wind, though one Rüppell's Warbler was heard at the first stop and a Blue Rock Thrush flew by at the second. On the other hand the scenery was stunning with an abundance of flowering plants scattered all over the hillsides. Yellow-legged Gulls, Northern Ravens and Common Buzzards all appeared to enjoy to the wind, hanging on the updrafts over the hillsides just as a Peregrine had done at the first stop.

Along the coast towards Charamida bird song increased significantly and it wasn't too long before we picked out the scratchy warbles of both Rüppell's and Sardinian Warblers. The Rüppell's was seen well and proved to be the biggest prize, a species with a limited breeding distribution found mostly in Greece and Turkey. Moreover, it's a truly handsome warbler sporting a black head, white moustacial stripe, black throat and reddish orbital ring. We saw the Sardinian Warblers pretty well too, a species with a more widespread distribution and found throughout much of the Mediterranean region.

Pleased with the morning's success we drove north to the picturesque village of Loutra. While the location and its narrow cobbled streets may have seemed an odd choice for a birding destination, in recent years Loutra has become synonymous with the presence of Laughing Doves (*Streptopelia senegalensis*), a relatively recent addition to the resident avifauna of Lesvos and Greece. In fact, Loutra was the site of the first ever breeding of Laughing Doves in Greece occurring as recently as September 2021! Within minutes Stylianos showed us a female sitting on a nest precariously balanced on a window ledge right in the middle of town, apparently window ledges and shop signs being the favored spots for nesting pairs in Loutra. Kathy and Monique went on to find one or two more individuals by walking the cobbled streets and we noticed that the locals, recognizing the level of interest from foreign birders, actually put out seed for the doves though most of it was 'wolfed



down' by the resident Eurasian Collared Doves. Even so, the petite Laughing Doves seemed to be doing pretty well with an increasingly established foothold in Loutra. Since we were in town Stylianos used his contacts and invited us for an impromptu taverna lunch, a fine mix of traditional salads, cooked meats, pork meatballs, and seafood and voted hands-down one of the best meals of the trip!

The day was far from over but with several in our party favoring a relaxed afternoon we went back to the hotel for an hour or so before heading back out at 4 pm. The blustery conditions continued as we made a start along the eastern berm of the Kalloni salt pans. In April migrants can drop in at any point and we were soon scoping a flock of 23 newly arrived Gull-billed Terns looking crisp and immaculate in full breeding plumage. Five Eurasian Curlews flew in from the Gulf and circled the salt pans, their far carrying melancholy calls surely one of the most enigmatic sounds of wild open spaces anywhere in Europe. Half-a-dozen partially summer plumaged Black-bellied Plovers fed along one of the berms albeit distantly until attention suddenly turned to a huge pelican lifting up from the back of the salt pans and lumbering across our field of view. It was soon identified as a

Dalmation Pelican, a relatively short distance migrant and considered both rare and local within its limited European breeding range. After settling briefly on the salt pans close to the main road, the magnificent beast gave superb views as it flew straight towards us before banking and gliding off to the west. Formerly very rare on Lesvos, Dalmation Pelican has become more regular in recent years and could well feature on future spring trips. Up next was the heavily vegetated Tsiknias River (Tsiknias meaning heron in Greek). We drove the western bank first to ensure the best of the evening light. Crisp views of a Little Ringed Plover on a sand bar were well received as was a Spotted Crake, two Common Snipes and a bevy of Wood Sandpipers and Western Yellow Wagtails. Swarms of *hirundines* fed on aerial insects over the river providing excellent eye-level views of Barn Swallows, Sand and House Martins and several Common Swifts in superb evening light. Another rewarding day was drawing to a close and we settled down to dinner at the hotel with more traditional Greek dishes on the menu; Pastitsio (Greek lasagna), Imam (Greek eggplant in red sauce), as well as pork with prunes, chickpea stew and traditional Greek salads.

