

Cyprus, June 2014

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A mini-break with the primary goal of tracking down the island's endemic birds, namely Cyprus Scops Owl, Cyprus Warbler and Cyprus Pied Wheatear. However, with a range of other potential species including Eleonora's Falcon, Great Spotted Cuckoo, Cretzschmar's Bunting and Black Francolin, this four-day trip promised to be a rather nice outing in the sun.

Visiting the island in late June, the peak migration months were long gone, the temperatures were soaring into the mid-30s and many would say the best birding missed. Against that however, many of the island's specialities were actively breeding and birds such as Masked Shrike, Cretzschmar's Bunting and the island endemics were all found with ease. 21 June. Departing East Europe late evening, my journey to Cyprus involved a one-hour flight to Warsaw, then another three hours to Larnica, arriving at the rather anti-social hour of 4.00 a.m.

22 June. Asprokremmos Dam, Petra tou Romiou & Evretou Dam.

In the pre-dawn darkness of Larnaca, the warmth was delicious. Two hours later, standing atop Asprokremmos Dam in the west of the island, the first hints of scorching temperatures that were to dominate were already transpiring - it was 25 C and the sun was barely peeping over the horizon!

A rather nice lilith race of Little Owl greeted the morning, bobbing about on the boulder of the dam wall, along with heaps of Chukar Partridges scattering from all sides and a Hoopoe flopping across the valley. Down the valley, assorted chacks of Sylvia warblers enticed from scrubby patches, raising a hope that perhaps my target of Cyprus Warbler would fall almost without effort! Er, that is not exactly as it turned out ...as the sun hit the slopes, the warblers of every description slunk into the depths of dense clumps and were virtually impossible to see! Following a good dozen or so birds, the best I could do was a few brief flits of birds and a tail-end views as they shot into the next bush. 'Hmm, perhaps earlier in the spring might have been a better idea', I began to think, imaging the birds then sitting atop bushes in full song! Still, several Red-rumped Swallows cruised the valley, a pair of Masked Shrikes sat prominently and another Little Owl gave me a good stare, so not so bad overall. By 8.00 a.m., now officially stinking hot, I retired for coffee, then travelled the few kilometres down the road to Petra tou Romiou, a fairly stretch of coast and, more importantly, prime habitat for Cyprus Warbler. And indeed it was good for Cyprus Warbler ...or at least I think it was - in the next hour or so, many Sylvia warblers played hide and seek with me, teasing from thickets and impenetrable tangles of thorny banks of vegetation. Sod's law dictated that the birds I did get good views of were certainly Sardinian Warbler, but at least two of the snippet views did appear to be young Cyprus Warblers! European Bee-eaters called overhead, at least 40 Chukars exploded off the slopes, but I could already see I would need to review my strategy slightly ...a dawn assault on this site next morning before the sun effectively stopped play. With that off I went, mountains beckoning. Choosing to base myself in a quiet village east of Polis in the north of the island, I also thought it would be a nice idea to take a 'back road' over the mountains to get there ...I did not expect it to be quite such a 'back road' - instead of the half hour or so on the asphalt road from Paphos to Polis, my route took several hours, included one puncture and a lot of bumping up and down over rough rocky dirt tracks meandering through the mountains. The route did have its attractions though - I barely saw another vehicle all route and, better still, encountered my first Cyprus Pied Wheatears, smart birds indeed. As it would turn out, Cyprus Pied Wheatears were fairly common in the higher altitude areas and several pairs I found, some feeding recently fledged young. Also saw the endemic race of Jay on this route, along with Chukars trailing chicks and a smart pair of Cretzschmar's Buntings, these also feeding recently fledged youngsters. By middle afternoon, I had reached the village of Agia Marina and checked into an apartment which would serve as base for the next few days - most plush by my standards, well-equipped and set in a quiet location just 50 metres from a totally deserted beach, backed by garden full of banana trees ...and House Sparrows. A bit wasted on me, I spent all of ten minutes gazing along the beach before deciding to head off on more exploration, the destination for the afternoon being Evretou Dam. Having actually missed the previous night's sleep, I was rather impressed on arrival to find a comfy sofa placed beneath a pergola overlooking the reservoir. I settled down for a hard afternoon's observations of the slopes beneath ...and promptly snoozed off! An hour or so later, I awoke to the chack-chack-chack of a couple of Magpies on the slopes opposite ...along with most un-Magpie like begging calls of another bird for food. 'Hmm, interesting', I thought. And indeed it was as I presumed, no less than a juvenile Great Spotted Cuckoo being fed by the Magpie host parents! In the next hour, I also found a pair of Masked Shrikes with three fledged youngsters, one Hoopoe, two Eastern Olivaceous Warblers ...and another young Great Spotted Cuckoo being fed by another pair of Magpies! On the reservoir itself however, the only bird seen was a Little Egret. And with that, I returned to my apartment to catch up on a little sleep! 23 June. Petra tou Romiou, Cape Aspro, Paphos Sewage Works & Akamas. Leaving my apartment at 5.00 a.m., my strategy this day was simply to get to Petra tou Romiou before the sun sent the warblers scurrying. And a fine plan it turned out to be - after a little wandering along the coastal path, a few Sardinian Warblers seen in the process, up popped a beauty indeed ...pausing to sing its scratchy little melody for good measure, this was the bird I desired, a very nice male Cyprus Warbler.

