

# Cyprus 2015

## Introduction

Having had three previous, very enjoyable birding trips to Cyprus, mostly recently in April 2013, another spring trip beckoned. This time, however, I decided to do a 'split site' week, spending three nights in Paphos (in the south west), a night in Larnaca and the final three nights at Protaras (in the south east).

All flights, accommodation and car hire were booked independently via the internet. A hire car (Chevrolet Spark) was pre-booked through 'Economy Car Rentals' for a very reasonable £60 for a whole week (picking up and dropping off at Paphos airport). This company has a 'fair fuel policy' and are good to deal with (they didn't quibble about a missing hub cap on return).

## Wednesday 8<sup>th</sup> April

After a four and a half hour flight from Newcastle to Paphos (a delay of an hour was due to an Air Traffic Controllers dispute in France), I catch a shuttle bus to the hire car depot (ten minutes from the airport). A Cetti's Warbler sings nearby as I wait to be served. No time to do any birding so I drive to the King's Hotel in Paphos (a basic but reasonable place with a decent breakfast).

## Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> April

From the hotel balcony several Yellow-legged Gulls are seen, two 'Baltic Gulls' (*fuscus* race Lesser Black-backed Gull) move north, as does a single Glossy Ibis. After breakfast at 7 a.m. a short walk leads to Paphos headland. It's quite breezy from the W/NW and there's a brief light shower before the sun comes out. A Whimbrel sits out on the rocks and a Hoopoe flies in off the sea. A ticket at the 'official entrance' costs 4.50 euros (but could be used again on subsequent days). A pleasant morning is had inside the World Heritage Site, picking through the various bits of cover. There aren't massive amounts of migrants but enough to tick over. A couple of Purple Herons that come out of trees near the entrance are presumably fresh in. A recently cut area of grass is favoured by about 15 Yellow Wagtails (a mix of 'Blue-headed' *flava* and 'Black-headed' *feldegg* races), half a dozen Red-throated Pipits, a Tawny Pipit and a Whinchat. A pair of Cretzschmar's Buntings is a welcome sight (and turn out to be the only ones of the trip). Also within the area are three Tree Pipits, a couple each of Hoopoe, Red-rumped Swallow and Nightingale, and one to two Woodchats. Sardinian Warblers are fairly numerous (breeding), and there are a few displaying Fan-tailed Warblers and Crested Larks. Several parties of 'Baltic Gulls' head north, as do a couple of groups of Glossy Ibis (17 and 15). Fellow Northumbrians, Andy, Maria and Harry Atkinson are also here on holiday and are checking out Paphos head as well this morning (yesterday they found a European Tarantula here!)



Crested Lark

A quick lunch in a restaurant back near the hotel coincides with a sudden drop in temperature and then a brief but heavy downpour. One of the birds I hoped to see on this visit was Bonelli's Eagle and the Anarita-Nata area is a known site. Passing north through the town of Anarita leads to a scenic valley. A car is pulled up and an English couple are birding; no eagles today but Rollers are back. A small almond orchard at the head of the valley holds a neat selection of migrants, best of which are three Collared Flycatchers (adult and first-summer males, and a female), Eastern Bonelli's Warbler and a bright Wood Warbler, plus single Nightingale, Redstart, Lesser Whitethroat, Blackcap, Willow Warbler and Spotted Flycatcher. In the surrounding area are two Great Spotted Cuckoos, about ten Spanish Sparrows, three Whinchats, a Tree Pipit and a few Corn Buntings.

Another 'target species' is Lesser Kestrel. 'Anarita Park' features regularly for this species (in spring). This is a new site for me but the directions are good (Gosney guide and local info). It's still breezy which is good and there are 13 kestrels (sp.) hanging over one hill/ridge. These include at least one adult male and one female Lesser Kestrel. It's quite possible they are all Lessers but most are a little distant to be certain. A Roller, a Black-eared Wheatear and several Corn Buntings are also present. It's good to see the latter as it's effectively extinct back home in Northumberland. Another nearby hillside holds seven kestrels (sp.), at least three of which are adult male Lessers.

