

On the Hunt for Eastern Festoon

Contributed by Jos

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Travelling between 14-17 April 2016, this was a short trip to explore the southern Aegean island of Kos, with the principal goal being to find Eastern Festoon and any other spring butterflies on the wing. Despite the short duration, it was a very successful trip, recording no less than 27 species of butterfly, including the Eastern Festoon, along with 85 species of birds, Great Spotted Cuckoo, Collared Pratincole and Bonelli's Eagle amongst them.

INTRODUCTION A total of almost 50 species of butterfly have been recorded on Kos, but I located very little information on which species were likely to be active in April and no information whatsoever on actual sites that might be productive on the island. Likewise, I also had no real idea whether Eastern Festoon, my main target for the trip, would be flying or not or indeed if it is actually regular on Kos. Staying in the southern resort of Kardamena, I concentrated on the Alykes Salt Lake at Tigaki and the mountain areas around Pili, the former of these very productive for birds and the latter proving very good for butterflies. Additionally, I spent some time along the coastal plains adjacent to Kardamena and paid one visit to the Psalidi wetland in the east of the island. It is hoped that this report will, at least in part, address the relative lack of information on butterflies on this Greek island and thus assist anybody venturing this way. Provided below is a basic site guide, a daily log and a full systematic list of butterflies seen during the three days, plus also a list of the birds and reptiles too. **KEY LOCALITIES** 1. **ALYKES SALT LAKE** Coordinates: 37°50'33.3"N, 20°45'46.3"E Altitude: sea level.

Primarily a birding locality, the pool excellent for passage waders and other birds. The meadows on landward side of the pool however were full of butterflies, most particularly Clouded Yellows, Eastern Dappled Whites and Eastern Bath Whites. Also, amongst others, Lesser Fiery Coppers and Aegean Meadow Browns. 2. **PILI MEADOWS** Coordinates: 36°50'45.8"N, 27°11'17.1"E Altitude: 170-190 metres. Straddling old terraces, this was a superb area of mixed meadows and olive groves. Almost 20 species seen here, including Eastern Festoon, both Swallowtail and Scarce Swallowtail and Mallow Skipper. For sheer numbers and variety of species, this was the best area that I found on the island. 3. **OLD PILI** Coordinates: 36°50'45.8"N, 27°11'17.1"E (lower), 36°50'01.8"N, 27°10'48.0"E (higher) Altitude: 270-320 metres. Less diversity and lower numbers of individuals than at lower altitude, but quite a good selection regardless. The valley below the old Pili castle supported several Eastern Festoons, while the higher more open area was good for skippers, several Mallow Skipper and a single Orbed Red Underwing Skipper seen here.

4. **MOUNT DIKEOS** Coordinates: 36°50'24.3"N, 27°11'59.0"E Altitude: 430 metres. Highest point that I visited on the island. Butterflies not abundant, but very scenic and some good species, including Eastern Festoon, Green-underside Blue, Green Hairstreak and Southern Comma. 5. **PSALIDI WETLANDS** Coordinates: 36°53'08.4"N, 27°20'31.7"E Altitude: sea level. This was a very good locality for butterflies, the best area being on the seaward side of the pools, more specifically the track that separated the wetlands from the adjacent arid sandy area. A lot of butterflies here, including Lesser Spotted Fritillaries, Pigmy Skippers, Green-underside Blue, many Long-tailed Blues (attracted to flowering broom) and a variety of others. 6. **KARDAMENA** Coordinates: 36°48'37.1"N 27°09'20.9"E Altitude: 15 metres. Very much a random location, probably any flower meadow on the coastal plain could produce similar butterflies. Nevertheless, abundant butterflies present, including Eastern Festoon, Lesser Spotted Fritillary, Long-tailed Blue, assorted whites and both Small Skipper and Lulworth Skipper.

