

## **Lesvos 1999 May Andy Senior**

### **Buzzards, Buntings and Black-eared Wheatears**

A group of four birders, Guy Bottomley, Roy Bottomley, Paul Robinson and myself [Andy Senior], visited Lesbos in early May this year for a week of fairly intensive birding

We had birded together in Andalusia in 1994 as well as in the UK, but Lesbos was a new experience for most of us. Roy had visited Lesbos previously, but in September as a family holiday. He therefore had some experience with the species we would encounter. Guy also had relevant previous experience from a birding trip to Turkey. Most of the planning was undertaken by Guy, drawing on information from Richard Brooks' book *Birding in Lesbos* (Brookside Publishing 1995), and from information gleaned from a series of trip reports by other birders, to whom we are grateful. The purpose of this report is to pass on information and advice to other birders who may be undertaking a similar trip.

#### **Background**

We flew from Manchester via Flying Colours on the early morning of 6th May, having been delayed for a little under an hour. Flight time was 4 hours and 12 minutes, diverting slightly from the normal route in order to avoid the Balkan conflict. We'd arranged to pick up the car at the airport. This presented no great problems, and enabled us to start birding directly. We did have some delays in trying to find our way through Mytilini, where the roads were being repaired, and diversions were in place, only some of which were marked.

Our car was a Suzuki Swift. Our only real criteria, apart from price, was that a four-door model was a must to enable us to bale out quickly at sightings. The small size of the car proved to be no real handicap since we were never in the car for long periods. We were continually stopping, and Lesbos offers no long distance driving anyway.

Our self-catering apartments were in Anaxos, near Petra. Though Kalloni is often recommended as the ideal base, and it probably is, Anaxos was quiet, had calling Scops Owl, and was only a twenty-minute drive from Kalloni. It also gave good access to the north, particularly Ruppell's Hill, and the west, where most of our driving was done. Restaurant and bar facilities were also good in Anaxos, with a wide choice. There was a small bakery next door to our apartments, which provided bread for lunches, which we prepared as we went.

The 'Marianthe' apartments were adequate, but not luxurious. We had two of the three apartments, and found the keys in the door when we arrived. Toilet and shower were available in each apartment, along with one single and one double bed. Cooking facilities was a two-ring electric hotplate. The apartments overlooked the village, and gave distant views of the sea.

#### **Day by Day**

##### **Day 1 – 6th May 1999**

The weather when we landed was not what we'd hoped, and certainly not what I'd prepared for. It was dull, with a stiff breeze from the northeast, making the day unpleasantly cold.

On leaving the airport, it was our intention to try and see Kruper's Nuthatch before heading for Anaxos. Our information suggested that this was the only species that required us to visit the southeast of the island, and we wanted to see this bird and then be able to concentrate on other areas.

(With hindsight, such determination was unnecessary. The distances on Lesbos are small, and the driving is easy – we could have visited this area at any time, and indeed we did return later in the week for another look!).

From Mytilini, our route took us on the Kalloni road as far as the Agiassos junction, and from there, south west towards Vassilika. Our first stop was at the point where the Agiassos road bridges the Evergeloulas River. The river carried a low flow of water on this date. We were attracted by large flocks of hirundines and swifts, and whilst these were seen regularly all over the island, this was our only report of Pallid Swift which another observer claimed for this site just before we arrived. We found our first Olivaceous Warblers breeding along the track on the north side of the river, and heard Cetti's and Nightingales. This site also produced one of our few sightings of White Wagtail.

We then stopped at various points as we drove southwest, until turning north towards Achladeri, adding a few species as we went. This road seems to have been recently re-made, and finding landmarks such as culverts from earlier reports proved difficult. Our destination was the 'White Barn' site. This well-known site is easily found off the right-hand side of the Kalloni road as you drive from Achladeri. The 'Barn' is not really a barn off course, but part of some facilities provided at a popular local picnic site. It is however very obviously white, and is easily seen from the road. We pulled into this site, and were immediately hailed by another birder who was watching two Kruper's Nuthatches carrying food to a nest hole in a double trunked tree some 50 yards up the main track from the barn, on the left hand (north) of the track.