The final destination of the day is Mavrokolympos Dam. As expected, the reservoir itself holds nothing but the main purpose for visiting here is to try for (Cyprus) Scops Owl. In the fading daylight a couple of Cyprus Pied Wheatears and a Chukar are seen, and Nightingale and Cetti's Warbler sing, while a Black Francolin calls in the distance. Unfortunately a blustery wind and a shower put pay to the owls on this occasion.

### **Friday 10<sup>th</sup> April**

There are showers during the night and a blustery thunderstorm around 5 a.m. so hopes of a 'fall' are high. The morning is again spent around Paphos headland. Common Sandpiper and Turnstone are noted on the coastal rocks, a couple of 'Black-headed' Yellow Wagtails feed in the grass, with an Isabelline Wheatear further out, and a Nightingale hops out on some wooden steps leading to the shore. I pause to talk to another birder who turns out to be Swedish and is taking time out from a veteran's basketball tour!

Inside the fenced off area it soon becomes clear that there hasn't been a 'fall', with a similar range of birds as yesterday except for a couple of Whitethroats, a typically elusive, singing Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, and four Corn Buntings. A group of 22 Glossy Ibis fly north, as does a single Night Heron which is later followed by a group of 11. The Yellow Wagtail flock contains a 'superciliaris' type.

In the afternoon I take a drive down to the Ezousas Soakaway/Acheleia Reeds area east of Paphos. A couple of Squacco Herons in flight are followed by nine resting in a recently cut field, where a Spur-winged Plover and about 30 Yellow Wagtails feed. At the end of the reeds (nearest the sea) a Great Snipe is a surprise as it flies up at close range, flashing bright white tail corners.

Moving back inland another visit is made to the almond orchard near Anarita. A couple of Collared Flycatchers are still present. Some time is spent trying to pin down a female flycatcher which shows some Semi-collared features but the end result is inconclusive. Roller, Great Spotted Cuckoo, Eastern Bonelli's Warbler, five Tree Pipits and five or six Red-rumped Swallows are also seen in the valley. Heading back towards Anarita, a large raptor emerges near the road; an adult Bonelli's Eagle. A good photo-opportunity is lost as I'm very close to a military-looking compound where parking is not recommended (one of the birders I talked to yesterday had been quizzed earlier in the year by security and the images on his camera inspected). Pulling in a bit further on allows the eagle to be tracked flying south and getting higher on the warm air. A nice sight. A Peregrine also takes advantage of the fine conditions and soars high.

Asprokremnos Reservoir is not too far away and so gets a visit. About 150 Yellow-legged Gulls are bathing and a Little Egret stalks the shore. I bump into another couple of English birders and five minutes into chatting I get asked, 'you do know about the Caspian Plover don't you?' I don't but am very interested! A short while later we're at 'lark corner' at coastal Mandria. A bare earth field initially yields only Chukar, Northern Wheatear and Crested Lark but after about ten minutes a really smart looking male Caspian Plover comes into view. This was my 'long-shot', hoped for 'target bird' of the trip (a 'first' for me). A small group of birders (all British) admire it as it feeds.

News breaks of a party of five Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters down at the nearby 'Ezousas Soakaway' so a short drive has us watching them feeding from wires/trees and generally giving good views in the evening light. A Peregrine sits on a pylon nearby.



Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters at Ezousas Waterway

The weather is much better than last night so another try at Mavrokolympos Dam is made. Andy and family, who are staying nearby in the valley, stop for a chat. At about 8.10pm a (Cyprus) Scops Owl starts calling from a cliff. It's close but it's got too dark to actually see it alas. Good birding today.

### **Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> April**

Leaving Paphos today I head for the Akrotiri peninsula but stop off briefly at Paphos sewage works, where three Collared Pratincoles are on view, alongside seven Spur-winged Plovers and two Stone Curlews. Some of the surrounding crop fields are popular with Yellow Wagtails and a couple of them hold about 50 each (but are only visible when they fly round), plus at least one Red-throated Pipit, and a Black Francolin calls from cover. There are more British birders here and while talking to one I 'scope a Scopoli's Shearwater flying W out at sea, followed by a party of three. The sea off southern Cyprus tends to be largely devoid of birds I've found and these are the first Scopoli's I've seen in the south east of the island.