DAILY LOG 14 April. Three-hour afternoon flight from Lithuania to Kos, 6 C and rain on departure, 25 C and sun on arrival! Picked up a rental car and drove the ten minutes to Kardamena. Already close to dusk, dumped my stuff in an apartment, paused a while to watch Pallid Swifts hurtling round the town, then scooted off for quick exploration of olive groves to the north-west of town - Crested Larks and Sardinian Warblers common, one Long-legged Buzzard by the roadside, several Scop's Owls calling as night fell. 15 April. Dawn, Alykes Salt Lake, northern Kos, a string of Greater Flamingos across the shallow waters, several dozen Ruddy Shelducks grazing the short turf between the lake and sea. Too early in the day for butterflies, so a couple of hours of birding instead, walking around the entirety of lake & not bad at all, Zitting Cisticolas rising from sedge tussocks, a Woodchat Shrike atop a small bush, Hoopoes flopping off across pasture and White Stork plodding meadow. On the lake itself, both Purple Heron and Squacco Heron, plus Slender-billed Gull and Spur-winged Plover. More impressive however was the flock of Red-throated Pipits found on the seaward side of the pool & numbering at least 30 birds, all strutting rank meadows adjacent to the sand dunes, these were treats indeed, all sporting smart summer dress. A little before 9.00 a.m., perhaps now approaching 20 C, a flutter of yellow across the dunes, a Clouded Yellow hurtling across without settling ...and so opened the butterfly action. Within ten to fifteen minutes, quite some dozens of butterflies took to the wing. I relocated to a flower meadow on the landward side of Alykes and marvelled at the masses of butterflies now flying, the numbers certainly in the hundreds.

Clouded Yellows prominent, so too assorted whites, the species initially confusing me as most refused to land for inspection! Step by step, the identities became clear & Eastern Dappled White, Small White and Eastern Bath White all common. Also plenty of Common Blues sunning and, in vivid splashes of orange, quite a number of Lesser Fiery Coppers, a new species for me. Aegean Meadow Browns also flying, plus a couple of Painted Ladies. Glancing towards the mountains rising to the south, the peaks flanked by olive groves and meadows on the lower slopes and pines higher up, these seemed my natural destination for the rest of the day. And glorious it turned out to be, my drive towards the village of Pili marked by a general rise in the numbers and varieties of butterflies populating the small roadside meadows. A couple of Swallowtails drifted over the lanes, a Red Admiral basked in the sun and, in a moment of brief frustration, a moderate-sized butterfly sailed over the car, giving hints of cream and black. By the time I was out of the car, over a fence it had gone, vanishing into olive groves beyond. Pretty sure it was an Eastern Festoon, but I certainly hadn't nailed it! Hopefully more would follow. After coffee and buns in a coffee shop in Pili, I followed the lanes

towards Zia and then stumbled across an absolutely superb area – a mosaic of meadows and small olive groves straddling a series of old terraces and dotted by tumbled down stone walls and thick hedges. Slightly overgrown and boasting a profusion of flowers, the place was alive with butterflies – Eastern Dappled Whites and Clouded Yellows abundant again, so too Aegean Meadow Browns. Here however, the range of species was far better than at Alykes – a total of sixteen species seen, including quite a few Swallowtails, several very nice Scarce Swallowtails, plenty of Lesser Fiery Coppers, a few Small Coppers and dozens of Common Blues. Also found a few Chapman's Blues and, in shady gullies, several Large Wall Browns. Highlights of the day however fell to the Eastern Festoons – after the brief glimpse of the probable on the way into the mountains, I then encountered no less than three more at this locality near Pili. Getting good views of them however was not very easy! The first simply sailed across the slopes at a fairly rapid pace, meandering widely, but never settling, the second did something similar, but teased by landing for split seconds when I was not close enough to appreciate it, and the third sent me on a wild goose chase for quite some time until it finally landed for just enough seconds to fire off a couple of photographs. But see it I did, the key target of the trip under the belt! Finally departing this excellent area, I decided to then try the higher areas, venturing to the upper slopes of Mount Dikeos above Zia. Very scenic, but a notable reduction in the number of butterflies active. Still not bad at all – some of the highlights including one Southern Comma on the track, a few Lesser Fiery Coppers and Small Coppers and, best of all, three Green-underside Blues. Also Sub-alpine Warblers singing here, flocks of Bee-eaters overhead and a few Red-rumped Swallows around villages just below. Moderately late in the day, I now returned to the Kardamena area, finding a very nice meadow at the eastern edge of the agricultural plain. A couple of Long-legged Buzzards circled over the adjacent hillside, Alpine Swifts hurtled in towards evening. The meadow itself was another treat – the now familiar cocktail of abundant whites of several species and Clouded Yellows, supplemented by yet another two Eastern Festoons, my first skippers of the trip (one Small Skipper and two Lulworth Skippers) and, also new for the trip, one Long-tailed Blue and two Lesser Spotted Fritillaries. I had now encountered 22 species during the day, a very respectable total for this small Aegean island. With that, I retired to Kardamena for the evening.