Thurs., Apr. 27

Skalla Kalloni | Christou River | Napi Valley | Agia Paraskevi | Tsiknias River | Achladeri Forest | Lotzaria Track | Race Track | Tsiknias River

A brooding sky, strong north-westerly winds and sporadic rain showers greeted us first thing this morning. With the weather being so questionable we elected to make our first stop at the Christou River Mouth and its saline



mudflats. Several species of shorebird feeding out on the flats sparked some interest with Black-winged Stilts, Pied Avocets, and three or four Kentish Plovers though these proved tricky to see, even with a spotting scope. There were long distance migrant shorebirds too, birds heading for the Arctic Tundra including several Little Stints and three Curlew Sandpipers in breeding plumage. The latter stirred up evocative memories for Dick as he'd co-authored a paper on a Curlew Sandpiper breeding event at Utqiagvik (Barrow), Alaska back in June 1962!

We headed inland toward the rugged farmland of the Napi Valley climbing up through the village of Paraskevi amid showers and foreboding skies. The finding of new species was going to be tough under these conditions but we persevered with a short walk along a farm track and had fine looks at a male Cirl Bunting, a couple of Black-eared Wheatears and excellent flight views of a Common Wood Pigeon, easily the largest member of the dove family to be found on the island. Five Common Terns flying overland at this elevation were more unexpected and must have been trying to take the quickest route north as they battled against the wind.

Calls for a much-needed comfort break were satisfied in Paraskevi and, for those inclined, coffee and hot chocolate were happily consumed at the same stop. While in town some 'hot news' filtered through the local grape vine. A Jack Snipe had been seen feeding on the Tsiknias River. Not only was this a great rarity for the island but a difficult bird to see well anywhere within its range due largely to its cryptic hiding nature. We soon reached the Tsiknias River and the Jack Snipe sweet spot and while the bird was certainly seen through scopes it was only really detected by its characteristic bobbing motion and we all agreed better views would be desirable. On the plus side a stunning male Back-headed Bunting singing out in the open on purple thistles was well worth the deviation. A huge flock of Barn Swallows and Sand Martins hawked for insects over the river and we had splendid looks at four Glossy Ibis, all of them resplendent in full breeding plumage. Superb views of European Bee-eaters in all their glory delighted the group too and Stylianos got very excited about a Cattle Egret that flew up from a sheep pen and headed off east. The egret was something of a local rarity and duly placed on the local grapevine.

An al fresco lunch was thoroughly enjoyed at an improvised picnic site in the Achladeri Forest at a spot known for being a former nesting location of Krüper's Nuthatch. On the hillsides in the distance, we could see farmers pruning olive trees and burning brush piles, a process that apparently had to be completed by the end of April for optimum yield. After lunch we headed to the Kalloni Bay Hotel for a little down time before going back out in late afternoon to the Lotzaria Track, a rather narrow single lane track through agricultural fields and meadows. Once again Stylianos rustled up views of a singing Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, but the undoubted highlight was the show of Red-footed Falcons, a highly migratory, gregarious species often found in concentrations as they



pause to rest and refuel. Careful scanning over the meadows produced a dozen or more, most of them stunning males! Further east a site simply known as the “Race Track” came up with three rather brief Tawny Pipits and a couple of Sandwich Terns just offshore until the blustery conditions forced us to seek the more sheltered confines of the Tsiknias River.

