

Lesvos - May 2004

by Ted Rogers

Our traditional spring time birdwatching trip took five ROC members to the much vaunted birding island of Lesvos. Taking the first available direct flight of the year from Gatwick we landed safely at Mytilini Airport, where we picked up our nine-seater minibus (an ideal vehicle for up to 6 normal sized people or possibly 9 hobbits).

The drive across the island took us to our rented house in Skala Eressos. Most birding visitors to Lesvos choose Skala Kalloni as their location, with its geographically central location and proximity to some of the best known birdwatching sites. Not being inclined to follow the crowd, we chose Skala Eressos as our base (in the North West part of the island) and, as we seemed to be the only birdwatchers staying in the village, we certainly achieved that objective!

Any concerns that we had about Lesvos being overrated as a birdwatching destination or our choice of location ill advised, were soon dispelled on the first morning, when our pre-breakfast walk took us along the sea front to an area where the small local river enters the sea. The reedy river mouth was teeming with birds, warblers included Olivaceous, Reed, Sedge, Great Reed and Cettis and, upstream, waders included Wood Sandpiper, Little Ringed Plover, Little Stint, Curlew Sandpiper, Common Sandpiper and Ruff. Among the reeds we found Little Bittern, Purple Heron, Squacco Heron and a diminutive Little Crake, while, overhead, wheeled Red Rumped Swallows, Martins and Alpine Swifts. With other obvious migrants like Golden Oriole, Grey-Headed Wagtail and Spotted Flycatcher it would be fair to say that the week started with a bang! After a pause for a late breakfast (time had rather flown when we had been having fun!) we headed inland into the surrounding hills, where a rough track added other delights like Cretzchmars Bunting, Crag Martin, Sombre Tit, Masked Shrike, Woodchat, Subalpine Warbler, Raven, Long-Legged Buzzard and Lanner Falcon. We finally retraced our steps (thoroughly satisfied) to Skala Eressos for an excellent meal (and a small sampling of local wine).

On day two we stuck with our policy of finding our own birds in the local area and headed off for a morning walk around a local hill known as Sappho's Mound which gave us our first Lesser Grey Shrike, Beeeaters, Rock Nuthatch and Chukkar. The afternoon was spent in the hills above Eressos mainly in search of the must see Cinereous Bunting, which gave themselves away by their simple song delivered from prominent rocks. As we scanned the surrounding mountain side a purple patch of raptor activity provided Short Toed, Bonelli's and Booted Eagles before we headed back down to the minibus parked at the edge of the village. A movement in the local orchard showed that, at migration time on Lesvos no bushes or trees should go unchecked, as some careful searching turned up a number of Wood Warblers, an Icterine Warbler and several Spotted Flycatchers and then, a truly stunning male Collared Flycatcher.

The rest of the week was spent visiting the more famous (in birdwatching circles at least) areas around the island. The birding didn't disappoint, with views of terns (including White Winged Black), Glossy Ibis, Slender Billed Gull, Rufous Bush Chat and Tawny and Red Throated Pipits around the Kalloni Salt Pans; Kruupers Nuthatch and Firecrest at Achladeri; Isabelline Wheatears, Roller and countless Red Backed Shrikes on the way to Sigra; Black Kite at Ipsolou Monastery and numerous Lesser Kestrels near Sigra, to name but a few.

As always, we didn't see all the species that we would have liked, both Red Footed Falcon and Pratincoles evaded us, not to mention Olive Tree Warbler and Scops Owl (I said not to mention them!). Also, the weather, which had been fine all week, broke on the penultimate day, but we all thoroughly enjoyed our week on this lovely island. Would I say that Lesvos is overrated? I would say definitely not and also don't feel that Kalloni is the only area worth visiting.