16 April. No point in getting up too early, few butterflies would be flying until about 9.00 a.m. So, arriving at the meadows between Pili and Zia a little before this, I wandered around a while waiting for the butterflies to take to the wing. First butterfly of the day, and a new species for the trip, one Mallow Skipper sunning on flowers aside the road. Other than this, didn't see any additional species to those of the day before, so fairly soon returned to Mount Dikeos to photograph the Green-underside Blues, seeing also three Eastern Festoons, again only one landing long enough to get any good views. Several Small Coppers on the tracks, one fine Green Hairstreak on flowers and, ambling across the meadow, a Spur-thighed Tortoise! Also one Southern Comma, several Large Wall Browns, a few Red Admirals and plenty of Painted Ladies. From here, I decided to cut across to the east of the island to visit the Psalidi wetlands. Quite a few Swallowtails and Scarce Swallowtails en route, plus another two Spur-thighed Tortoises. The Psalidi wetlands are supposed to be one of the island's top birding localities, but from a bird perspective, I have to say it was disappointing, three Greater Flamingos and a handful of Little Grebes being about the only birds of any note. Fortunately, it was rather better for butterflies, the arid area between the pools and sea being very good, and even more so the margin where the arid area jutted up against the more luxuriant vegetation of the wetlands. In this area, a whole range of good butterflies seen, including several Lesser Spotted Fritillaries, two Pigmy Skippers, one Oriental Marbled Skipper and, attracted to flowering broom, 18 Long-tailed Blues!!! Temperature now sitting at 26 C, great wafts of Clouded Yellows and Eastern Dappled Whites fluttered in the light breeze, a single Long-legged Buzzard drifted overhead. After a couple of hours here, I detoured through Kos town, then returned relatively early to Kardamena. After dark, I took a short drive through farmland and olive groves to the east of town, seeing a couple of Little Owls near old buildings, then hearing quite a number of Scop's Owls in the olives, two eventually seen.

17 April. Decided to revisit Alykes Salt Lake early morning. Seemed to have been an influx of migrants, with Great Spotted Cuckoos amongst the first birds of the day seen, two in agricultural areas just outside Kardamena, then another three at Alykes. Also two Lesser Kestrels at Alykes and assorted passerines, including Black-eared Wheatear, Tawny Pipits, Citrine Wagtail and a fine flock of about 30 Yellow Wagtails, males of feldegg and dombrowskii amongst them. On the salt lake itself, several Little Ringed Plovers, four Kentish Plovers and Temminck's Stint were newly-arrived, plus too a few Wood Sandpipers and other waders. Four Stone Curlews also roosting nearby. Top birds on the lake however were three Collared Pratincoles - mostly roosting on a small island, but occasionally taking sorties, these were nice indeed. Soon, it was butterfly time again – no new species at Alykes, so I returned to the mountains, focussing on the Old Pili area. Climbed to the hilltop castle first, seeing several Large Wall Browns and the occasional Swallowtail and Clouded Yellow, plus a singing Black-eared Wheatear, then dropped into a limestone gully beyond. Not amazing numbers of butterflies, but remarkable for Eastern Festoons – five seen in all, predictably none stopping for more than a split second! Hot and sunny again, touching 26 C, the next stop was the higher slopes above Old Pili. Cretzschmar's Bunting singing in an isolated tree, Alpine Swifts high above, a rather memorable pair of Bonelli's Eagles being mobbed by a small flock of Lesser Kestrels, perhaps eight of the latters buzzing in and out. Two Long-legged Buzzards also circling, along with many dozens of Jackdaws. On the butterfly front, quite splendid too – a mini hotspot for skippers, I found no less than four Mallow Skippers and one Orbed Red-underwing Skipper on a single sunny bank, a Southern Comma and half dozen Painted Ladies accompanying them. A few other bits and bobs also seen, but as mid-afternoon arrived, it was back to Kardamena for me. With 27 species now under the belt, I decided I had seen all the butterflies that I was realistically going to see, so I actually spent a couple of hours lazing in the sun before it was time for me to head to the airport. Departed Kos at 7 p.m., a warm sun still sitting in the sky, arrived in Lithuania three hours later, cold and damp again!

