

A week in western Cyprus April 5th – 12th

This week-long spring trip was intended to give us (Peter and Rosemary Royle) a break in a warmer and sunnier climate (winter in Pembrokeshire is not cold but it is relentlessly dull, wet and windy) whilst also supplying us with two new species of bird in the form of Cyprus Wheatear and Cyprus Warbler, plus some nice scenery, good food and spring flowers. We were also keen to see the Cyprus endemic sub-species of Jay, Short-toed Treecreeper, Coal Tit and Scops Owl.

It succeeded in all these things except that weather was not very warm; the temperature struggled to get up to 20 degrees and the mornings and evenings were pretty chilly. There was a lot of rain on the Saturday and strong northerly winds on several days.

We bought a package with Thomson, which cost £1155 for the two of us, flying from Cardiff and staying in the Anemi Apartments in Paphos which were excellent. They were in a very good position - quiet but near the seafront and restaurants, there was private secure parking, spacious rooms where we could spread out all our stuff, a balcony for doing the birdlist with a home-made G&T, and a truly excellent breakfast at only €6. (We ate this on three days and on other days we ate cereal and went out early or were too full from the meal the night before to need breakfast!) There is also a very pleasant swimming pool. *[As I write this, Thomson trips to Paphos are heavily discounted for dates at the end of April – only £300 or so per person].*

We hired a 4WD Suzuki SX4 SCROSS (the same car as we have at home) which was expensive as we had to hire it from Hertz at the airport, our previous car hire booking, which we made via Thomson, having gone pear-shaped. We were glad we had a 4x4 – many of the places we went to had unsurfaced roads and while we never actually needed to use the 4WD the higher ground clearance was handy. (Technically you are not supposed to use 2WD on unsurfaced roads or off-road but there is a lot of confusion about this – our Thomson rep did not seem to know that there were unsurfaced roads in Cyprus!) *[We found driving in Cyprus to be really easy – driving on the left, good roads, signposting pretty good, not much traffic. Buying fuel in the evening was a bit of a problem – the service stations were working on automatic credit card payment only. The instructions near the machine were in Greek and English but actually on the machine itself the questions were in Greek! Somehow we managed it and petrol was dispensed!]*

Cyprus in spring will always be a lottery. Depending on the weather and the progress of the seasons the bird species that you will see can vary dramatically. We kept our eyes on the Birdlife Cyprus latest sightings at <http://www.birdlifecyprus.org/recent-sightings>. These do tend to have an eastern Cyprus bias as most of the resident birdwatchers live there. Nonetheless it was a very useful resource for giving us an idea of what was about.

As far as our birdwatching went, we were pleased to see our two target birds in the first couple of hours so the rest of the week was spent going to interesting, scenic and/or birdy places to see what we could find, and also doing a few touristy things. Having read copious trip reports beforehand I was surprised that we did not find the following birds: Black Francolin, any birds of prey other than Kestrels and a Marsh Harrier, and conspicuous and charismatic species such as Bee-eaters, Great Spotted Cuckoo, Roller and Golden Oriole. This was despite the fact that we were looking out (and listening out) for the above species all the time. There were strong northerly winds for much of the time we were there which can't have been good for migrants though it might well have been holding up those already there. However this does not explain the lack of any hint of a Black Francolin or of resident birds of prey. *[As I write this on 15th April I see that the weather forecast for Easter and the rest of the week is very good – temperature up to 24 degrees and light southerly winds – bliss for both birdwatchers and migrating birds I should think]*

We thought the Cyprus Warbler might not be easy – in the end we found two birds on the first morning and one gave us a good singing display. But we found them more retiring and not as showy as the Sardinians and often all you got was a flight view. We soon realised that if you could see a prominent white bib on a bird in flight then it was not a Cyprus but was a Sardinian. I fear for the future of Cyprus Warblers - for every Cyprus Warbler we found there were always several Sardinian

Warblers nearby and they seem to occupy exactly the same habitat – a bit puzzling really. We saw several occurrences of the two species interacting and chasing each other.