At Akrotiri Salt Lake 67 Greater Flamingos feed but there is little else except for two Greenshanks, and Hoopoe and Tawny Pipit amongst Crested Larks in the surrounding briny vegetation. A 'new' wader pool at Phassouri reedbed (a small cut area) is a real magnet for waders, holding Little Stint (10), Ruff (5), Wood Sandpiper (4-5), Black-winged Stilt (2), Marsh Sandpiper (2), several Kentish and Little Ringed Plovers, and single Spur-winged Plover, Black-tailed Godwit, Spotted Redshank, Redshank, Dunlin and Snipe. A few Yellow and White Wagtails, a couple of Sand Martins and a Woodchat are also present, and Black Francolin calls. A singing Chaffinch is the only one of the trip (more would have been likely had I ventured to the Troodos Mountains).

Akrotiri gravel pits are a place I've only visited once before (to see a Cream-coloured Courser many years ago) but look like they may hold some migrants. An hour or so produces eight Tawny Pipits, four Short-toed Larks, three Cyprus Pied Wheatears, and single Wryneck, and Northern and Isabelline Wheatears, plus a surprise Short-eared Owl (a migrant fresh in from north Africa?). There's also a steady northward passage of Swallows and Swifts, and one Red-rumped Swallow. A calling Black Francolin sits out in the open on a rock in the nearby military 'aerial farm' but it's not possible to stop in this sensitive area (a shame because most are usually hidden).

Another brief look at Phassouri gives three Cattle Egrets, a couple of Common Snipe and a calling Quail. Along at Bishop's Pool eight Glossy Ibis fly over, and a Ruff and a Black-tailed Godwit circle round but there's nowhere suitable to

land so they head off. On the pool itself are four Ferruginous Ducks, a few Coots, Moorhens and Little Grebes and a Common Sandpiper. About ten Red-rumped Swallows feed amongst the other hirundines.

The pools down at Lady's Mile hold a selection of waders including Ruff (c15), Little Stint (c15), Black-winged Stilt (14), Marsh Sandpiper (3), Greenshank (2) and a Curlew Sandpiper, plus a few Kentish and Little Ringed Plovers. Eight adult Slender-billed Gulls (some showing a faint rosy tint on the under-parts) are a nice sight, but four immature Yellow-legged Gulls aren't so smart.

The final stop of the day is Zakaki Pool, with its' smart new hide. The small pool and reed-bed has Little Egret, Squacco Heron, Glossy Ibis, Sedge, Reed and Great Reed Warblers, but a small crane out in the open grabs the attention and proves to be the scarcer Baillon's.

'Digs' tonight are the 'Flamingo Hotel' in Larnaca. Two Common Terns feed close inshore.

### **Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> April**

Larnaca Salt Lake is largely devoid of birds except for half a dozen Black-winged Stilts. Several Black Francolins call from agricultural fields around Menou. Stopping at the first pool, a surprise find is a Daurian (Isabelline) Shrike. It perches out on top of a shrub bordering a garden, showing a contrastingly orangey tail and a sandy-coloured mantle, but then flies out of sight.

Menou Pools still have about 100 Greater Flamingos, three Slender-billed Gulls, a few Ruff, and single Little Egret, Shelduck, Green Sandpiper, Little Gull and Whiskered Tern. A couple of Spectacled Warblers frequent the salty vegetation. The north easterly breeze is strengthening at Larnaca Sewage Works, where the selection includes a breeding-plumage Black-necked Grebe, 38 Black-winged Stilts, five Collared Pratincoles, three Spur-winged Plovers and a couple of Ferruginous Ducks. At the nearby Spiro's Pool 40 Greenshanks and eight Marsh Sandpipers feed in one corner.

The 'desal fields' next to Larnaca airport hold about 70 Short-toed Larks, about 15 Red-throated Pipits, Chukar, White Wagtail and Crested Lark. A patch of scrub has migrant Woodchat and Pied Flycatcher, along with a singing Cetti's Warbler.