SYSTEMATIC LIST OF BUTTERFLIES SEEN In total, 27 species were seen over the three days, a good total I think for a trip to the island in early spring. The lists below details all the sightings, with additional notes added on abundance and

localities. Orbed Red Underwing Skipper. One seen on mountain slopes above Old Pili. Mallow Skipper. A total of five seen – one in flower meadows between Pili and Zia, four on the mountain slopes above Old Pili. Oriental Marbled Skipper. One at Psalidi wetland. Lulworth Skipper. Six seen in the lowlands, two near Kardamena, four at Psalidi wetland. Small Skipper. A total about eleven seen, all in the lowlands near Kardamena and Psalidi. Pigmy Skipper. Two seen at Psalidi wetland. Eastern Festoon. Target species, fourteen seen - six in the flower meadows between Pili and Zia, two in meadows near Kardamena, one on Mount Dikeos, five at Old Pili. Very rarely land, mostly gliding across the slopes and meadows fairly swiftly. Swallowtail. Fairly common, especially in the mid-altitude areas, such as between Pili and Zia, but also occasional individuals even in urban areas such as Kos town. An estimated 60 seen across the three days. Scarce Swallowtail. Occurring in the same areas as Swallowtail, a total of 17 were seen, most in the Pili and Zia areas, with a couple also near Kos town. Large White. Not many seen, about eight over the three days, most between Pili and Zia. Small White. Abundant, hundreds seen daily both in the lowlands (Alykes, Kardamena and Psalidi) and mid-altitude area (between Pili and Zia). Also present in the higher altitude habitats above Old Pili and Mount Dikeos, but in lower abundance. Eastern Bath White. Quite common at low altitude, especially in the Alykes and Kardamena areas. Some also present between Pili and Zia. Eastern Dappled White. Abundant at low and middle altitude, especially Alykes, Kardamena, Psalidi and between Pili and Zia. Clouded Yellow. Abundant throughout, hundreds seen. Recorded at all localities visited, but most common on the lowland plains at Alykes and near Kardamena. Green Hairstreak. One seen on Mount Dikeos. Small Copper. Moderately common, small numbers seen at all localities visited from coastal meadows at Alykes to the high altitude Mount Dikeos. In total, about ten seen each day. Lesser Fiery Copper. About 35-40 seen over the three days, most common in the low altitude meadows at Alykes and mid-altitude areas between Pili and Zia, but occasionals also seen on Mount Dikeos and elsewhere. Long-tailed Blue. Two seen in meadows near Kardamena and an impressive 17 at Psalidi. The species was very much attracted to flowering broom. Green-underside Blue. Five seen on Mount Dikeos and two at the Psalidi wetland. Chapman's Blue. About six seen in total, all in the area between Pili and Zia. Common Blue. Quite abundant, 30 or more seen daily. Seen at all localities visited, but most common at low and middle altitudes. Red Admiral. Fairly common, with about five seen each day, mostly in the middle altitudes between Pili and Zia. Painted Lady. Common, upward of 15-20 daily. Seen at all localities from coastal to the high altitude Mount Dikios. Southern Comma. Five seen – three between Pili and Zia, one at Mount Dikos and one at Old Pili. Lesser Spotted Fritillary. In lowland meadows, two seen near Kardamena and five at Psalidi. Aegean Meadow Brown (Turkish Meadow Brown). Fairly common in meadows, particularly at low altitude (Alykes, Kardamena and Psalidi) and mid-altitude (between Pili and Zia). Smaller numbers higher. 15-20 seen each day. Large Wall Brown. A total of about 25 seen between Pili and Zia or at the higher altitude localities of Old Pili and Mount Dikios. **SYSTEMATIC LIST OF BIRDS SEEN**

Though the trip primarily focussed on butterflies, Kos is also a very good island for birds during the migration period. A total of 85 species were seen, with Alykes Salt Lake by far the most productive locality. Ruddy Shelduck. About 45 present on Alykes Salt Lake on both visits.