On leaving the 'White Barn' we headed off for Anaxos to find our rooms. We got our first site of the pools and salt pans east of Kalloni, but allowed ourselves only a brief look before carrying on. These pools and pans became a magnet for us, and we returned to these at some stage during most days of our trip.

## **Day 2 – 7th May 1999**

The day began sunny, but breezy. Our first area for the day was the Petra – Molivos road, which was largely in the lee of the hills to the east and thus protected from the worst of the wind. As we moved on from Molivos to Skala Sikamias, we became more exposed to the wind, and the day turned quite chilly. From Sikamia back to Molivos entailed driving through fairly high ground, and we were pretty cold. We finished the day with a visit to Kalloni salt pans, wishing we'd bought heavier clothing with us.

## **Petra – Molivos Road**

It's a short drive from Petra to Molivos, but the area offers plenty of birding opportunities. Our main target for the day was Ruppell's Warbler, and the areas between this road and the sea were recommended as good sites. We made three stops along this road.

1) The lay-by on the seaward side of the road was the most rewarding stop. Drive up the hill, north out of Petra, until you've passed the jetty on the left, and look out for a peculiar structure built onto the hillside on the right-hand side of the road. This building is quite distinctive, being supported by girder work. When the road starts to sweep right again, there is a lay-by capable of allowing a few cars to get off the road completely. A walk from here down through the scrub gave us good views of Ruppell's Warblers, with plenty of added interest from shrikes, buntings and other warblers. We set up scopes on the derelict terraced fields just north of the lay-by, but had to retreat almost immediately as we had inadvertently set up within feet of a tangle of scrub where a pair of Ruppell's were trying to bring food to young.

2) Continuing north, the sweeps around a small valley, which runs to the sea. A track leads inland from the right-hand side of the road. Here we saw more Ruppell's as well as Orphean Warblers.

Note that we never saw an Orphean Warbler with the classic white eye once. All our birds were dark eyed. The Handbook of the Birds of Europe the Middle East and North Africa – Cramp et al, quotes a number of references which suggest that eastern Orpheans are more frequently dark eyed than western birds.

3) Our third stop shouldn't really be recommended. Within site of Molivos was another track leading away from the right-hand side of the road. The track was half-heartedly blocked by a rickety gate. Tempted by a tantalising glimpse of a falcon sp. over the ridge, we walked this track for some distance. We never did identify the falcon, but we did add our only sighting of the trip of Golden Orioles.

### **Molivos – Skala Sikamias**

The day was now dull, and with a blustery and cold wind, we didn't do any real sea-watching here other than note a few shags flying east.

### **Skala Sikamias – Molivos**

This was our first attempt at raptors, but again the cold and wind beat us. One common buzzard was our only reward in the mountains.

On the outskirts of Molivos the road passes over a small stream. A walk along the track on the north of this stream gave our only sightings of Willow Warbler and Blackcap, and our second White Wagtail.

### **Kalloni East River**

A short stop here produced four Wood Sandpipers, and more Olivaceous Warblers. We were keen to press on to the complex of salt pans and pools east of Kalloni however.

### **Kalloni Salt Pan Complex**

Richard Brooks' book describes this area in some detail. It is a huge area, full of interest. The salt pans are a commercial operation, and presumably will hold water in rotation throughout the year. The associated pools however dried up noticeably during the week we visited, and are probably sites which are best early in the year. Viewing of the area is made fairly simple from the road along the west side of the pans, but it's not possible to see the centre pans very well, and there's no-where from which to gain height to see the nearside of the embankments. As well as the birds I've listed, we heard reports of other species being found – notably Greater Sandplover, Spur-winged Plover and Red-necked Phalarope.

On the way back to Anaxos from Kalloni, we had our only sighting of Nightjar when a single bird got up from the road as our car lights approached.