Cyprus Pied Wheatears were much easier – we found our first bird on the wires going up the Mavrokolympos Dam road – they often perched in bushes and even tops of trees and although usually associated with rocky areas, could sometimes be found where there were hardly any rocks. Their song is most unusual and distinctive – a sort of fizzing buzz.

We used Gosney “Finding Birds in Southern Cyprus” as our main source of information plus the Birdlife Cyprus website and various notes I had downloaded from the web. Also research carried out using Google Earth. We bought a map from Amazon which was just good enough for most purposes – it was the National Geographic Cyprus Adventure Travel Map. The birding locations we visited are described below in the daily itinerary:

Day 1, 6th April

Mavrokolympos Dam: We parked about 150m beyond the end of the tarmac where a little gully came in from the dam, and although it initially seemed quiet when we got out of the car, in the immediate area we found two pairs of Cyprus Warblers and two of Sardinian. Eventually we had excellent singing views of the Cyprus Warbler. The male Sardinians and Cyprus Warblers were interacting and chasing each other. At the same spot were several Cyprus Wheatears and the first of many Tree Pipits. Nothing on the water except a pair of Little Grebes and a Wood Sandpiper at the edge. We walked along the track and found Fan-tailed Warblers and had a decent view of a Chukar (they were calling all around). Also huge numbers of small blue butterflies – Paphos Blues? Down the road in the valley beneath the dam we heard the first of many Cetti's Warblers and in the fig tree by the little house at the end of the dam a Chiffchaff and a Willow Warbler. This was altogether a lovely spot and we were glad we had come here first. We then went, via Agios Georgios, to **Avigas Gorge**. After a splendid lunch (large chunks of juicy and tender barbecued chicken and pork) at the Last Castle at the beginning of the gorge, we walked slowly up the track seeing a good range of migrants in the form of Redstart, Blackcap, Garden Warbler, Eastern Bonelli's Warbler, Nightingale and Semi-collared Flycatcher. There were several Turtle Doves purring in the trees.

Day 2, 7th April

We drove to Troodos up the Diarizos valley on the F616, which turns off the B6 just near the Asprokemmos Dam turning. It proved to be a good quality road which also looked promising for birds so we planned to come back another day. Along the **upper F616** Before the road joins the E812 and the turn off to Platres, there was a section which ran through beautiful scenery with orchards, fields, mountains and small patches of scrub and pine forest. We stopped at two places along this road and found Cretzschmar's Buntings, about 8 pairs of Masked Shrikes, Serins (including a song-fighting male) and Cyprus Wheatears (also Chaffinches!) Sitting in a café at **Troodos Village** with a good view out the back we saw Red-rumped Swallow and two Pallid Swifts. We walked the Persephone Trail which turns off the small road which leads to the right of the hotel. Along this (rather dull) trail were quite literally hundreds of Coal Tits – at any time you could here at least three singing. There were also Treecreepers but these were hard to see – they were often feeding in the upper branches of the trees which were covered in lichen. You could hear them though, even if you couldn't see them. They did not often fly to the bottom of a tree and work up like the ones in the UK. We did eventually get some very good views. We also saw two pairs of Jays, a pair of Masked Shrikes and heard Blackbird and Wren. We then drove round the back of Mt Olympos and to Cedar Valley, then back down the F622 via Pano Panagia - fantastic scenery but we did not see any birds of note.

