

Kerkini

25th April to 1st May 2013

A six-night Gourmet Birds holiday in north-east Greece, with Jan Tomlinson, Roy and Janet Chapman, Stella Gamble, Richard and Poppy Carden and John Davies. It proved to be an astonishingly hot week, with sunny, cloudless days and the temperature topping 30degC by the end of the month. Such conditions meant that most migrants must have flown over and not paused, as there was a notable shortage of passerine summer visitors, and we struggled to find warblers. Birds started to appear at the end of the month, with our first black-headed bunting seen on the 29th. Our species total was 137; surprises included a single crane, while we also saw five species of eagles and four species of shrikes.



EasyJet's Gatwick flight to Thessalonica now takes off an hour later than it used to, at 0655, so we didn't land until 1210. Our plane appeared to be brand new, with slim seats that gave more knee room but less padding for one's bum. As the plane taxied across the airfield Jan spotted an oystercatcher, and I glimpsed a pair of little ringed plovers. Our hire car was booked with Alamo, which doesn't have a desk at the airport, but I soon found our man and we were taken to the depot. The vehicle is a reasonably new Opel Vitaro, with a diesel engine, the first time I've hired a diesel in Greece. We landed to find Greece bathed in warm sunshine, and we had a hot drive up to Kerkini, with the air conditioning running. We stopped to eat our sandwiches at the dam, where there were surprisingly few birds to see other than great crested grebes and a couple of herons, one of which was eating a snake. Numerous house martins buzzed overhead, and we soon heard our first nightingale.

We stopped a couple of times as we drove along the side of the lake, seeing first a mass of fishing cormorants, joined by a few Dalmatian pelicans. Our next stop, at Wild Cat Corner, produced a fine drake garganey. Here there were also lots of little egrets, a single great white, several spoonbills and numerous white storks. Raptors included buzzards, a black stork and a lesser spotted eagle, sitting in the grass. I suspect it was hunting frogs. The sun was very hot, the temperature around 28degC.

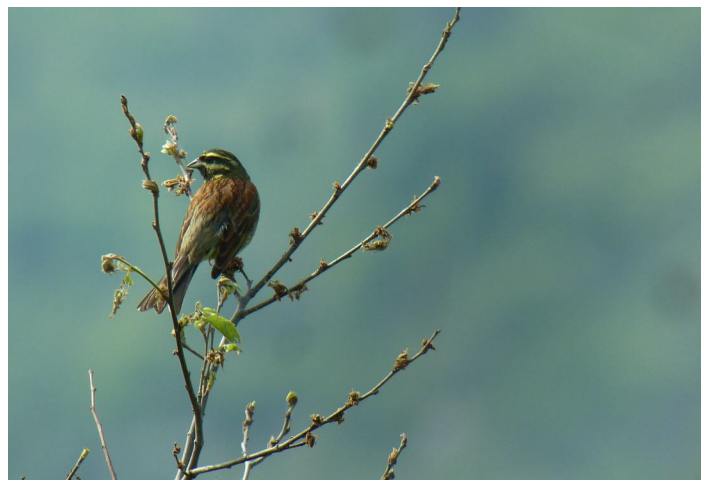
We reached Viglatorias at 0430, and soon checked into our rooms. Outside bee-eaters called, and numerous house martins buzzed overhead. Richard and John joined me for an excursion: it was a gentle introduction to Kerkini, with cirl buntings and woodchat shrike, marsh harrier and buzzards.

We ate dinner al fresco, a rare treat so early in the year. It was up to the standard we have come to expect from Stelios. As we ate a not-very-distant scops owl called.

Friday 26th April



An enjoyable day with stunning weather, but in many ways a little disappointing. We left Viglatorias at 6.30 for Mandraki, where the water was very high, as expected. However, birds were relatively few in both number and variety. There were lots of great crested grebes, and great warblers croaked away from the reeds, but there were no ducks, no waders. There were several grey herons and up to 20 squaccos, but no little bitterns. We didn't hear any golden orioles, nor Cetti's warbler, though we did scope a cuckoo. Whiskered terns gave excellent views, as did the colony of common terns, but the highlight was a young white-tailed eagle that flew over, looking as impressive as ever.