Mallard. About 30 at Alykes Salt Lake and 10 at Psalidi wetland.

Teal. Seven and two recorded on my two visits to Alykes Salt Lake

Pheasant. One calling between Pili and Zia.

Little Grebe. Four at Psalidi wetland.

Shag. All on the sea, one off Psalidi, three off Alykes.

Squacco Heron. One at Alykes Salt Lake on 15th.

Little Egret. Seven recorded at Alykes Salt Lake on both visits.

Purple Heron. One at Alykes Salt Lake on 15th.

White Stork. One near Alykes Salt Lake on 15th.

Greater Flamingo. Forty at Alykes Salt Lake on both visits, three at Psalidi wetland.

Bonelli's Eagle. Pair seen on mountain about Old Pili.

Long-legged Buzzard. Moderately common in higher areas, three or four seen daily.

Common Buzzard. One seen east of Kardamena on 14th.

Sparrowhawk. One at Psalidi.

Common Kestrel. Two near Alykes Salt Lake on both visits.

Lesser Kestrel. An arrival on 17th, two near Alykes Salt Lake and seven mobbing Bonelli's Eagles at Old Pili.

Moorhen. Six at Alykes Salt Lake and eight at Psalidi wetland.

Coot. One near Alykes Salt Lake and about 20 at Psalidi wetland.

Collared Pratincole. Two at Alykes Salt Lake on 17th.

Black-winged Stilt. About 30 seen at Alykes Salt Lake on both visits, about ten at Psalidi wetland.

Stone Curlew. Three seen in olive groves near Kardamena, four seen near Alykes Salt Lake and two seen near Psalidi.

Several also heard at night in the Kardamena area.

Little Ringed Plover. Six and four seen on the two visits to Alykes Salt Lake.

Kentish Plover. Four seen on the beach adjacent to Alykes Salt Lake on 17th.

Spur-winged Plover. A single bird at Alykes Salt Lake on both visits.

Little Stint. At Alykes Salt Lake, five birds seen on 15th and three on 17th.

Temminck's Stint. One at Alykes Salt Lake on 17th.

Wood Sandpiper. Two and four birds seen at Alykes Salt Lake on the 15th and 17th respectively.

Green Sandpiper. One at Alykes Salt Lake on 15th.

Common Sandpiper. About five seen at Alykes Salt Lake on each visit and a single on the seashore near Kardamena on 16th.

Common Redshank. One at Alykes Salt Lake on 15th.

Greenshank. Four to five birds seen on each visit to Alykes Salt Lake.

Curlew. Two seen on rough ground between Alykes Salt Lake and the sea on both the 15th and 17th.

Ruff. Flocks of about 16 and ten seen on the two visits to Alykes Salt Lake.

Common Snipe. One at Alykes Salt Lake on 17th.

Yellow-legged Gull. Small numbers seen at coastal sites around the island and occasionally soaring inland.

Slender-billed Gull. A single bird seen at Alykes Salt Lake on both visits.

Sandwich Tern. Roosting on exposed stumps in the middle of Alykes Salt Lake, four and two birds were seen at Alykes Salt Lake on the two visits.

Feral Pigeon. Scattered birds in urban areas.

Collared Dove. Common across the island.

Turtle Dove. Presumably newly arrived migrants, one near Zia on 15th and one near Alykes Salt Lake on 17th.

Scop's Owl. Three seen at night in olive groves east of Kardamena, others heard. Also several daytime calling birds heard between Pili and Zia and at Old Pili.

Little Owl. Two seen at night in agricultural areas just east of Plii.

Common Swift. Several seen over Psalidi.