### **Day 3 – 8th May 1999**

Our first trip to the west of the island. Our plan was to dawdle towards Sigri, intending to finish the day at Faneromeni. The weather was quite promising initially, being bright and sunny, but wherever cover from the wind was lost it became very cold. We had a number of sites to check.

### **Filia – Skalocheri Road**

After the passing the junction of the road to Anemotia, there are a couple of signs indicating the presence of a filling station in Skalocheri. Before reaching the filling station, just on the outskirts of Skalocheri, a fairly broad track joins the southern side of the road. This track runs parallel to the road before starting to climb into the hills.

We parked at the roadside, and walked up this track. The hills around seemed perfect for raptors, but we saw none. We did however see our main target – Cretzschmar's Bunting, as well as Blue Rock Thrush, Hoopoe and Sub-alpine Warbler amongst others.

When we left the sight, we'd travelled less than a kilometre before finding Rock Nuthatch on a rocky outcrop next to the road.

### **Skalocheri – Vatoussa Road**

We found our first Long-legged Buzzard about halfway between these two towns. We'd expected some difficulty in confidently separating this species from Common Buzzard, but had no trouble at all. The underwing markings and colouring were straight from the textbook, and the unbarred, white tail was startling. We watched the bird in the air until it seemed to land further down the road. Interestingly, the bird was seen to use the tail as a rudder, in a way reminiscent of Kite.

We found presumably the same bird after travelling only a few hundred yards, and this time were treated to closer and extended views. Other birds seen along the roadside included Cretzschmar's, Oortolan and Black-headed Buntings.

### **The 'Rotten Oak' near Vatoussa**

As you approach Vatoussa from the direction of Skalocheri, your first sight of Vatoussa will be from a couple of short hairpins as the road begins to drop into the valley. After these initial short hairpins, the road drops into a fair straight, and you'll see Vatoussa clearly on the far side of the valley. There's a crash barrier for part of this straight section on the right-hand side, and just at the point where the crash barrier ends, our attention was drawn to a Hoopoe investigating a hole in an elderly tree. I'm not a botanist, but I think the tree was some species of Oak. We pulled up to watch the Hoopoe, and for the next hour we hit one of those "purple patches" that we all dream of.

A pair of Middle Spotted Woodpeckers were bringing food to a nest hole in the tree, and perhaps more remarkably, we watched a common nuthatch mudding up the entrance to another hole within a couple of feet of the woodpeckers. We're pretty sure that two nuthatches were active, but I can't swear to seeing both at once. As we continued to watch the peckers and nuthatches, other visitors to the tree included Blackbird, Blue Tit, Black-eared Wheatear, Woodchat Shrike and three Sombre Tits. I don't suppose the tree will ever pay off as well again, but I mention it because this tree will remain one of my outstanding memories of the island.

### **Vatoussa – Antissa**

A Raven was added as we drove through Vatoussa, and at other short stops along this stretch of road we found another Long-legged Buzzard, Alpine Swift and Red-rumped swallow along with other hirundines, a single Roller on telephone wires and, just as the road climbs into Antissa, a Short-toed Eagle hunting over a hillside.

### **Isabelline Triangle**

After Antissa, a major road junction offers routes to either Eressos or Sigri. The area around this junction is the famous "Isabelline Triangle" where Isabelline Wheatears were performing well whilst we had lunch. A further Long-legged Buzzard here, escorting a Common Buzzard, allowed a good opportunity for size comparison between the two species.

### **Ipsilou Monastery**

Because this site was exposed to the wind, and the wind was still distinctly chilly, we didn't explore this site as thoroughly as we should have done. We missed Rock Sparrow, which we discovered later breed inside the Monastery, but we did see Blue Rock-thrush, Rock Nuthatch, Cretzschmar's Bunting and another Long-legged Buzzard amongst others.

### **Sigri**

As we approached Sigri we were treated to distant views of a flock of falcons. These were mostly Lesser Kestrels, although at least one Red-footed Falcon was present. We watched some of these birds drop into a bare tree, and decided to drive off the main road, and look back from the Faneromeni road, which would give us much better light. We never saw the flock again!