After breakfast we paused for 10 minutes at the trough, where we enjoyed good views of a cock red-backed shrike, plus a couple of cirl buntings. A Levant sparrowhawk flew along the ridge, giving a decent but distant look. We called in at Mandraki again but two coach loads of school children put us off, so we didn't stop. Instead we

drove on to Vironia, did a quick shop, then drove on down to the north bank of the Strimonas. The first bird we saw was a lesser grey shrike, but it proved to be the only one. We walked along the river, seeing several little ringed plover and common sandpipers, plus a single little stint. A party of white pelicans were seen, flying high towards Bulgaria. Walking back along the edge of the marsh was disappointing; the only notable birds being a cock red-backed shrike and a great spotted woodpecker. However, the walk was saved by a couple of flocks of red-footed falcons, the first very distant, the second overhead. We watched them as they hawked for insects, catching them with their feet then transferring them to their beaks. We also saw a distant lesser spotted eagle displaying.



We continued on to Megalahori, where we did the mulberry tree walk along the north bank. Apart from Dalmatian pelicans, spoonbills, great crested grebes and little egrets there

was remarkably little to see, but a black stork saved the day. We had lunch back at the picnic site, where Jan and Poppy chatted to the two French photographers we had seen earlier at Mandraki. It was delightfully hot – a real treat.

After lunch we drove, then walked, along the south embankment. Here we did pick up some pleasing birds, with four gull-billed terns and six Mediterranean gulls the best. I had never seen gull-billed terns here before. We also found a single ruff, a spotted redshank, two greenshanks and several black-necked grebes. Nightingales sang continuously, but there was a notable shortage of other passerines. I heard several penduline tits calling, and on the walk back I found a fresh nest, complete with male tit in attendance. He gave



fine views as he worked on the nest, and was a lifer for Richard.

After this excitement we headed for the supermarket, where we stocked up on essentials such as cheese and fruit juice. On the way home I did a quick diversion down the side of the river, where we saw nothing

but goats, but as we drove back Jan spotted a large raptor that proved to be a young and very showy golden eagle. There was, in fact a pair of young eagles, one of which was carrying a tortoise which it dropped a couple of times,

stooping down with the tortoise as it headed for the ground. We watched the eagles for some time: they made a fitting finale to the day.

Saturday 27th April

For our 6.30 start we drove up the hill to the church, where we soon found a pair of nesting long-tailed tits. New birds came slowly, but we added a singing (and seen) blackcap, followed by a lesser whitethroat. An unseen Bonelli's



warbler sang strongly from close by, and curl buntings flew round. A blue tit was seen, and we eventually had a good view of a grey-headed woodpecker that we had earlier heard calling. A surprise was a female Montagu's harrier, migrating high above us, and looking remarkably skinny, with long tail and long wings. We dropped down to the sycamore wood, and here we saw a singing robin. A raven was seen high overhead. Back at Vigladoras, a whinchat was sunning itself on the top of a conifer tree.

After breakfast, just as we were ready to board the minibus at 9.30, we were rewarded with excellent views of a Levant sparrowhawk soaring overhead. Its deep, elastic wing beats are highly distinctive, and make the bird easy to identify. We dropped down the hill to the trough, where we saw a red-backed shrike and scoped distant sitting golden orioles. Carrying on down the road, we stopped for a ring-tailed harrier hunting the barley field. It proved to be a hen harrier, and, amazingly, we saw another one as we watched it.

