

Birding Cyprus – by foot, by bike, by bus and by car

APRIL 2012

Having visited Cyprus once before, back in 1997, a return visit seemed overdue. A week long package deal via 'lowcostholidays' got return flights from Newcastle to Paphos and seven nights bed and breakfast in the reasonable Kings hotel in Paphos. Arriving after dark on 4th April meant no birding today but plenty to look forward to tomorrow.

Thursday 5th April

In the half light of dawn a Swallow sings outside the hotel and a few Hooded Crows and Swifts are seen as the light improves. After breakfast, a short walk, taking in a couple of White Wagtails on 'waste ground', leads to Paphos headland. It's bright and calm and quickly warming up nicely. Much of the headland which houses some important archaeology (a World Heritage Site) is now fenced off (not the case 15 years ago?). Outside the fence is a wide path, popular with walkers and joggers, that borders the rocky shoreline. On the rocks are three Turnstones, a Whimbrel and a Common Sandpiper, and a Kingfisher shoots past. Crested Larks are plentiful and a small party of 'Black-headed' Yellow Wagtails pick around the flower-rich grassy margins.

Also in this area are six Short-toed Larks, a few Northern Wheatears, a Black-eared Wheatear (pale-throated form) and a Tawny Pipit. In the air are a Red-rumped Swallow, a Sand Martin and a couple of House Martins. Several displaying Fan-tailed Warblers (*Zitting Cisticolas*) add to the Mediterranean feel, as do a couple of pristine adult Yellow-legged Gulls (*michahellis*-like).

Another UK birder, Chris Rollie from Dumfries and Galloway, is doing his morning round (he's out here on a family holiday) and he passes on some recent sightings which include a couple of Pallid Harriers in the preceding couple of days.

Once inside the headland proper there are more birds and more birders (all British). Some bemoan the lack of migrants while others are happy to see what there is. Apparently some cover has been removed completely from the previous year which doesn't go down well in some quarters (my memories are too vague to be able to recall this loss of habitat). Wandering round the various footpaths during the morning is very enjoyable. It's refreshing to see good numbers of Corn Buntings (some singing) as they have become practically extinct back home in Northumberland (I so rarely come across one nowadays I'd almost forgotten their call note).

Small numbers of migrants are present such as Blackcap and Lesser Whitethroat, six Short-toed Larks (the same party as previously noted outside the fenced area?), three to four Nightingales (including a couple in song), three Meadow Pipits, two Song Thrushes, and single Hoopoe, Chiffchaff and Masked Shrike. Three Sardinian Warblers may be local breeders. A Kingfisher cuts over the headland and a calling Green Sandpiper flies inland. Four buntings in flight are possibly Ortolans but are seen too briefly to confirm. The 'arena' area holds 17 Northern Wheatears, two Cyprus Pied Wheatears, and two 'beema'-like Yellow Wagtails.

As the day warms up a few butterflies appear; Swallowtail, Clouded Yellow and Painted Lady (including one with extremely tatty hind-wings).

After some lunch and a short siesta it's back out to the headland to see what's different. It's still warm and sunny with a light onshore breeze. A Lesser Whitethroat and a Chiffchaff are in bushes near the hotel. Along the shoreline a single silhouetted roosting wader gets the pulse going initially until it reveals itself as a European Golden Plover (not the hoped for Greater Sand Plover or Caspian Plover!). About ten Northern Wheatears and the Black-eared from this morning are feeding above the shoreline and amongst them is a single Isabelline Wheatear.

Offshore a flock of 25 ducks flies up from the south and briefly rest on the sea before carrying on their way; Garganey (heard 'growling' as they passed by). A group of nine or so Yellow Wagtails includes obvious *feldegg* but also others that resemble *beema* ('Syke's Wagtail') and '*superciliaris*'. A small number of Yellow-legged Gulls move north offshore. A striking male Subalpine Warbler (*albistriata* race) and two Wrynecks end a satisfying opening day on foot.

Friday 6th April

After breakfast a stroll round Paphos head produces three Night Herons, two to three singing Nightingales, a couple each of Hoopoes and Ortolans, two fly-over Turtle Doves, and a Black-eared Wheatear but pick of the bunch is a fine adult male Pallid Harrier which flies directly over the headland and off inland. This may have been one of two birds that Chris Rollie had yesterday (possibly roosting in the area overnight?). A shiny black snake slithers away in a quiet corner.