### **Faneromeni**

We drove this track as far as the ford, and then walked over the ford and continued north. The track, when we visited, was capable of being driven by tractor, but not a saloon car. The track beyond the ford was effectively a stream, albeit with little water in it. Apart from Persian Squirrel, we recorded the following birds in this area: – Wood Sandpiper, Moorhen, Marsh Harrier, Sand Martin, Swallow, Crested Lark, Pied and Red-breasted Flycatcher, Yellow Wagtail (Feldegg certainly, and probably another race), Rufous Bushchat, a flock of perhaps thirty Bee-eaters, Red-backed Shrike, Collared and Turtle Dove, Great tit, Olivaceous Warbler and Black-headed Bunting, as well as Hooded Crow and Yellow-legged Gull.

#### **Day 4 – 9th May 1999**

The weather had improved dramatically. With little wind and clear skies, the sun soon lifted the temperature comfortably.

Our main targets for today were Cinereous Bunting and Olive-tree Warbler – neither proved easy.

#### **Potamia Valley**

For Olive-tree Warbler we decided to try the Potamia Valley as described in Roger Brooks' book. We made a short stop at Kalloni West River where we recorded Little Egret, Grey Heron, Stone Curlew, Kentish Plover, Lesser Grey Shrike, Long-legged Buzzard and Marsh Warbler.

The olive groves at the end of the Potamia valley proved a little frustrating. We did eventually get a glimpse of Olive-tree warbler, but that was all. It would seem that these birds prefer older groves which contain more than a monoculture of Olives. Our later experience suggests that this species is best looked for in groves that have been left un-maintained for some time.

#### **Parakila Marsh**

This area of marsh is clearly visible from the road between Kalloni and Parakila. A quick stop here resulted in Little Bitten, Stilts, Wood Sandpipers, Great Reed Warbler, Marsh Warbler and lots of Terrapins.

#### **Parakila Hills**

South of Parakila, on the U bend shown on the roadmap, is track leading up into the hills. We followed this track for 1.3 km to a point where a track leads to a newish looking tiled barn. (The third track to the right after leaving the main road). Here we had lunch, and here we had our only sighting of Cinereous Bunting – a single male singing from a rock. Also a family party of Rock Nuthatch, Cretzschmar's Bunting, Black-eared Wheatear, Red-backed Shrike and Linnet.

#### **Kalloni**

From Parakila, we headed back to Skala Kalloni to spend the rest of the day around East River, the Salt Pans and the Inland Lake. The areas around Skala Kalloni are well described in Brooks'

book, and offer excellent birding opportunities.

We took a quick look at the Inland Lake where Squacco Heron and Night Heron were showing briefly, and a ring-tailed Montague's Harrier provided good views on the track to the Lake. We were shown by other birders where a Little Crake was seen regularly (on the waters edge near a tall poplar towards the north end of the lake), and returned here at 20:15 in time to see the bird performing well as it stalked through the reed fringing the lake.

Kalloni 2 pool surprised us with fifteen Coot showing, apparently stopping later than usual. A White Stork was nesting on a nearby rooftop.

Kalloni East River provided a wide range of birds including two separate Little Bitterns and Spanish Sparrows coming to bathe in the water. To do this river justice takes a lot of time. We drove from the south end of the river, across the main road, and on to the ford at the north end, stopping every few hundred yards, but undoubtedly we missed a lot. In particular we missed a reported Citrine Wagtail, and although Roy saw a Grey Wagtail, the rest of us missed this as well.

At the Salt Pans, viewed from the road running down the west side of the complex, we spent a while scanning through waders and watching terns. Our best moment here was when the waders were disturbed by something, and as we looked for cause of the disturbance, a male Lanner came over the embankment, almost across the bonnet of our car, and away over the grassland behind us. This was our only sighting of Lanner, and although brief, was another high point for us.