News of the previously reported Jack Snipe had spread and it came as no surprise to find numbers of birders gazing into the Tsiknias River from a high vantage point on the western bank. Initially things seemed pretty quiet but with perseverance we had nice views of Squacco Heron, Spotted Crake, lots of Western Yellow Wagtails and hundreds of Common Swifts, Barn Swallows, House and Sand Martins. A Common Snipe strolled into view and briefly created some excitement and then, not long afterwards, we spotted the Jack Snipe feeding and bobbing in the open right alongside the wagtails and Wood Sandpipers. This cryptic little gem put on the most fabulous show with its curious, near-comical bobbing motion. The late afternoon light was quite superb and wonderful scope views were enjoyed by the entire group. For many birders on Lesbos the Jack Snipe was a top tier rarity, particularly for a couple staying at our hotel....it was their first on the island in almost 30 years of consecutive visits! The large numbers of *hirundines* feeding over the river had gone almost unnoticed, that is until a magnificent Eurasian Hobby swept through the flock scattering swallows and martins all over the fields and putting on a fabulous display to gathered admirers. As we drove back towards the hotel a Great Crested Grebe in breeding plumage preened itself on the river and was arguably the last notable bird of the day though the chorus of singing Common Nightingales around the hotel would still take some beating. It turned out that Kathy had actually been shown a Common Nightingale by one of the guests staying at the hotel, something of a scoop since actual views of singing nightingales are few and far between - Kathy was understandably thrilled!

Dinner was a wealth of traditional Greek dishes; Plaki (baked cod), Yuvetsi Chicken and Tourlou (eggplant, zucchini and potato in tomato sauce) with Ravani (syrup cake) for dessert and of course followed up with the traditional run through the day’s sightings will Stylianos.

Fri., Apr. 28

**Skalla Kalloni | Potomia Valley | Filia (secret pond)
Kalloni Salt Pans | Lotzaria Track | Skalla Kalloni**

The last full day of the tour was upon us. Somehow the week had flown by due in no small part to the enthusiasm and camaraderie shown by this wonderful group. Though the day dawned a little chillier than of



late it was still bright and sunny after the passage of the previous day's cold front. We began amid the olive groves and stone walls of the lower Potomia Valley. Common Buzzards and Short-toed Eagles were already in the air as we stepped out of the vehicles, a nice indicator of warm air thermals rising above the valley. The area was full of bird sound and between the songs of Common Chaffinch, European Goldfinch, European Greenfinch, Eurasian Blackbird and Great Tit we slowly pursed out some of the more tricky old world warblers. The main target was the vocal, bulky Olive-tree Warbler and Mike F even got a photo! This aptly named species is the largest member of the *Hippolais* genus and is both scarce and thinly distributed on the island as well as being a late spring arrival. Another large warbler, a migrant Great Reed Warbler confusingly popped into view in the same area and an Eastern Orphean Warbler proved quite cooperative towards the end of the walk sitting up high in the olives and singing. On the other hand we had less fortune with an adult Barred Warbler as it moved along a hedgerow and frustratingly disappeared before most of the group could see it. While the quest for skulking warblers may have had its place, a Masked Shrike building and settling down on a nest on a spindly branch right over the track was a pure treat to watch. Indeed, the Potomia Valley was especially flush with gaudy black-and-white Masked and Woodchat Shrikes popping up throughout the olive groves.

News of the Barred Warbler had traveled fast and within minutes birders started to arrive at our spot prompting us to depart. Barred Warblers in breeding plumage are not common on the island and evidently much sought-after so we headed above the valley to the more peaceful environs of Filia. A beautiful mix of rustic farmland and hanging oak woodland shaped the habitat here and Stylianos introduced us to his "secret pond". Though initially quiet Stylianos was sure that patience would be rewarded and how right he was. We had great views of male and female Eastern Subalpine Warblers, Lesser and Common Whitethroats, and a 'crooning' European Turtle Dove in the background.