Back-tracking to Menou Pools a van-load of birders 'scoping the area turn out to be a 'Speyside Wildlife' tour group (from the UK). They are watching three Red-necked Phalaropes feeding out on the water (did I miss these earlier?). We exchange notes and there is a lot of interest in the Daurian Shrike so we all decamp to the end where it was. Grilling the area doesn't produce the bird alas.

Heading east I call in to Kiti Dam; a site I've not visited since my first Cyprus trip in 1997. Initially the site looks a bit



disappointing but a thorough circuit of the rubbish-strewn, shrubby, shallow water is worthwhile as a string of water-birds appear. These include about 55 Glossy Ibises, seven Night Herons (plus a dead immature bird; no signs of visible injury), ten Spur-winged Plovers, 30 Ruff, half a dozen Wood Sands, and a few each of Little Ringed Plovers, Marsh and Common Sandpipers, Snipe, Cattle Egret and Shoveler, plus single Green Sand and

Glossy Ibises at Kiti Dam

Teal. Around the periphery four Hoopoes and three to four Wrynecks are found, plus a smart male Ruppell's Warbler (the only one of the trip). Painted Ladies are fairly numerous and Black Francolins call from the surrounding arable fields. Perhaps surprisingly, given the seemingly good habitat, there are only two or three ('Black-headed') Yellow Wagtails.

Moving on again, the smart little reserve at Oroklini Marsh is next up. A small selection of wildfowl includes two drake Red-crested Pochards, ten Shoveler and four Garganey, whilst waders include up to eight Spur-winged Plovers (some on the roadside) and 23 Little Stints. A group of 23 Cattle and four Little Egrets appear, a pair of Coot has fresh young, a couple of Spanish Sparrows are in with House Sparrows, a passage Wood Warbler feeds close to one of the hides and a Great Reed Warbler sings. The 'Speyside Wildlife' group turn up and four Gull-billed Terns suddenly appear and fly straight through without stopping.

By late afternoon I'm approaching Protaras and decide to detour to Sotira Pools (Paralimni Lake) to see what the water level is like. There are a few scattered, shallow pools but not a huge amount. A fairly brief check produces Squacco Heron, Little Egret, five Spur-winged Plovers, eight Wood Sandpipers and a couple of singing Great Reed Warblers. A barely fledged young Cetti's Warbler clambers around a bush. A more thorough working of the area will have to wait until tomorrow.

Check-in at the Evelena Hotel in Protaras. A mild, pleasant evening with lightning strikes well out to sea after dark, but no rain. A couple of small bats 'hawk' over the swimming pool.

Looking forward to seeing what migrants are around this end of the island....

### **Monday 13<sup>th</sup> April**

A pre-breakfast stroll around some small fields and a lemon orchard behind the hotel reveals a few migrants; Whitethroat and Lesser Whitethroat, Song Thrush (the only one of the week), a couple of singing Nightingales and a striking male Collared Flycatcher. A Black Francolin calls in the distance, while three Alpine Swifts off to the north are also the only ones seen during the trip. Along the shore single White Wagtail, Tree Pipit and Wryneck indicate on-going movement.

After breakfast I head down to Cape Greco. Driving down the peninsula a Hobby flies north directly over the car and is followed by another falcon. A rapid stop to check it out reveals a dark morph Eleonora's Falcon (a 'lifer'). It too flies north at close range and is followed by another Hobby, which like the other looks to be actively migrating. At the base of the cape are three birders, two of which I recognise from a couple of years ago; Irish birders Joe Donaldson and his friend John ('Luigi'). They've been out here for several weeks, coming down to Cape Greco most days. While we chat a further three, single, Hobbies come in off the sea and head north, as does a Marsh Harrier and a Kestrel (Common). Later in the morning I have another two Hobbies 'in off', making seven in total (all before 1000h). Small numbers of Yellow Wagtails (not always possible to race as they go overhead) and Red-throated Pipits fly in off the sea in an increasingly fresh north-easterly to north/north-westerly breeze. Searching round the rather sparse cover, other migrants appear, such as Short-toed Lark (13), Tawny Pipit (6-7), Turtle Dove (2), White Wagtails, single Nightingale, Northern Wheatear and Ortolan Bunting, and a Short-eared Owl wings its way north in view of the military lookout tower perched on the higher ground. A tired-looking Night Heron flops down on the small road, is disturbed by a passing car and takes flight before quickly dropping back down into cover. The cape is a good area for breeding Spectacled Warblers, Crested Larks and Chukars, and a pair of Cyprus Warblers are good to see again. A couple of Cyprus Pied Wheatears add to the selection.

