

Tour Report

Greece – Crete’s Spring Flowers and Birds

14 – 21 April 2023

Marsh harrier - Agias Lake



Orchis boryi - Spili



Dracunculus vulgaris - Akrotiri



Wood warbler near Alexis hotel



Compiled by Barry Embling

Day 1: Arrive Chania, drive to Alexis Hotel**Friday 14 April 2023***Weather: Clear and sunny, 25°C*

After a hassle-free flight to Chania, we met the last member of our group, who arrived on another flight, and emerged from the terminal to a very hot day. We proceeded immediately to the Alexis Hotel where, once we had checked in and relaxed, we enjoyed our first (huge) evening meal, followed by an interesting digestive liqueur flavoured with geranium flower petals.

Day 2: Ayia Lake - Akrotiri**Saturday 15 April 2023***Weather: Cloudy at times, clearing later to sunny, 21°C*

Our day started with a short trip to Ayia Lake, where we were the first visitors to arrive. We familiarised ourselves with the local wildlife for the first time in the warmth of a glorious morning sun. A couple of female marsh harriers gave good views, as did common swifts and spectacular Alpine swifts. As temperatures warmed, we started seeing buzzards soaring on thermal currents, joined by honey buzzards - which created an identification challenge at first. European green lizards sunbathing on the wall provided good photographic opportunities. A walk over the weir and exploring the parkland took us to a beautiful clear stream, where we saw a sedge warbler catching flies and barn swallows dropping in for a bathe.

After a brief stop at the hotel we headed for the Akrotiri Peninsula, where we saw some beautiful maquis habitat and arrived at Moni Gouverneto to the gentle and pleasant sound of monks singing. Enjoying the attractive gardens of the monastery, we were all impressed by our first tassel hyacinth as we headed to the war monument overlooking the sea to have our picnic lunch. From here we saw a passing flock of bee-eaters and more marsh harriers heading north on migration.

After lunch we descended in the direction of the cave, which most of us reached eventually. Along the way we saw Cretan wall lizards and Balkan green lizards and enjoyed the wildflowers, which included the Barbary nut, a small blue iris. Eastern black-eared wheatears put on a fantastic courtship display with chasing and disputes between rival pairs. The caves with their stalactites and stalacmites and the charming small chapel were of great interest, and we all enjoyed the views across the Sea of Crete.

Once back at our vehicle we drove slowly through the maquis, stopping to photograph the dragon arum in the softer evening light and later we spent some time with some impressive ancient pollarded olive trees before arriving at our last stop of the day, Moni Triaga. Here we enjoyed the beautiful courtyards and impressive architecture, while some of us even managed a quick look at the museum. Our time here was cut short slightly, as we had to return to the hotel to change vehicles.

Day 3: Omalos Plateau**Sunday 16 April 2023***Weather: Sunny with light cloud, 20°C, 17°C on high ground*

Another beautiful warm day - ideal for a trip to the mountains and the Omalos Plateau. Our first stop was Ayia Lake which is en route. Being the first on site on this very quiet Easter Sunday, we awakened the many domestic wildfowl, but soon spotted a new wild duck in the shape of a ferruginous duck. The migratory birds seemed quiet today, with just a couple of honey buzzards leaving northwards as we arrived. From here we gradually climbed into the mountains admiring the views and seeing interesting wildlife wherever we stopped. Our first griffon vultures started appearing, as did ravens, giving us some admirable aerial displays. Butterflies included the Cretan festoon at the Botanical Gardens. At lower altitudes we spotted black-eared wheatears, then sometimes northern wheatears as we got higher.

Up on the temperate Omalos Plateau we were treated to swathes of pink tulips (*Tulipa bakeri*), and our first anemones (*Anemone coronaria*). Trees were coming into flower and leaf, including impressive blossoming

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pears (*Pyrus spp.*). One of our last stops before reaching the top was a charming cultivated valley, where we first heard the distinctive song of the woodlark and ciril bunting, and later saw both. *Daphne sericea* was in full flower, attended by bees that were gathering its orange pollen, sporting curious brightorange pollen sacs.

Proceeding up to the Samaria Gorge on an unusually warm and still day, we had lunch and waited for any passing raptors. Only crag martins along with the odd passing raven appeared, and we walked down to the viewpoint and admired the spectacular gorge in variable and atmospheric white cloud. Suddenly a dark bearded vulture appeared directly overhead, its plumage showing it to be an immature individual. We had good views and a chance to study its shape as it moved in and out of cloud before getting higher and eventually moving off. We were all pleased to see such an island speciality, and we subsequently saw our first orchids of the trip, *Orchis pauciflora*.