Day 3, 8th April

We went early for a walk round the **Paphos Headland**. It was Saturday so it was quite busy with joggers and it was also gloomy and windy. There were Crested Larks, Yellow Wagtails, Corn Buntings and a mixed flock of sparrows which were finding juicy caterpillars on the yellow marigold flowers. A flock of Little Egrets passed offshore, but the best birds were a small flock of Red-throated Pipits feeding just inside the fence which gave excellent close views. The weather was grey and cloudy with a forecast of showers – good driving weather so we decided to drive

eastwards to **Oroklini Marsh**. It was fiercely windy in the northerly hide, but there was a very good range of birds on view, the best being a flock of Glossy Ibises, Spur-winged Plovers, Black-winged Stilts, a pair of Red-crested Pochard, a Ferruginous Duck and a few Flamingos. We drove down to the southerly hide which was more sheltered and found another pair of Red-crested Pochard, a big flock of Ruff (about 100), a Marsh Harrier, and feeding on the track were a Wryneck and a Collared Flycatcher. A Great Reed Warbler sang hesitantly from the reeds. We had lunch in the café by the northern hide – it is round the back and is a very laid back and family friendly place where we had fantastic fresh orange juice and one of the best pizzas ever. We then drove back west and looked at **Zakaki Pool** – we saw nothing there as it was very windy and although the hide is up high the reeds still blocked the view. Then we drove down **Ladies Mile** – the “small pools” in Gosney were a full-sized lake, and it started to rain heavily but we did eventually find a small number of Little Stints, two Greenshank, a few Kentish Plovers, a few Flamingos and the inevitable Ruffs. Also a Northern Wheatear on the dry side of the unsurfaced road (which had by now become very muddy and full of puddles). At the end of the road we could go no further – the shallow lake went right up to the fence and although it may be possible to drive across we weren’t prepared to try it. So we backtracked and went round to Akrotiri to see the salt lake – which appeared to be completely empty birdwise. We progressed onwards to find the other end of the track across from Ladies Mile – it ended at the big sandy lake as we expected. It was getting too late to birdwatch in the vicinity of the monastery so we did not investigate this area further.

Day 4, 9th April

The weather was fine but rather breezy, We decided to go north towards Aphrodite’s Pool. We turned off to **Theletra Gorge** (Gosney) and parked for a while hoping the local Long-legged Buzzards might show but nothing did and despite the apparently really nice habitat there were hardly any birds at all. Next stop was **Evretou Dam** where we parked near the top of the track which was in poor condition. Lovely lush habitat but inhabited only by Great Tits and Sardinian Warblers. Splendid orchids though, on the slope below the track, also an Eastern Festoon butterfly. Being Sunday, there were a lot of fisherman at the lake edge, and there was no sign of any birds on or by the water. Eventually we got to **Aphrodite’s Pool** and – AAAARGH! the car park was overflowing and people were parking all down the road! (It was Sunday of course) We rapidly aborted and went to look at the Akamas Heights villages and had an amazing vegetarian mezé in Imogen’s Taverna in Kathikas. Then back to Paphos intending to go the Archaeological Site, but it closed at 5:00pm (Lonely Planet said 7:30 – maybe that’s in the summer). Later we set off back to **Mavrokolympos Dam** to try and find the Scops Owls (these are very likely to be split on the basis of their two note call and dark plumage see

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/283666966_Reprising_the_taxonomy_of_Cyprus_Scops_Owl_Otus_scops_cyprius_a_neglected_island_endemic). We followed the instructions and GPS ref. in Gosney and parked in a small pull-in on the left opposite two tracks going off to the right (not one track as in Gosney). Note that this is by the first set of cliffs going up the road, not the ones at the top. While it was still light a Scops Owl flew out of the cliff just behind us and then flew into the valley where we lost it. Then just after dusk a bird started calling from about 100 metres up the road. We walked up the road to hear it better, then after calling for a few minutes the owl flew out and into the valley, followed by a second one which perched on the wire for a few seconds. (There was still just enough light to see these birds as they flew and perched) A bit later another bird started calling from the opposite side of the valley and further up. (We heard three different types of call from these owls - one owl gave the classic Cyprus Scops Owl call of one strong note followed after a gap by a second quieter note on a different pitch, one called with a second note which was actually two notes close together and the third sounded much like a Eurasian Scops Owl, but it was far away and the second note may have been lost)