Further up the cape is an area of planted pines which hold Pied (2) and Collared (1) Flycatchers, Redstart, Blackcap (3), Lesser Whitethroat (4), Tree Pipit (1) and Turtle Dove (2), with six Jackdaws overhead (quite a localised species).

Mid-afternoon and the Paralimni Lake/Sotira Pools get another, more thorough, visit. The few shallow pools hold Wood Sandpiper (23), Black-winged Stilt (17), Little Ringed Plover (11), Little Stint (10), Spur-winged Plover (7), Ruff (3), Snipe (2), Greenshank (1) and Green Sandpiper (1). Less expected is a Temminck's Stint which towers up giving a loud trilling call. At least 17 Red-throated Pipits feed around the dried mud but curiously there are no Yellow Wagtails. Also found are Little Egrets (11), Woodchat (2), and a Marsh Harrier. Single migrant Wood and Eastern Bonelli's Warblers feed in scrub, a Nightingale sings, and Fan-tailed and Cetti's Warblers are present, plus plentiful Crested Larks. A Merlin dashing low and scattering waders is a surprise (the first I've ever seen on Cyprus).

Another look back at Cape Greco (rubbish tip area) is fairly uneventful, with one or two Tree Pipits, Short-toed Larks and a Woodchat, with a few Clouded Yellows and Painted Ladies on the move.

## Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup> April

As breakfast isn't served until 8 o'clock I make an early visit to Cape Greco (0625h). It's fairly quiet today. A handful of Yellow and White Wagtails and Red-throated Pipits fly north. What is more noticeable today are Ortolan Buntings, of which parties of 4, about 10 and 2 are noted and include one singing. A flock of 13 Little Egrets sit right out on the tip,



where a couple of sub-adult Audouin's Gulls loiter. A male Marsh Harrier flies north over the sea as does a flock of 11 Purple Herons, and a Peregrine comes across clutching prey. A 'ring-tail' harrier appears briefly but isn't seen well enough to identify to species. Two men with dogs are combing the hillside and seem to be after the local Chukars (this would be illegal as it's outside the breeding season).

Back at the Evelena hotel in Protaras a flock of 17 Purple Herons fly north out to sea (seen from the restaurant veranda). Post-breakfast I decide to have a look round the cover near the 'Grecian Park' hotel (near the base of the cape) which 'has potential' for attracting migrants. A male Collared Flycatcher is a good sign but not a huge range of other birds are present. A Quail flushes at close range and a Hobby pushes northwards. A Sardinian Warbler is the first I can remember seeing at this end of the island (evidence of their continued spread across the island?), Cyprus Warbler being more likely (a female of which is seen).

Moving on to the pines area near the cape, 3-4 Nightingales and Collared Flycatchers, Wryneck, and a singing Eastern Olivaceous Warbler amongst a few other common migrants are found. About 15 Ortolans feed in a grassy area under the trees (and may be the same birds seen earlier today further down the peninsula) and again include one singing.



