

2019

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THE BIRDS OF GREECE SEPT 2019



Stephanie and I have been birding the world since I retired- can it really be nearly 13 years ago now! I have always called it “hardcore” birding- 12-14 hour days in the field, owling at night, muddy trails in most of the rain forests of the world, average to at times seriously bad accommodation. You can’t really call these birding trips holidays- great though they may have been.

Well we have decided to change tack- we are both in our seventies now- we have achieved practically all our birding goals. We have decided it is time to go on holiday. This does not mean we will stop birding- we could never do that, but the birding will be more relaxed and linked perhaps to a cruise, perhaps to some cultural or historic attractions somewhere in the world and perhaps just to see one or two birds we still have on our must see list.

So we are just back from a holiday- a great cruise from Venice along the Dalmatian coastline to Athens- and what better way to see a bit of Greece than to spend 4 days birding around Athens.

Europe does not have too many birds and we have birded in the UK many times and once in Spain and once in Morocco- so the rest of Europe from a birding perspective is new to us.

September is a difficult time of the year in Greece. The summer visitors have left- birds like Cretzschmar’s Bunting, Ruppell’s Warbler, and even Levant Sparrowhawk were long since gone and the winter visitors have of course not yet arrived. As always I prepared a wanted list which I gave to our chosen guide Lefteris from “Birds in Greece”- he comes highly recommended by the way. It was not a long list- just 14 birds of which we managed to see 11.

We were off the boat by 10 am. Lefteris collected us and dropped us off at our hotel. Our birding would only start in the morning – we had the Acropolis to see! along with the Rose-ringed and Monk Parakeets flying around amongst the ruins of central Athens.

We had an early start the next day- we needed to track down the Eurasian Scops Owl on Lycabettus Hill in central Athens before dawn broke. The bird is surprisingly common there and we saw at least two if not three individuals.

We then headed west driving two hours to reach the lagoons and marshlands in the Southwestern part of Greece near Messolongi. Two birds at the top of my list were Scopoli’s and Yelkouan Shearwaters, so we had planned a ferry trip to the island of Evvoia on our last day to see them both, but en route to the lagoons we had to cross the gulf of Corinth, either by using the road bridge or by taking the ferry- a short 15 minute ride. There was not really a choice was there, and even before we pulled away from the shore we could see birds out there in mid channel. Yes the Scopoli’s were there along with many





Yellow-legged Gulls. The Scopoli's was a milestone bird for me- the 900th bird I have photographed on the Southern African list.

When we reached the marshes I was amazed to see many individuals riding scooters and mopeds with guns strapped to their backs. The hunting culture is still strong in Greece and as we started looking for Pygmy Cormorant I could not believe I was birding with gunshots going off around us.

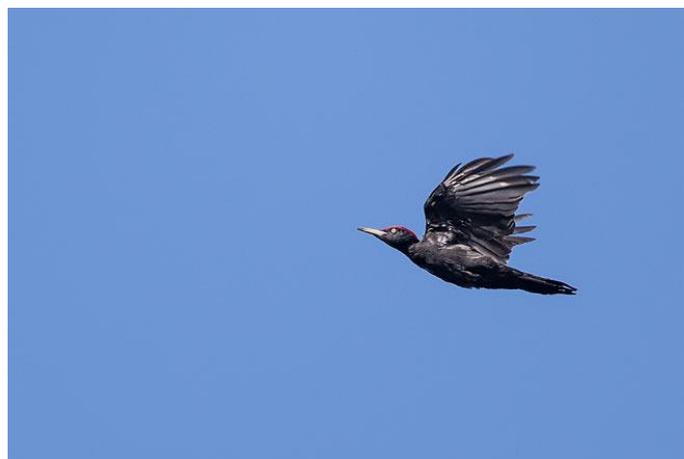
Pygmy Cormorant used to be a rare bird in Greece but numbers have increased in recent years (despite the hunters) and we were to see a dozen birds or so during the day. As we drove along the edge of the lagoon we found Northern Wheatear, Whinchat, Western Rock Nuthatch, and Blue Rock Thrush. The Nuthatch which we needed, we had actually seen clambering over the ruins at Delphi during our cruise but now I had the chance of a photograph.