Day 5, 10th April

To avoid the strong northerly winds we kept south and visited **Asprokremmos Dam**. The small patch of pine trees was harbouring quite a few birds – Collared and Semi-collared Flycatchers, Tree Pipits, a lovely Wood Warbler, as well as Greenfinches, Goldfinches and Great Tits. Then we heard the distant call of a Hoopoe and saw two birds in the distant row of trees. We walked out into the scrub beyond the trees and found one Cyprus Warbler (not very co-operative) and the usual Sardinians, also a Cyprus Wheatear. We then went to the area below the dam but it was very quiet indeed – just the occasional Cetti’s Warbler singing. There were a lot of bee-hives here which made

it not very inviting for walking, but there were also no bee-eaters in attendance! We then decided to explore the Diarizos Valley so we took the F616 Troodos road up into the hills and turned off at several places where a side-road went off to the right and down towards the river. These areas were all different – sometimes uncultivated and full of scrub, sometimes planted with oranges, sometimes cultivated fields - but they yielded some good birds. We found plenty of Corn Buntings, plus Cretzschmar's Buntings, Whinchats, Tree Pipits, a flushed Snipe, Spanish Sparrows, Lesser Whitethroat and Reed Warbler. We then progressed up the main road to the point where it crosses the river. Here we followed the **road to Gerovasa** – this I hoped would lead us to a recommended spot described in a report I had which refers to the wonders of the “Dhiarizos Valley”. The location in the reports is not actually the Diarizos, it's a tributary but it sounded nice. I researched the instructions on how to get there from Limassol and reckoned we could get there from the other end. Well, we found the spot, by a bailey bridge which goes over the head of the little valley. There were Cyprus Warblers and Wheatears and Cretzschmar's Buntings but regrettably nothing more interesting. We then returned back down to sea level via some spectacular scenery around Dora and went to the **Mandria Fields**. There we found a huge flock of mixed Yellow Wagtails – mostly Black-headed, some Blue-headed and possibly others. They were dipping up and down into the irrigated potatoes and just occasionally they would all fly up in a huge flock. The only other bird of note here was a Northern Wheatear.

Day 6, 11th April

After our experience on Sunday we set off early for the Akamas Peninsula and at 8:30 we were the only car in the **Aphrodite's Pool** car park. We were pretty sure we heard two Olivaceous Warblers singing as we headed up the path. We then popped out of the gate at the top and into the famous “**Caravan Park**”. We walked around and about and along a track through the middle. There was a Nightingale singing in the scrub near the Pool, and the scattered trees in the grassy field held a lot of migrants – a similar range to Aspro Dam. Tree Pipits, Wood Warblers, Blackcaps, and we think we saw all three of Collared, Semi-collared and Pied Flycatchers. (This site was interestingly quite sheltered in what had become another day of very strong winds from the north). We then drove to **Smyies Picnic Area** – it was very cold and windy here and although we could hear Serins we could not see them. On the way back towards Neo Chorion we stopped and wandered around a beautiful field full of wild gladiolus where we saw yet another Cretzschmar's Bunting and we also stopped at the little chapel where there was a huge flock of nesting Spanish Sparrows. We then drove back to Paphos and went to the **Archaeological Site**. The wind was much lighter on this side of the island and we had very a pleasant couple of hours looking at the ruins, photographing the masses of flowers (yellow field marigolds, red poppies and blue statice) and seeing some good birds – more yellow wagtails, very tame singing Crested Larks, Corn Buntings, Redstarts and best of all a Woodchat Shrike and, at last, a Black-eared Wheatear.