Across the gully, a second male appeared for a while to sing in competition and within an hour I had managed to find a total of five Cyprus Warblers, a far more successful effort than the day before! By 9.00 a.m., however, the heat was already to hand and the slopes were becoming very quiet again. Went over to the nearby Cape Aspro to look for Eleonora's Falcons - failed in this quest, but did see a nice brookei Peregrine as compensation. Also saw a pair of Cyprus Pied Wheatears, a pair of Masked Shrikes, two Eastern Olivaceous Warblers, a couple of European Bee-eaters and, not something I expected at this locality, two Black-headed Buntings. One hour here was quite enough, so I then decided to return to the north coast, stopping briefly at Paphos Sewage Works en route - one Spur-winged Plover and a flock of Spanish Sparrows here, along with a pretty impressive butterfly selection. Also added my first Roller of the trip on the way back to the north.

In Agia Marina, I gave up birding for the day and went kayaking on the sea instead, thinking it would be cool if an Eleonora's Falcon went over whilst paddling along ...which of course didn't happen! For the evening entertainment, I took a drive around the Akamas Peninsula - picturesque and a number of birds of note, including a few Red-rumped Swallows, a European Nightjar found at roost and yet another pair of Masked Shrikes, this time feeding fledged young. The best of the action was yet to follow however - one of the birds I most wanted to see on this mini trip was Cyprus Scops Owl. After a brief rest back at base, I set off on a random tour of the backroads above Agia Marina after sunset ...periodic stops to listen and very soon I was listening to my first Cyprus Scops Owl calling. Too distant for any chance of locating, so on I went ...one Nightjar churring, then another Cyprus Scops Owl, then two more calling on opposite sides of the road. Stopped here a while and began to wonder what the chances were of tracking one down were ...and then the calling suddenly got a lot closer and with a flash of the torch, there he was, perched on roadside wires hooting away! Superb views as he sat there totally unconcerned by me ...unconcerned that was until I took a wrong turn in the dark and went sliding down the steep roadside embankment, scattering gravel as I went and flushing the bird in the process! Nursing rather grazed legs, I hobbled back up and was rather pleased to find the owl now sitting in an adjacent conifer, more fine views to follow. And so ended day two on the island. 24 June. Agia Marina to Stavros, Evretou Dam and Akamas. With the three endemics seen, today I turned my attentions to the forested highlands of the island, the chief targets being Short-toed Treecreeper and Coal Tit, both represented on Cyprus by endemic races. Most birders seem to head to the Troodos region for these, but it seemed illogical to drive so far when the slopes above Agia Marina were equally cloaked in pine forests. So, taking a random set of turns onto gravel roads winding high into the hills, off I went, flocks of Common Swifts overhead, a few Chukars scattering from the road. The Coal Tit was a doddle to find, the very first stop revealing a little flock in low trees, and so too did the next stop and the stop after that! After a while, it soon became apparent that Coal Tits were just about the most common small passerine in the forests, or in reality the only common small passerine! Other than the Coal Tits, my total haul of forest birds on the long windy road up to Stavros amounted to a few Chaffinches, a Wren, two Olivaceous Warblers, a pair of Jays and, after considerable searching, one Short-toed Treecreeper, the latter in amongst a flock of Coal Tits. The route was also very good for Cyprus Pied Wheatears with at least 20 along the road, mostly at rock cuttings. Temperature was 34 C this day and by 11.00 a.m. I began to get a little lazy, so detoured to Evretou Dam for a second look round - Cyprus Pied Wheatears present again, plus one of the Great Spotted Cuckoos still being fed by Magpies. Also found no less than three Rollers, one Hoopoe, a pair of Masked Shrikes and, not something I was expecting on Cyprus, a juvenile Goshawk being harrassed by Magpies. With that however, bar a quick look at some reedbeds at Polis (highlight Spanish Sparrows), I gave up on the birding for the rest of the day, touring along the coast and then taking a siesta in my apartment.