Paphos sewage pools to the east of the town (near the airport) sound like they could be worth visiting so a bike is hired (8 euros for the day). Keeping close to the coast the mouth of the Ezousas soakaway is soon reached. A few Yellow-legged Gulls and a Slender-billed Gull are loafing. A pleasant couple of hours are spent exploring the area running inland. The few small pools (which are quite full of water) hold Little Grebe, Squacco Heron (2), Little Egret (1), Purple Heron (2, plus 7 fly-overs), Night Heron (2), Ruff (2 swimming phalarope-style), a Teal and one Little Crake, with a couple of Spur-winged Plovers nearby. Singing warblers include Cetti's, Fan-tailed, Reed and Sardinian, and an unseen Black Francolin calls close to.

Kingfisher, Cyprus Pied Wheatear and other 'bits and bobs' are found but some commotion in a scrubby area reveals a shrike being mobbed by several small birds. It's something of a shock to see it's a cracking male 'Turkestan Shrike' (Isabelline Shrike) with an intensely rufous tail.

With nothing for lunch a ride inland finds a small town with a café. Afterwards, a return to the sewage pools visited earlier seems a good idea but I fail to find the shrike this time. A dozen White Wagtails in a ploughed field, 23 Hooded Crows gathered on wires and a Subalpine Warbler are noted. Cycling back to Paphos a flock of 50 Glossy Ibises make their way northwestwards. A brief stroll across Paphos head doesn't reveal anything major (a male Spanish Sparrow is in with some House Sparrows).

Saturday 7th April

Straight after breakfast it's down to Paphos headland to see what's new. It's breezier than it has been and with more cloud (but no rain). Two, perhaps four, Ortolans are found along with a Stone Curlew (which alights in the open 'arena' area before continuing), Woodchat, a couple of Nightingales and 28 Glossy Ibises moving north.

It gets warmer, with cloud, and an encouraging east-south easterly breeze. For a change of scenery I take the bus up to Coral Bay (only 2 euros for a ticket), getting off at the Pegia turn off. On checking the small dry valley nearby one Cyprus Warbler is seen well but is outnumbered by singing Sardinian Warblers. A black snake, like the one yesterday, quickly disappears. Also in this spot are a dozen Woodpigeons, Cyprus Pied Wheatear, Red-rumped Swallow, Nightingale, Cetti's and Reed Warbler, and a Bee-eater flies over calling. Birds aside, several small intensely blue butterflies are eye catching.

A stroll across towards the sea leads to a small stream from where a Little Bittern flies up. This is presumably a recently arrived migrant as the habitat is certainly sub-optimal. Two Kingfishers are also found on the creek and an Isabelline Wheatear hops around nearby.

Late afternoon and back around Paphos headland. A couple of parties of Yellow Wagtails (mainly of the 'black-headed' *feldegg* race) feed along the beach front, as does a Tawny Pipit. Two Black-winged Stilts are roosting on the rocks, and a Common Sandpiper feeds. Well out to sea a party of 35 or so probable Glossy Ibises head north (distantly). A dark-looking raptor, probably a harrier (sp.), is glimpsed all too briefly, it too heading north. Two Ortolans and a Woodchat are found, along with a sprinkling of Lesser Whitethroats and Blackcaps, and an old man collects fresh asparagus. Whilst chatting to Chris Rollie (his last evening) a male Red-footed Falcon caps off the day as it slowly winds its way over the head, catching insects as it goes.

Sunday 8th April

A hire car booked yesterday is waiting outside the hotel by 0800h. En route to Akrotiri a Buzzard and a couple of Chukars are seen. First birding stop is the salt lake. Viewing from the west edge reveals about 120 Greater Flamingos, 40 Slender-billed Gulls, 15 Ruff, nine Black-winged Stilts, 5-6 Shelducks and Shoveler, 2 Wood Sandpipers and single Snipe and Greenshank. The biting mosquitoes are pretty bad so I don't linger too long but three Spectacled Warblers, Wryneck and Whinchat are seen before departing.

Bishop's Pool is fairly quiet; a dozen Little Grebes and a few Coots and Moorhens being the only water-birds, in addition to 10 or 11 roosting Night Herons. Near the car are two noisy Great Spotted Cuckoos.