### **Day 5 – 10th May 1999**

Having been given a site for Olive-tree Warbler on the Skoutaros – Filia road, we decided to give this a shot, hoping for better views than those of the previous day. If we found the right site, it proved just as frustrating as the Potamia valley site. We were pretty sure we heard Olive-tree Warbler, but never got a sighting. Further along this road, where the road forks to Filia or Skalochori, we hung around waiting for a reported Bonelli's Eagle to appear. It didn't.

We decided to head off west again looking for Rock Sparrows, and the day improved dramatically at 10:00 when we were between Vatoussa and Antissa. We were exactly 1.5 km east of the junction for Moni Perivolis, when Paul called a halt, having spotted a group of Falcons soaring over a ridge. We saw at least four Eleanora's, a Red-footed Falcon and a single Honey Buzzard. These were dropping in and out of view as they crested the ridge, and provided real excitement. As we stood watching these birds we became aware of a vaguely familiar call behind us, which was eventually resolved into three Olive-tree Warblers performing well, and giving excellent views.

These were in an olive grove that was obviously untended, and best views of the birds were obtained when they left the olives and sang from other bushes which had infringed on the grove.

'Robinson's Ridge' provided more interest with both Common and Long-legged Buzzard, as well as Blue Rock-thrush and Alpine Swift. We also saw our first Tortoise here, blithely crossing the road.

### **Antissa – Petrified Forest**

We had travelled most of this route two days earlier, and found many of the same species again – Isabelline Wheatear, Cretzschmar's Bunting, and so on. We did add two more species on this road: a Woodlark singing from telephone wires, and just at the junction where the road to the Petrified Forest branches off from the main road, two Chukars calling from the hillside below the road. We also had a female Kestrel sp. sitting on a telegraph pole downhill from the road, and facing us. Roy immediately scoped it, and declared it to be a Lesser Kestrel on account of the pale talons! I knew I still had a lot to learn!

The Petrified Forest was disappointing as far as Rock Sparrows were concerned. I thought the site was fascinating in its own right, and it did provide our only Hobby as well as a couple of Little Owls.

### **Eressos Road**

We finally connected with Rock Sparrow at the first bridge as we drove south to Eressos from the "triangle" (see sketch map 9). Adult birds were bringing food to a nest in the culvert under the road immediately north of the bridge, and gave excellent views as they perched on the buttresses of the culvert before going to the nest. The site also provided Spanish Sparrow and Cetti's warbler. Although we didn't check personally, the rock outcrops on either side of the road here are reputed to be good for Cinereous Bunting.

### **Skala Eressou**

We spent a short time on the beach here, taking our first opportunity for a seawatch. We found small numbers of Cory's Shearwater, Mediterranean Shearwater and Shag offshore, and a Crag Martin hunting over the beach.

### **Kalloni Sheep Fields**

These fields lay south of the salt pans, and are approached by turning left at the bottom of the road running down the west of the pans. Follow the road until it becomes a dirt track. Keep going until this runs out, taking care over a particularly dodgy cattle grid, and park at the end of the track. Cross small bridge on the left, and two tracks run eastwards, parallel to the coast. Either of these tracks will lead you to a large flooded area. It is possible to drive over the bridge, and along the tracks – the "fence" across the bridge is in fact a gate.

We had an extremely productive couple of hours here, watching Flamingos, Egrets, Herons, Ibis, Waders, and Marsh Terns. We also had good views of Rufous Bushchat, as well as Fan-tailed Warblers and a single adult summer Red-throated Pipit – one of several reported from the area.

### **Day 6 -11th May 1999**

Driving from Anaxos to Kalloni we heard a Chiffchaff singing near a small quarry on the west side of the road, opposite a filling station. We looked for the bird, but although we heard it a couple of times, we didn't see it.



We did find a couple of Short-toed Treecreepers however, and our only Wren of the trip.