Pleased with my success on the Cyprus Scops Owl the previous evening, I fancied another go this night ...and having spotted some superb open olive groves at the beginning of the Akamas Peninsula, this seemed the perfect spot to try. And indeed it was, an action-filled hour or two began with a European Nightjar hawking around my head a little after the sun set, then continued with an incredible density of Cyprus Scops Owls calling - they truly seemed to be hooting away from virtually every clump of trees! By evening's end, covering not more than five kilometres, I had logged at least 20 Cyprus Scops Owls, one Little Owl and a grand total of eight Nightjars, most impressive I thought. Of these, good views of one Cyprus Scops Owl in an olive tree and of another Nightjar swooping round. 25 June. Kensington Cliffs, Zakaki Marsh & Larnaca Water Treatment Pools. My final day on the island ...and the hottest, the temperature touching 35 C for much of day. Overall a fairly easy going day, nothing much seen at dawn, but then a most productive amble along the south coast back to Larnaca. Wishing to see a few Eleonora's Falcons, my first stop was the western end of the beach at Kourion ...this was hardly hardcore birding, I merely plonked myself on the beach with a coffee and sat and waited. To the immediate west, the high cliffs of Kensington soared and were, to the best of my knowledge, prime Eleonora's Falcon habitat. An hour in, after a little paddle in the sea, my patience was rewarded as the distinctive shape of an Eleonora's Falcon came swooping out of a cove a little way along, did an arch over the sea and rose to settle on the cliff, a dark-phase bird, distant but nice. On with the beach vigil, another couple of birds appeared a while later, both in the same cove as the first, then another, this last bird giving the views I had been waiting for, passing directly overhead, then catching something low over the cliffs before settling on a nearby pinnacle to devour its prey. With that, the beach holiday element of my trip was over and I drove round to the Akrotiti and stopped at the expansive salt pan. Needless to say, in the middle of the day at 35 C it was little more than a shimmering haze, vast and white, hints of water very far out and, at that stage, possible even a mere mirage! Not wishing to see my car sink through the salt crust, I trudged out across the salt and indeed there was water ...the only problem was it was absolutely devoid of birds, all bar a single Greater Flamingo! Likewise, the pools along the nearby Ladies Mile were either dry or lacking birds, so I decided to leave and head to Larnaca, but fortunately my route out took me via the pool at Zakaki Marsh ...which was not dry and was packed with birds! A tiny little site, squashed up against a road, this pool was a most pleasant surprise-

lined up along the far bank, 28 Little Egrets, two Squacco Herons and one Night Heron, while swimming around on the water in front, seven splendid Ferruginous Ducks, several Mallards and a mixed bunch of Coots, Little Grebes and Moorhens. Settling down in the hide, I also found a female Ferruginous Duck with three ducklings and then turned my attention to the assembled birds to the right - amongst a lot of noisy Black-winged Stilts and four Spur-winged Plovers, also single Wood Sandpipers and Little Ringed Plovers, a group of roosting Little Terns on an island, one Greater Flamingo and other odds and ends, including a couple of juvenile Yellow Wagtails and quite a few Reed Warblers. In the drier scrub to the rear, a male Black Francolin began to call, several Zitting Cisticolas too. For its simple unexpectedness, Zakaki Marsh impressed me. And with that, I really did return to Larnaca, thinking I could finish the birding with a tour of the wetlands behind the airport. Hmm, good plan, but without exception all the salt pans were totally dry, so I instead went and had something to eat in a beach restaurant before venturing across to Larnaca Water Treatment pools to finish off the trip. Quite a good selection of waders here, Black-winged Stilts and Spur-winged Plovers again dominant, but five Kentish Plovers, six Little Stints, two Common Sandpipers and a Common Redshank also present. Also found one pair of Spur-winged Plovers on a nest in the field behind the pools. T'was now time to head for the airport, flocks of Swifts milled overhead, ever-present House Sparrows chattered away. My trip was over, 72 species recorded, clearly far less than a visit in the peak migration months would produce, but I was quite happy - with Cyprus Scops Owl, Cyprus Warbler and Cyprus Pied Wheatear under the belt, along with Great Spotted Cuckoo and Eleonora's Falcon, I had seen all of my targets, a good little trip overall. For full list of all birds seen*** [CLICK HERE](#)