We failed to find a Syrian woodpecker in the village, and had to make do with admiring the Spanish sparrows nesting in the storks' nests. A hobby came dashing over, very low, but I was the only one to see it. At the lake John glimpsed a purple heron, but no one else saw it, but we enjoyed listening to cuckoos, nightingales and turtle doves. We continued down to the port to book our afternoon boat ride, then continued to Wild Cat Corner. Here we had a pleasant walk in the sun, adding a few new birds to the list. A probable redshank was never seen again, but lesser grey shrikes were seen well, and I

managed to scope a female ortolan bunting. I had been looking for a tree pipit, but no one else saw it. Poppy flushed a snipe, which we saw when we flushed it again as we walked back. The only waders identified were four little stints. We did have a good look at a great white egret, and saw both black kites and a distant golden eagle soaring over the mountain ridge to the west. Lunch was eaten at the same picnic site back north along the road, and here we watched a woodchat shrike and listened to a whitethroat.

Our boat trip proved to be a popular excursion, cruising out on the flat-calm water across to the heronry and nesting cormorants. We saw an adult little gull as we motored across, and a flock of at least a dozen white-winged terns with one black among them. The boat didn't really disturb the cormorants, which must be well used to it. Many if not most of the cormorants' nests had well grown fledglings. Here we also saw numerous night and squacco herons,



plus a few spoonbills. On the way back we had a good look at the nesting Dalmatian pelicans, and added a single Sandwich tern to the list. The ride cost 60 euros, which was good value.

Our final walk of the afternoon in the quarry added short-toed eagle to the list, along with a displaying cock black-eared wheatear. It was very hot walking in the quarry, as the heat bounces back at you. We flushed a black

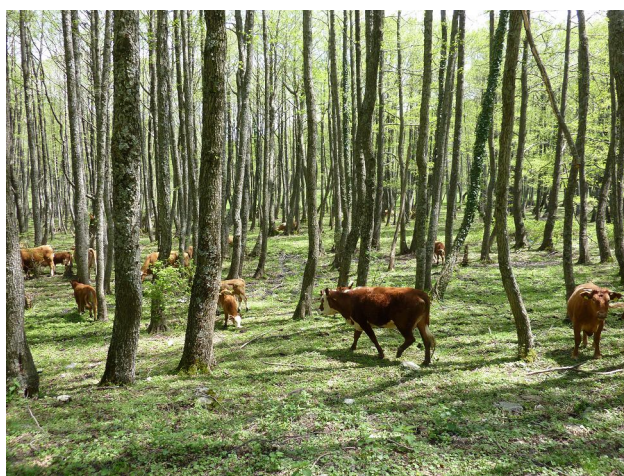
stork twice: it was feeding in shallow, muddy pool where it was, no doubt, finding frogs. I had a glimpse of what might have been a masked shrike, but failed to see it again.

Our day total was close to 90 species, so we had scored well.

Sunday 28th April

Mandraki before breakfast failed to produce any surprises, nor add any birds to the list, though we almost certainly glimpsed a Syrian woodpecker flying away from us. We chatted to one of the Frenchmen who have travelled down here in a Transit, and he remarked how late many of the birds are to return this year, which explains the lack of passerines. We still enjoyed our walk – how can you not enjoy calling cuckoos, purring turtle doves and singing nightingales?

After breakfast we drove up the mountain. The track has deteriorated badly since the first time I drove up it, in a car, five years ago, and once everyone had to get out so that I could get through a particularly tricky patch. We did well finding subalpine warblers, with everyone getting good

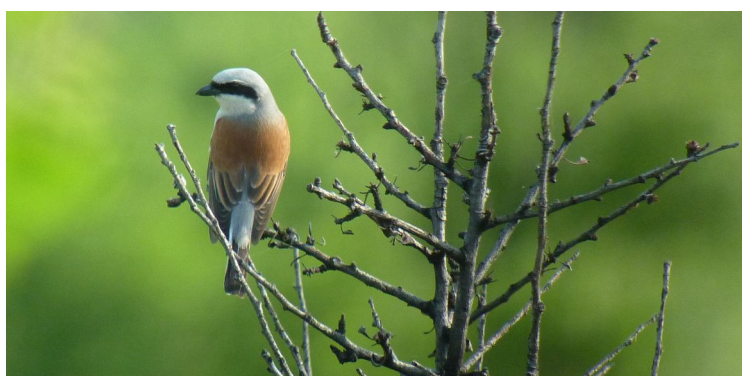


views. Intriguingly, my iPod also called in a whitethroat that showed really well. We also saw several circl buntings, plus red-backed and woodchat shrikes.