Down at Lady's Mile Beach, there are more waders including 30 Little Stints, 25 Ruff, 10 Kentish Plovers, 9 Marsh Sandpipers, 3 Green Sandpipers and 2 Black-winged Stilts, with 3-4 Little Egrets and Purple Herons in the general area.

Next stop is the pleasant Phassouri reed-beds (one of the places that really stuck in the memory from the 1997 trip). A wet, grassy area bordering the reed-bed is productive. Waders include Black-winged Stilts, Little Ringed Plover, Snipe, Ruff, Wood Sandpipers and 2 Spur-winged Plovers. A likely-looking Great Snipe flies up and over the reeds but is seen too briefly to be 100%. Little and Cattle Egrets, Squacco Heron, Glossy Ibis (including 30 dropping into distance), Marsh Harrier, Buzzard, Garganey, 3 Ferruginous Ducks and Hoopoe add to the selection. Two Black Francolins call repeatedly and one shows itself in the afternoon sun – looking very fine!

On the way back to Paphos a short detour is made to Asprokremnos Dam. Just near the turn off a 'ringtail' harrier cuts across. The pools below the dam that were so good for crakes on the last visit

have all but gone (it seems water released from the reservoir after heavy winter rains obliterated them). The reservoir holds few birds but for about 15 distant Yellow-legged Gulls. In the surrounding scrub a couple of Cyprus Warblers sing and Chukar show well.

A brief stroll around the perimeter of Paphos head produces Tree Pipit, Lesser Whitethroat and a few Northern Wheatears.

Monday 9th April

A quick breakfast and then away over the hills to the Akamas peninsula. At the Baths of Aphrodite near Polis it is fine and sunny. The coastal scenery here is particularly fetching. Walking along the coastal path and checking the trees for migrants takes up the morning. Blackcaps are commonest (15 -20) but are outdone by 3 to 4 fine-looking Wood Warblers. A Crag Martin appears amongst a mixed group of Swallows, Red-rumped Swallows and House Martins. A single male *ficedula* flycatcher is only seen briefly amongst leaves (perhaps a Collared), and Chukar, Cyprus Pied Wheatear, Nightingale, Sardinian Warbler, Serin and a Chiffchaff bathing in 'Aphrodites Pool' are amongst other birds in the area. Working back towards the car, some trees around some caravans look worthy of a check. A Wood Warbler in the crown of one of the trees shows nicely and then a small *phyllosc* with wing-bars comes briefly in to view. Not expecting to see anything like this I track it down and find it's a Yellow-browed Warbler! (it later transpires that this is only the 11th record for Cyprus).

A short drive takes me to some scrubby hills with scattered trees. Wryneck, a couple of Serins and a frustratingly elusive warbler (possibly Eastern Olivaceous), along with a few Blackcaps and Lesser Whitethroats are found.

Returning to Paphos there's time for a stroll along the headland. A Cormorant flies north, as does a high Glossy Ibis. Amongst smaller birds are 22 Yellow Wagtails, Tree Pipit, a Ruppell's Warbler, Woodchat, and three Ortolans. A Pallid Swift comes over at close range, while eight Common Swifts scream round back at the hotel.

Tuesday 10th April

It's a bit cooler this morning, with full cloud and an onshore breeze. On arrival at Agios Georgios (up the west coast) a thunderstorm lasts for about 45 minutes. There's no-one else about but as the rain eases off another car arrives and out steps Northumberland birder Les Hall! Didn't expect that. He's staying at the nearby Coral Bay resort with his family and has been working this patch regularly in the mornings. The rain seems to have ditched a few migrants, such as 20 Yellow Wagtails, four Wheatears, three or four Short-toed Larks, three Ortolans, and single Common Sandpiper, Quail, Whinchat and Subalpine Warbler.

Offshore, about 20 Yellow-legged Gulls mill around and seven Little Egrets include a patchy grey individual. A flock of 30 Spoonbills head north up the coast, as do 15 Garganey.

Les recommends the arable fields around Mandria, a place I've heard other birders at Paphos mention so I decide to head there next. A quick detour to Mavrokolympus Reservoir produces Chukar, Tawny Pipit, Cyprus Pied Wheatear and Cyprus Warbler but the only bird visible on the water is a lone Little Grebe.