Hooded Wheatear at Cape Greco

A ploughed field nearby has Northern and Isabelline Wheatears, Whinchat and Woodchat. Back down towards the end of the cape I have a paddle in the sea. Whilst doing so a harrier appears over a ridge. Grabbing the 'bins' a decent view this time reveals a female Pallid Harrier. A Kingfisher flits along the rocky shore and the Little Egret flock has risen to 25. The day is heating up nicely. A female Hooded Wheatear has been reported here over the last few days but has eluded all my attempts to find it. Today though it decides to 'play ball' and shows well. Its' behaviour is peculiar for a Wheatear in that it feeds by catching insects high in the air in the

manner of a Bee-eater! It is seen to catch a Silver-Y moth and a Painted Lady. Given this feeding technique it seems the bird might not become active until the day warms and flying insects become active (perhaps explaining its apparent absence on previous visits when it was earlier and cooler).

A fine and sunny early evening is spent at Sotira Pools. Waders are similar to yesterday with the addition of four Spotted Redshanks and a Marsh Sandpiper. Little Stints are up to 23 and Green Sands up to three. Also different are 2 Glossy Ibis, a Cattle Egret, eight Garganeys, two Great Spotted Cuckoos together, and two Tawny Pipits. A Spotted Crake feeds at a small reed-fringed pool, and a Wood Warbler is in scrub. A couple of ('Black-headed') Yellow Wagtails are in but just a single Red-throated Pipit tonight. Two Great Reed Warblers sing out on view in the bright light.

The day ends with a calling Common Sandpiper heard calling from the hotel balcony after dark.

### **Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> April**

The final day and down on the cape before breakfast. A scan for shearwaters is fruitless but a Quail is seen to fly in low off the sea and land on the first available rock. The local Peregrine comes over carrying what may also be a Quail. Migrants include Turtle Dove, Hoopoe and Tawny Pipit, and an Eastern Olivaceous Warbler sings from cover. Two or three Cyprus Pied Wheatears include one giving the full 'boiling kettle' song. Two to three Audouin's Gulls float around offshore. A brief look in the pines area gives nothing new but a Willow Warbler is one of only a handful this trip. On driving back towards Protaras a Roller flies north. A solitary Hooded Crow at Protaras is the only one of its kind I've had in this corner of Cyprus.

After breakfast back at the hotel I head west to Achna Dam. This site, close to the border with the Turkish occupied north of the country, was great a couple of years ago for Little Crakes. The water level is much higher this year so no crakes. Whilst fruitlessly scanning for water birds across the reservoir a swift with a stark white rump dips down low over the surface; a Little Swift and something of a shock as it's quite a scarce bird on Cyprus (although a pair was reportedly found breeding for the first time in 2013).

A Little Bittern flies into some tall reeds, seven Purple Herons do a circuit, and single Grey and Squacco Herons are noted, as are Marsh Harrier, Spur-winged Plover, Red-rumped Swallow, and Cetti's, Great Reed and Eastern Olivaceous Warblers.

Driving westwards a couple of large raptors soar over a distant hillside to the north east of Limassol but it's not possible to stop. A brief look at Mandria produces a 'ring-tail' harrier, possibly Pallid, rising up on a thermal, while Stone Curlew and Spur-winged Plover both look to be on nests near Paphos sewage works.

The hire car is dropped off before getting to a very busy Paphos airport (more industrial action apparently) and a delayed flight back to Newcastle.

### **Summary**

A really enjoyable weeks' birding. Some 'common' migrants were a bit lacking (looking back at my notes I didn't see a single Blackcap or Lesser Whitethroat at Paphos) but a decent range of species was had over the duration and a good sprinkling of rare and scarce birds (Caspian Plover, Great Snipe, Little Swift, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, Hooded Wheatear, Daurian Shrike).

Splitting the trip between the south west and the south east (with a night 'in the middle') was very useful, getting to sample many of the key sites right along the south of the country.

In terms of accommodation the Evelena Hotel in Protaras can be recommended. It's quiet (in April at least), pleasantly situated, has some nice land immediately at the rear (which can hold migrants) and is good value. King's Hotel in Paphos is also good value but fairly basic (and can be noisy at night due to a nearby karaoke bar), and is within easy walking

distance of Paphos head. The Flamingo Hotel in Larnaca is adequate for one night, and is handy for roads leading to various birding sites.

April is a nice time to visit Cyprus; lots of birds on the move, pleasant climate (not too hot) and isn't over-run with visitors.



Woodchat