Day 7, 12th April

A dull morning but it felt really warm. First thing we went to **Mandria Fields** where we saw the Yellow Wagtails again and also some other birdwatchers – virtually the first we had seen! We then investigated the road down to **Achelia reed beds**. The whole stream bed was completely dry and looked as though it had been for some time. It was also used for fly-tipping and not very pleasant. The only birds of note were a flock of 6 Turtle Doves asleep on the wires. After packing up we called in at **Aspro Dam** again. There were other birdwatchers there – up to five cars at one point! (We were now into the week before Easter – perhaps a more popular holiday time) There was still a good range of species there – at one point we had five species of warbler in one tree – Eastern Olivaceous, Chiffchaff, Wood Warbler, Blackcap and Lesser Whitethroat. Beyond the trees there was a very smart pair of Whinchats on a pile of dead wood. Heavy black clouds were approaching so we called it a day and set off for the airport.

BIRD LIST

We were quite pleased with our tally of birds though we would like to have seen a few of the missing birds mentioned earlier, in particularly Great Spotted Cuckoo as my husband has never seen it. We made no special effort to see water birds so our list of waders, gulls and herons is rather paltry.

Little Grebe	At Mavrokolympos Dam and Oroklini Marsh
Cattle Egret	Large numbers breeding at Oroklini Marsh

Little Egret	A flock of about 15 birds off Paphos headland
Grey Heron	Just one bird in flight at Oroklini Marsh
Greater Flamingo	Small groups at Oroklini Marsh and at Ladies Mile
Great Cormorant	One bird on a rock off Aphrodite's beach
Mallard	At Oroklini Marsh
Teal	A few at Oroklini Marsh
Shoveler	At Oroklini Marsh
Ferruginous Duck	One bird at Oroklini Marsh
Red-crested Pochard	Two pairs at Oroklini Marsh
Marsh Harrier	One at Oroklini Marsh
Kestrel	Several birds seen every day in all habitats
Chukar	Seen at Mavrokolympos Dam and the Diarizos Valley
Quail	One bird heard in the Diarizos Valley
Moorhen	At Oroklini Marsh
Coot	Numerous at Oroklini Marsh
Black-winged Stilt	Numerous at Oroklini Marsh
Kentish Plover	A few at Ladies Mile
Spur-winged Plover	Displaying and mating at Oroklini Marsh
Little Stint	A small number at Ladies Mile
Ruff	Large flocks at Oroklini Marsh and Ladies Mile
Greenshank	A few at Ladies Mile
Wood Sandpiper	One bird at Mavrokolympos Dam
Black-tailed Godwit	One at Oroklini Marsh
Snipe	One bird flushed from a ford in the Diarizos Valley
Yellow-legged Gull	Seen regularly over the sea and around dams
Wood Pigeon	Very numerous in a wide range of habitats
Feral Pigeon/Rock Dove	In towns and also on cliffs
Collared Dove	Common in towns and villages
Turtle Dove	Heard at Avigas Gorge and a group of 6 seen on wires along the Achelia stream bed
Scops Owl ss cyprius	3 to 4 birds at dusk at the cliffs on the road up to Mavrokolympos Dam
Alpine Swift	A small group near Aphrodite's Rock
Pallid Swift	Two birds at Troodos
Common Swift	Seen every day, even over the hotel
Hoopoe	2 at Asprokremmos Dam and one on the Akamas Peninsula
Wryneck	At Oroklini Marsh and Paphos Archaeological site
Crested Lark	Common in suitable grassy habitat e.g. Paphos Archaeological site
Crag Martin	Only at Avigas Gorge
Red-rumped Swallow	At Troodos
Barn Swallow	Numerous everywhere
House Martin	Seen regularly but not as common as swallows
Tree Pipit	Seen in numerous places where there were small trees
Red-throated Pipit	A small flock on the Paphos headland
White Wagtail	Seen several times in urban or village settings
Yellow Wagtail	Seen at Paphos Headland, Aspro, Dam and especially at Mandria fields where there were large mixed flocks of Blue-headed and Black-headed and possibly others
Wren	Heard at Troodos
Nightingale	Seen at Avigas Gorge and heard at the "Caravan Park"
Redstart	Lovely male birds at Avigas Gorge, Paphos Archaeological site, the "Caravan Park"
Whinchat	At Ladies Mile, Asprokremmos Dam, Diarizos Valley
Northern Wheatear	Only a few birds seen at Mandria Beach and Ladies Mile
Black-eared Wheatear	Only one bird seen, at the Paphos Archaeological site
Cyprus Pied Wheatear	At Mavrokolympos Dam, Avigas Gorge, Diarizos Valley, the "Caravan Park", Asprokremmos Dam etc