It took a long time to climb the four or five miles to the first plateau. At one stop we heard and saw a lesser whitethroat, and here there were also distinctive black and white bumblebees, a species I've never seen before, nectaring along with tiny olive-coloured bee hawkmoths. As we watched we heard a black woodpecker.

We eventually reached the top, and though it was cooler here than down below, it was still very warm in the sun. The sky was slightly hazier than previous days, but it made no difference to the temperature. Finding birds was difficult. There was only one pair of red-backed shrikes, suggesting that most have yet to arrive. We did find a single rock bunting, followed by a single cock yellowhammer, plus an unexpected female black redstart. Both wrens and a song thrush sang unseen from the alder wood. Here, for the first time,



I failed to find tree-creepers, or even marsh tits. Butterflies were few in variety, with walls very common; we also saw both small and large tortoiseshells, brimstone, orange tip, green-veined, wood and small white, red admiral and common blue.

Stella, Jan and Janet all decided to walk down from the first plateaux; it took them an hour and three-quarters, not bad in the hot sun and on a stony road. We stopped once so that they had the option of a lift for the last section, which they declined. As we waited we had a fine view of a young and very showy golden eagle, mobbed initially by a buzzard, then by a peregrine.

In the late afternoon John and I walked round the town. We soon saw grey wagtails on the river, and found a nesting pair of marsh tits.

Monday 29th April

We had decided to have an early, 0730, breakfast, so the pre-breakfast excursion was brief – just down to the trough. We didn't add anything new, though we did see a marsh harrier (only the second sighting) and have good views of golden orioles. We returned after breakfast, and this time I found our first black-headed bunting of the trip. It was distant, but perched on the wires prominently so was easy to scope. Our next stop was the quarry above Vironia. Here Richard and Poppy had a brief view of a black woodpecker, while we enjoyed excellent sightings of black-eared wheatears in the quarry itself. Alas, the rock nuthatch nest was occupied by house sparrows. There were several Queen of Spain fritillaries here, and we also our first green hairstreak.

Our next stop was the Woodpecker Wood. The Jumbo Shopping Centre is now officially dead, with the car park taped off. Finding birds in the wood was as difficult as ever. We eventually saw great, middle spotted and grey-headed woodpeckers, with different people getting views of differing quality. I managed to call in a short-toed treecreeper, and we also saw blue tits, starlings and a hoopoe, while unseen orioles called around us. It was cool in the wood, but several mosquitoes made their presence known.



I had high hopes for Sidikastro, but the rock nuthatches were absent here, too, and the only new birds for the list were crag martins and common swifts. However, we did stop for coffees at an open-air bar – Sidikastro is an attractive and stylish little town. We then drove to the top of the rock that dominates the

town, and walked to the old castle with its spectacular views. No birds of note, but plenty of swallowtails.

After a late lunch back at Viglatoras John and Stella joined me for a 4 o'clock outing. We managed to find the white-tailed eagle observation hide, but failed to see a white-tailed eagle. However, we did enjoy excellent views of a lesser spotted eagle and a black kite, while I eventually managed to find a distant soaring booted eagle, a pale-phase bird. A shelduck on the lake was a new addition for the list, and as we drove back I spotted a purple heron in the freshwater marsh by the side of the road. We finished with a walk along the river from the bridge, and here we enjoyed good views of turtle doves, golden orioles and a single penduline tit that I called up. It came within 10ft of us.

Tuesday 30th April

Another 6.45 excursion to the trough. As we arrived a Levant sparrowhawk was glimpsed as it flew up towards the mountain. We then had 30 minutes of excellent birdwatching. First I found a black-headed bunting, shortly followed

by a lesser grey shrike, the first time I've seen one here. Another briefly joined it. Then a woodchat appeared, soon followed by a pair of olivaceous warblers and a sombre tit. The latter hopped briefly into view in my telescope, and I had an excellent view of it. Two new birds before breakfast.