At Mandria, there is a large flock of Yellow Wagtails – about 200 or so – feeding in potato fields. Occasionally an aircraft spooks them and the whole flock wheels round. There are a variety of head patterns amongst them, including a male ‘superciliaris’ type with very dark grey head/ear coverts and obvious and extensive white supercilia. On the shore 20 Short-toed Larks feed, with seven more in a field. There’s a definite movement of *fuscus* type Lesser Black-backed Gulls moving west (four flocks totalling 37 birds) and a flock of 35 Spoonbills fly in off the sea. Also found are Stone Curlew, Sand Martin, Tree Pipit, two White Wagtails (much lesser conspicuous than Yellow Wagtails in general so far) and two Ortolans, plus three (unseen) calling Black Francolins.

Painted Ladies are in evidence, with about 30 noted (fresh in from North Africa presumably). A ‘ring-tail’ harrier suddenly appears and makes a half-hearted attempt to catch a wagtail. A Red-throated Pipit is more obliging and shows well, while a Quail calls briefly.

A stop is made on the return journey at Paphos sewage pools. It’s now warmer and sunnier. A Peregrine perched on a pylon appears to be picking at a Hooded Crow wing. Water birds include Glossy Ibis (2), Squacco Heron (2), Purple Heron (2 plus a flock of 20 flying round without landing), Little Egret (2), Black-winged Stilt and Kingfisher. Singing Sardinian Warblers are fairly frequent, a couple of Nightingales and a Hoopoe are noted, and a Turtle Dove looks like a fresh arrival. Painted Ladies continue to be obvious.

Wednesday 11th April

My final morning is spent around Paphos head on foot (the hire car having been collected last night). There’s a heavy thunderstorm around 6.00 a.m. which looks like it could drop some migrants. After a quick breakfast I walk out of the hotel and find a singing Nightingale in a tiny patch of scrub nearby. Another is flushed off the rocky shoreline, while a third is hopping around the car park near the entrance to the World Heritage Site. The rain seems to have had some effect. Over the morning ten or 11 Nightingales are found in total, some showing well and showing greyer upperparts of the *hafizi* race (or *golzi* if using the modern name). Also near the hotel a Stone Curlew flies over some ‘waste ground’ and almost lands but instead continues northwards – migration in action! Another comes up from the rocks on the shore, and it or another is later seen within the fenced area of the headland.

An enjoyable time is had slowly picking through the bits of cover. There’s not been a massive ‘fall’ but there’s certainly enough to keep the interest up: 30 Yellow Wagtails, seven or eight Wheatears, three Tawny Pipits, three Common Whitethroats, three Ortolans, and one to two Cuckoo, Black-eared Wheatear (black-throated form), Tree Pipit, Lesser Whitethroat, Blackcap, Ruppell’s Warbler, and at last, an Eastern Bonelli’s Warbler (my first of the trip). Great White Egret and Marsh Harrier fly north over the head, six Slender-billed Gulls go south, and a Whimbrel and two Common Sandpipers are on the shore.

After a light lunch it’s back out for a last look round. A male Ruppell’s Warbler flits about in the same bit of scrub near the hotel that held a Nightingale earlier today – fresh in during the night/this morning no doubt. Out on the headland are five Tawny Pipits, a Stone Curlew, 30 Yellow Wagtails in one small field plus 55 that flew in from the area above the shore line, and a few Tree Pipits and Lesser Whitethroats. Two Night Herons sit in a tree in a quiet quarter and a fly-over Purple Heron is

followed by two more. Best find though is a superb male Collared Flycatcher feeding in some taller trees.

Near the main entrance gate two Wrynecks feed together on the ground under some trees and in the same patch a rather elusive male *ficedula* flycatcher flits about actively. After a time it reveals itself as a male Semi-collared Flycatcher.

Unfortunately time has just about run out as I need to get back to the hotel, pick up my gear and get on the shuttle bus back to the airport for the flight home. It's a shame it's the last day as it feels like there could be more to be found but alas...until next time.

Summary

A pleasantly enjoyable and fairly leisurely week, with a decent range of migrants coming through. No 'new' birds (I wasn't expecting any) but great fun getting out and seeing what turned up each day. Nice to see good numbers of Yellow Wagtails (of various races), and actively migrating groups of e.g. Garganey, Glossy Ibis, Purple Herons etc. Paphos headland is a good place to adopt as a temporary 'patch' during spring movement.

Graeme Bowman