Blackbird	Heard at Troodos
Zitting Cisticola	Heard in may damp places, seen well at Mavrokolympos Dam and Diarizos Valley
Cetti's Warbler	Heard everywhere there was even a hint of water, often in quite dry-looking valleys.
Reed Warbler	One seen in the Diarizos Valley
Great Reed Warbler	One heard singing at Oroklini Marsh
Eastern Olivaceous warbler	Heard at Aphrodite's Pool then seen at Asprokremmos Dam
Lesser Whitethroat	Seen a couple of times
Blackcap	Regular at migration hotspots especially the "Caravan Park" and Asprokremmos Dam
Garden Warbler	A couple of birds singing and one seen at Avigas Gorge
Sardinian Warbler	Very common, even in the hotel car park
Cyprus Warbler	Mavrokolympos Dam, Asprokremmos Dam, the Gerovasa road.
Eastern Bonelli's Warbler	Very good close views of two birds in Avigas Gorge
Wood Warbler	In the last few days there were several of these beautiful warblers at the "Caravan Park" and Asprokremmos Dam
Willow Warbler	Single birds seen at Mavrokolympos Dam, Asprokremmos Dam and the "Caravan Park"
Chiffchaff	Single birds seen at Mavrokolympos Dam and Asprokremmos Dam
Pied Flycatcher	We had initially assumed that all the Pied/Semi-collared Flycatchers we were seeing were Semi-collared. However, looking closely at several birds at the "Caravan Park" on our last day we are sure that these were Pied. (Later we checked with Birdlife Cyprus sightings and Pied Flycatchers were being reported)
Semi-collared Flycatcher	Quite common, mostly at migrant spots such as Asprokremmos Dam but also at Avigas Gorge and Oroklini Marsh. Mostly males.
Collared Flycatcher	Great views of smart males at the "Caravan Park" and at Asprokremmos Dam.
Great Tit	Common virtually everywhere
Coal Tit	Extremely common in the high level pine forests. Quite variable in plumage, some much darker than others and with the white neck patch being very variable.
Short-toed Treecreeper	Common at Troodos, though not that easy to see well
Woodchat Shrike	One bird seen on our last day at the Paphos Archaeological Site
Masked Shrike	Quite common at higher elevations in open wooded areas, orchards or pine forest.
Jay	Two pairs seen at Troodos on the Persephone Trail
Magpie	Seen every day – quite common
Jackdaw	Seen in areas with cliffs e.g. Avigas Gorge, the Gerovasa road
Hooded Crow	Common
House Sparrow	Common
Spanish Sparrow	We did not see this species every day but it was often in mixed flocks with House Sparrows. A very large flock of nesting birds was seen at the chapel en-route to Smiyies Picnic Area.
Chaffinch	We only saw this species in or near high elevation pine forest or orchards
Serin	In pine forest – near Troodos and at Smiyies Picnic Area
Greenfinch	Quite common – even in the hotel car park
Goldfinch	Common
Corn Bunting	Common in cultivated areas
Cretzschmar's Bunting	We saw this bird, apparently on territory, in a selection of elevations and habitats e.g. en-route to Smiyies Picnic Area, the upper F616, the Diarizos Valley, the Gerovasa road
Other wildlife of note:	Starred Agama, Chameleon, Butterflies: Eastern Festoon, Paphos Blue, Painted Lady, Clouded Yellow