We did even better after breakfast. At the trough we had great views of an exceedingly handsome masked shrike, plus a red-backed, so all four species of summer shrikes in the same place. The olivaceous warblers showed well, and Jan spotted two cock black-headed buntings on the wires together.

Mandraki didn't produce anything new, though I had fun trying to digiscope flying pelicans, with some degree of success. We did see several squaccos, and once a group of five night herons flew over. One individual was noticeably



paler and more silvery than his companions. We met the Frenchmen again, and discovered that we had found the knife that belonged to one of their friends. It was clearly a knife with sentimental attachments, and we heard it came from Sardinia.

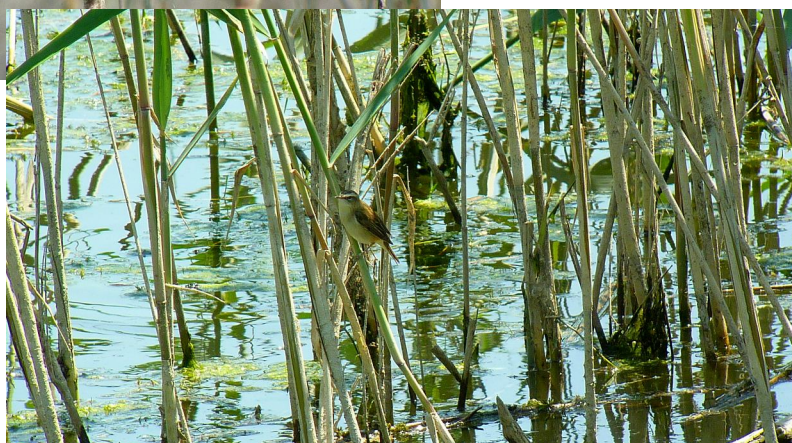
The walk along the overgrown river was as unproductive as usual, but we did meet two other couples of birdwatchers who confirmed what we had found – passerine



migrants were in short supply. We did much better in the floods of the Strimonas, as here we had great views of a penduline tit, followed by a single bee-eater, courting lesser grey shrikes and a pair of red-backed shrikes. Golden

orioles flashed around and gave fleeting glimpses.

We then drove round to Megalahori, where our quarry was little bittern. We walked along the embankment



in search, but clearly walked too far, but were rewarded with a single (lost?) crane, plus a black stork. We checked the two small reedbeds as we came back, and were delighted to find an active pair of moustached warblers, though no

little bitterns. As we watched a kingfisher darted by. It had been a great morning, with several new species added to the list.

For the late afternoon excursion we returned once again to the White-tailed Eagle Observation platform. No big eagles, but we did have prolonged, if distant, views of both booted and short-toed eagles, along with several buzzards. The sun was very hot as it beat onto the platform. Once I thought I glimpsed a masked shrike flying in the nearby hedge, but all we could find were two cock woodchat shrikes. On our return we stopped to watch grebes out on the flat-calm lake, and found several black-necked, but nothing else of note. We finished at the top corner of the lake where another penduline tit put on a good show, and we saw more black-necked grebes. However hard I tried, finding ducks proved impossible, but we did glimpse another kingfisher. As we left we saw two whinchats.

Wednesday 1st May

I woke early, listening to the scope owl calling close by. Just before dawn the garden nightingale started up and put on a virtuoso performance, filling our bedroom with sound. Collared doves cooed, swallows and house martins twittered and a more distant hoopoe called, bidding us farewell. It was another cloudless morning, with the lake flat-calm as we drove south. As anticipated, we did see a roller on the roadside wires south of the dam. Our last addition to the list was a rook, glimpsed from the bus at the usual site not far from Thessalonica. A crash on the ring road delayed us by 15 minutes, but we still had time to spare after calling in to the Alamo depot, and being driven back to the airport. Our easyJet flight left 12 minutes early, and landed at Gatwick 30 minutes early. Gatwick was bathed in sunshine, but at 17deg was a lot cooler than Greece.

David Tomlinson