Eastern Bonelli's Warblers had been vocal throughout the morning in Filia and this canopy dweller was never going to be easy to see but by the following their distinctive sparrow-like 'chip' calls we eventually had good views of this tricky species moving around in the oaks. Northern Ravens were plentiful at this elevation, often engaging in dogfights with the local Common Buzzards and a Blue Tit visiting a nest in an oak cavity entertained as did a Scarce Swallowtail by the track. Lunch was calling and we could hardly pass up one final taverna stop. We dropped down the valley to the same harbor-side restaurant overlooking the Gulf of Kalloni where it all began on the first day. The food was outstanding once again and afterwards our party split up for a little while,



some heading into Skalla Kalloni town while others enjoyed a walk along the beach front and the remainder headed back to the hotel for a little down time. In the afternoon most of the group headed out towards the eastern side of Kalloni salt pans where Stylianos knew of a pair Little Owls frequenting a small building and sheep enclosure. Sure enough the owls were there when we arrived perched on the terracotta roof seemingly quite unconcerned by our presence unlike the noisy pups guarding the sheep pens! The nearby salt pans were again teeming with birdlife with lots of Greater Flamingoes, Pied Avocets and Black-winged Stilts and some new arrivals in the form of about 25 Curlew Sandpipers, many of them in fine breeding plumage. The Lotzaria Track offered beautiful views of a male Red-footed Falcon perched on wires by the track, and several Whinchats and Black-headed Yellow Wagtails. Most impressive of all, three Collard Pratincoles rested on a freshly plowed field giving fabulous scope views, especially satisfying for those in the group that missed the three in flight over the Alykes Wetlands earlier in the tour. We enjoyed one last buffet together as a group and said our good-byes after going through the bird list since we'd all be having staggered departure times the following day. The delightfully friendly ambience of the Kalloni Bay Hotel had served us so well and been an ideal base for the tour. Highlights will always be difficult to pick out but who could forget the vibrant colors of European Bee-eaters or the Black-headed Buntings and Black-headed Yellow Wagtails, the privilege of watching a pair of Krüper's Nuthatch feed their young at the nest, the quest to secure good views of handsome Rüppell's Warblers at Charamida, the majesty of a Dalmation Pelican in flight or the curious bobbing of the charismatic Jack Snipe that generated so much excitement. For some, the daily Common Nightingales singing in the hotel grounds was a further joy and for others simply being on Lesbos in spring was *'the'* highlight of the tour!

Sat., Apr. 29

Skalla Kalloni | Mytilene | Departures

Kathy, Martha and Cassie had the earliest flights so Stylianos headed out with them around 6am. Dick, Deb, Marie and Mike, and Monique all had mid-morning flights and traveled to the airport with James after breakfast. Dawn and Mike had a leisurely day and hired a local guide to further explore the history and culture of the island until they flew out in late afternoon. The much improved new terminal at Mytilene was a breeze to use and ensured relaxed departures from the island at the end of a truly wonderful week in the eastern Aegean.

Special thanks go to our wonderful group who shared their good nature, humor and camaraderie throughout the tour, and to the team at Sunrise Birding who generously offered support and counsel throughout the week and beyond. We can't wait to do it all again in 2024!

Photo Credits: Parthenon (Michael Freeman - MF), Eurasian Scops Owl (James P. Smith - JS), Blue Tit (JS), Black-headed Bunting (JS), European Bee-eater (JS), Greater Flamingoes (MF), View from Ipsilou Monastery (JS), Yellow Wagtail (MF), Limonos Monastery (JS), Lardia Valley (JS), European Goldfinch (MF), Coastal View (MF), View towards Tsichlionda Bay (JS), Stop at Meladia Valley (JS), Wildflowers (JS), Group at Alykes Wetlands (JS), Black Stork (MF), Little Egret (MF), Kruper's Nuthatch (JS), Stripe-necked Terrapin (MF), Gulf of Kalloni from Agra (JS), Eressos (JS), Chuckar (JS), Sombre Tit (JS), Black-eared Wheatear (MF), Exploring Cobbled Streets (JS), Dalmation Pelican (JS), Black-headed Bunting (MF), Christou River Mouth (JS), Tsiknia River (JS), Ruppell's Warbler (JS), Glossy Ibis (MF), Mike watching Red-footed Falcons (JS), European Bee-eaters (MF), Enjoying Bonelli's Warbler (JS), Scarce Swallowtail (JS), Seaside (JS), Little Owl (JS), Kremasti Bridge (MF)