Pallid Swift. Common over Kardamena town.

Alpine Swift. Flocks of about 30 seen on two evenings at the fring of the mountains east of Karamena and a flock of about 20 seen over Old Pili.

Hoopoe. About 15-20 seen, most in the plains near Kardamena or adjacent to Alykes Salt Lake.

European Bee-eater. Several flocks encountered, including north of Kardamena, at Old Pili and over Psaldi wetlands.

Roller. One seen near Kardamena on 16th.

Great Spotted Cuckoo. All seen on the 17th, a pair just east of Kardamena and three between the beach and Alykes Salt Lake.

Crested Lark. Common across the island, particularly in the agricultural lowlands.

Short-toed Lark. One in display flight at Alykes Salt Lake.

Sand Martin. Moderately common at Alykes Salt Lake, several dozen in flight.

Barn Swallow. Common across the island.

Red-rumped Swallow. Several seen around villages in the middle altitudes near Pili and Zia.

House Martin. Fairly common in Kardamena, over Alykes Salt Lake and in assorted other localities across the lowland areas.

Red-throated Pipit. Impressive flocks of summer-plumaged birds at Alykes Salt Lake – a minimum of 30 birds on 15th, about eight on 17th.

Tawny Pipit. Two seen at Alykes Salt Lake on 17th.

Yellow Wagtail. Two at Alykes Salt Lake on 15th, then a flock of about 30 at the same locality on 17th. Identifiable males were of oooo and oooo races.

Citrine Wagtail. One male with the Yellow Wagtails at Alykes Salt Lake on 17th.

Common Nightingale. Two singing near Pili.

Black-eared Wheatear. One seen in the sand dunes adjacent to Alykes Salt Lake and one at Old Pili, both on 17th.

Whinchat. A loose flock of about ten at Alykes Salt Lake on 15th.

Blackbird. Common in the forests around Old Pili and Mount Dikeos.

Fan-tailed Warbler. Common around Alykes Salt Lake.

Subalpine Warbler. Small numbers seen and heard in the hills above Old Pili and on Mount Dikeos.

Sardinian Warbler. Common, particularly in lowlands and middle altitudes.

Cetti's Warbler. Common at Alykes Salt Lake and Psaldi wetlands, occasional birds also singing in well-vegetated stream courses in agricultural areas and hills between Pili and Zia.

Reed Warbler. Common at Alykes Salt Lake.

Eastern Olivaceous Warbler. Occasional birds only.

Great Tit. Several seen in the woodlands in the highlands and in hedgerows in the lowlands.

Blue Tit. One near Zia.

Coal Tit. One on Mount Dikeos.

Woodchat Shrike. Three seen – one at Alykes Salt Lake, one near Kardamena and one near Psaldi.

Magpie. Common in lowland and middle altitude areas.

Jackdaw. Abundant across the island.

Hooded Crow. Common in lowlands.

Common Raven. One in mountains east of Kardamena.

House Sparrow. Common in lowlands and middle atitude areas, both in urban and agricultural areas.

Chaffinch. Common in the highland forests.

Linnet. One flock seen near Pili.

Goldfinch. A couple of individuals seen in the area near Zia.

Greenfinch. Occasionals seen across the island.

Serin. Several seen or heard singing, especially around Old Pili.

Cretzschmar's Bunting. Two seen in highlands, one above Old Pili and one on mountain road east of Kardamena.

Corn Bunting. Common in the agricultural plains. SYSTEMATIC LIST OF REPTILES SEEN Six species identified, possibly other lizard species overlooked. Visiting later in the season might produce more species. Starred Agama (*Laudakia stellio*). Common across much of the island, especially in the hills.

Balkan Green Lizard (*Lacerta trilineata*). One seen near Zia.

European Snake-eyed Lizard (*Ophisops elegans*). Several seen at various localities.

Black Whip Snake (*Dolichophis jugularis*). Two seen near Pili and three in agricultural areas near Kardamena,

Spur-thighed Tortoise (*Testudo graeca iberica*). One on Mount Dikeos, two others in the hills between here and Kos town.

Balkan Terrapin (*Mauremys rivulata*). One seen near Alykes.