### **The 'Blue Bag' site**

We had been given this site by another birder as a good location for Rufous Bushchat, and although we'd had good views the previous day near the sheep fields, we decided to try it – it's difficult to become bored with Rufous Bushchat, and it was a potential photo opportunity. Directions were as follows: –

From the main road across the north of the salt pans, take the road on the west bank of the East River, heading north. Past a pink house on the left, look for a cluster of grain silos, and take the track to the left, driving past the silos until the T-junction. Turn right at the junction, and follow the track up. Keep going uphill until passing a small farmstead on the right. Beyond the farmstead (perhaps 100 yds) look for two bushes on the left-hand side with blue bags hanging in them. In these bushes sings the Bushchat.

And so it proved. We arrived at 09:00 and the bird was sitting out, singing in plain view. Plenty of photo opportunities although the bird stubbornly refused to cock it's tail in the 'classic' manner. Further up this track we saw Lesser Grey, Red-backed and Woodchat Shrikes, Bee-eaters, Middle Spotted Woodpecker and Black-eared Wheatear.

### **East River**

Another look for Citrine and Grey wagtails proved fruitless, although plenty of birds to keep you interested. A quick look around Derbyshire was also quiet.

### **White Barn Site**

From Derbyshire, we decided to have another look at the White barn site. Once again we had no trouble in finding the pair of Kruper's Nuthatch. We watched these for some time, and also noted Green, Gold and Chaffinches, Linnet, Serin, Masked and Red-backed Shrike, Middle Spotted Woodpecker and a distant Short-toed Eagle. For those of our group who missed Serin, we stopped at the first bridge north of the White Barn on the way back to Kalloni, where Serin appeared almost immediately, coming to the water, and a Little Bittern also showed well on the pebbly beach of the river.

### **Salt Pans & Sheep Fields**

We were inevitably drawn back to this area. Much the same birds as we'd seen previously in this area, but still a great experience. We did add Gargany, Mallard and Marsh Sandpiper to our trip list. The Glossy Ibis showed particularly well this evening at the sheep fields, and this encouraged Roy to try for a photo or two. As he crept forward to get his shots, a Great Snipe lifted from the toe of his boot and went into cover a few yards forward. Roy immediately retreated, and called together all the birders in the area. Once gathered, Paul volunteered to make one try to flush the bird again. From Roy's directions, Paul waded through where the bird had been seen to go for cover, but all that flushed were two Wood Sandpipers. Reluctantly, we agreed that once was enough, and we withdrew. Roy remains the only one amongst us who saw the bird.

Back at Anaxos this evening, we heard a Scops Owl calling around the town, but never found it.

### **Day 7 – 12th May 1999**

I was feeling groggy on the morning of the 12th, and stayed in bed whilst the others went off for some further sea-watching. I didn't miss a great deal apparently, although all had now seen grey Wagtail except me.

### **Napi Valley**

In the afternoon we'd decided to try for a Lesser-Spotted Eagle reported from the Napi Valley. We didn't have good directions, but decided to drive the valley looking for likely spots. Sometime after passing north through Napi towards Madamados, we came upon the crest of a hill where a radio mast stood a little way off to the west. Stopping here we saw a number of raptors including Sparrowhawk (not Levant), Long-legged Buzzards, Common Buzzards including a couple that may have been Steppe Buzzards, and Short-toed Eagle. The site is obviously attractive to raptors, and may be worth more looking. This was our last day, and we never had the opportunity to return.

### **Conclusion**

An excellent trip, which exceeded expectations for all four of us. The birding was fairly easy, and made easier by Roger Brooks' book, previous trip reports from other birders, and the unstinting helpfulness of all the other birders we met during the trip.

Driving throughout the island, with the exception of Mytilini, wasn't difficult, and traffic was such that it was possible to stop almost anywhere. We never met any hostility at all from local people. Indeed, they seemed to accept birdwatchers as a standard feature of at least the early tourist season, and although the barkeeper at our adopted "local" baited us with tales of his shooting prowess, he did mitigate this with good service and good measures, as well as some interesting Ouzos on the house.

I'd thoroughly recommend Lesbos in May as a birding destination. My only word of caution is to recognise that the weather may not always be hot.