Our next target was the Eurasian Penduline Tit- a reed loving bird which moves around in small family parties. It proved surprisingly tricky to find but we eventually found a couple of juveniles and then a lone adult. Beyond the town of Messlongi we visited more ruins and here in broadleaved woodland we found our next target Sombre Tit. We also needed a woodpecker but he was not here and so we tried a grove of ash trees further down the road and managed to call up Middle Spotted Woodpecker- completing the trio as we had seen Greater and Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers several times in the UK. A final drive back along the lagoons gave us juvenile Greater Flamingoes and a pair of Dalmatian Pelicans.

Four new birds for the day- call it five with photos of the Nuthatch- a great start to our first day in Greece. We overnighted in Nafpaktos before heading to the hills above the towns of Itea and Galaxeidi.

Day two saw us heading into the rocky hills above Itea and Delphi looking for Rock Partridge. This was theoretically the most difficult bird of the trip. Not because it is uncommon but because it is hunted. They respond to the call so you know they are there, but the only time they break cover is when they are flushed, and as you get close they stop calling and seemingly disappear. We spent the whole morning chasing them before giving up and moving on. We were heading for Mount Parnassos and the extensive pine forests above 1500 metres.

Here another woodpecker was to be found- one I missed in Japan in February and very much wanted to see- the Black Woodpecker. NATO jets were exercising above Mount Parnassos and the noise was literally ear shattering so it delayed our finding the bird for an hour but eventually they responded to the call and gave us several fly-byes. White-backed Woodpecker was also here and behaved much like the Black giving us just the one fly-by. Next up was the Firecrest – a tiny





bird of the fir forests which responded well but was difficult to photograph as it never stops moving through the thick foliage.

We then moved to the upper reaches of Mount Parnassos where the ski lifts start. There was nothing new for us up here but we missed Alpine Chough and had to content ourselves with lots of Chaffinches and Linnets and the odd Sardinian Warbler. It was cold this high but we were soon heading back to the coast and our overnight stop in the picturesque town of Arachova.

Day three saw us heading back towards Athens but not before stopping on the Kopaida Plain the southernmost site in Greece for Syrian Woodpecker. This bird seems to like agricultural holdings and for a shy bird does not seem to mind living relatively close to mankind. He responded well to the call but it took some time to bring him close enough to photograph in the poor early morning light. We arrived back in Athens around noon and headed south east to Artemis lagoon- a stretch of water surrounded by reeds but with dwindling water levels giving us a better chance of seeing the Water Rail. It was fairly quiet- some Little Ringed Plovers and a single Spotted Redshank. We could hear the Rail calling and suddenly there he was – close to the water before making a rush back to safety and the reeds.

That was the end of our potential targets for the day but there was still some good birding available. We headed east along the coast to Cape Sounio home to the temple of Poseidon – another tourist trap. Here because the land is protected from hunters several families of Chukar Partridges have become habituated to the many groups of tourists visiting the temple and are relatively easy to photograph.

We headed to Rafino a small town close to the airport where we were to spend two nights before flying home. Rafino was also close to the port of Agia Marina and the 45 minute ferry ride to Evvoia. Day 4 dawned but before the ferry ride we had to try for another Owl.

Tawny Owl is a common owl around Europe and the UK but for some reason we had never crossed paths with the bird. A pair roosted in the monastery of Kaisariani and Lefteris was confident about finding it after daybreak. It was not to be- two hours of hard searching failed to reveal the bird. No calls just nothing. There was some nice birding around the monastery- more Firecrests and Cirl Buntings and dozens of Spotted Flycatchers and Willow Warblers all getting ready for the long journey south. This was as close as we got to birds getting ready to migrate. Many raptors leave during September as well but the only raptor we saw on the trip was an Osprey.



The ferry left at 10.am and after the disappointment of the owl I was ready for a Yelkouan Shearwater. Sadly this was not to be either. The crossing both ways was desperately quiet with just a handful of Yellow-legged Gulls accompanying the boat. The afternoon was quiet too- we checked a few sites for migrating Garden Warblers with no luck and finally headed for Schinias NP- HQ for the Olympic Rowing event where there were plenty of Ferruginous Ducks around along with the ever present Jays and Magpies. So a shame to end with 2 dips on our last day but that's birding!!

We said farewell to Lefteris that evening but as our flight did not leave until the evening of the following day we caught another ferry the next morning – an hour long ride to Marmara a small island in the Aegean. Ever game we had one final shot at the Yelkouan. The crossing was as quiet as it was the previous day but we did find a flock of a dozen Scopoli's sitting on the water on the way back.

So ended 4 days of relaxed birding with some great views of the very charming Greek towns and dramatic coastline of the Gulf of Corinth. This I could certainly do again.