Later we started our journey back, our destination being the café at the Botanical Gardens. Welcome interruptions included our first woodchat shrike, easily seen as it hunted with its contrasting pied plumage. At the café we did a little shopping and enjoyed a tasty cup of tea, which concluded a full and enjoyable day in the mountains.

Day 4: Kotsiphos Gorge - Moni Preveli Kourtalitiko Gorge - Spili

Monday 17 April 2023

Weather: Sunny all day with broken cloud, 22°C

Our first stop was the impressive Kotsiphos Gorge, where we had a wonderful walk taking in many new plant species, including the casmophyte (*Linium arboretum*) and the weirdly scented *Arum cretica*. were seen. Before continuing to the beach resort at Plakias for a coffee break we spotted some wall brown and Cleopatra butterflies. We then successfully navigated our way to the car park for Preveli Beach, and went down the first few steps to the viewpoint, from where we overlooked the spectacular valley with around 200 palm trees (*Phoenix theophrasti*). Some of us thought that the only thing the scene lacked was dinosaurs!

We returned to the vehicle after walking back to the car park and had lunch in the beautiful and remote setting of Moni Preveli, with its bizarre menagerie that included Canada geese, cats and llamas. We enjoyed the church and huge Turkish pine (*Pinus brutia*) with its bell, as well as the interesting architecture and museum, along with the historical information about the monks helping allied troops escape from the Germans in WWII.

Driving alongside the Megalopotamos Valley, we passed the beautiful Turkish bridge and continued further inland to the wide Kourtalitiko Gorge, with many close-passing griffon vultures, crag martins, Alpine swifts and a pair of choughs.

We arrived at Spili Plateau with an hour to spare, and on reaching what botanists call the 'Spili bumps' we were excited by the many orchids we could see from the minibus. Although we were initially confused by the variations and the many hybrids, we were able to identify milk orchid (*Orchis lacteal*), Bory's orchid (*Orchis boryi*), few-flowered orchid (*Orchis pauciflora*), and different kinds of *Ophrys*, as well as the beautiful and endemic red tulip (*Tulipus doerfleri*). Corn buntings were singing their jingling songs the whole time we were there, creating loads of atmosphere in what felt like an ancient and unspoilt landscape that made a wonderful finale to a very full day.

Day 5: Georgiopolis - Lake Kounas - Souda Bay - Ano Vouves

Tuesday 18 April 2023

Weather: Sunny all day 22°C

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Our first destination was the river at Georgiopolis, where on arrival we were greeted mostly by coots (with their young), moorhens and swifts of both common and Alpine varieties. Noisy marsh frogs made provided an audio background. Balkan terrapins and a pair of non-native red-eared terrapins were spotted, plus a Balkan wall lizard close by. The highlight of our visit was three passing red-rumped swallows, a new bird for our trip.

The next stop was for a cuppa at Lake Kounas, where we observed a few little grebes on a very disturbed lake due to the many pedal-boats. We saw our first little egret here. After admiring the shrimp plants, we returned to the minibus and observed half a dozen passing steppe buzzards and a couple of griffon vultures. From here we headed to Souda Bay war cemetery, where we had our picnic lunch and took in the sombre atmosphere of this beautifully maintained memorial site.

After a quick dash to the toilets at Moni Triada (via the Old Bastard Canteen where we chased a swallowtail) we saw house martins and another three red-rumped swallows. We navigated the roads around Chania to visit Ano Vouves and its famous olive tree, purportedly the oldest in Greece. This proved to be a particularly interesting place with a fine museum about olive producing and a shop. A walk around the village left us feeling very interested in this ancient rural landscape dedicated to olive growing, and we also saw common smilax (*Smilax asperata*), a creeper sporting its red fruits.

We ended the day with walk to the beach from our hotel for a dip, then headed along the beach to the edge of Chania and a small river mouth. On the way we spotted many migrants, including a very confiding wood warbler, a large flock of over 30 yellow wagtail that we later identified as belonging to the *feldegg* and *flava* races. At the outflow itself we saw little ringed plovers, a Temminck's stint, two common sandpipers and a wood sandpiper – so ending a fun and varied day, much enjoyed by all.

Day 6: Armeni Tombs - Knossos

Wednesday 19 April 2023

Weather: Sunny all day with a cool north breeze, 20°C

After breakfast we headed back to the nearby outflow into the sea beside Georgeakakidon. Here we saw a pair of yellow wagtails, the male being of the *feldeggi* race. Little ringed plovers were still in residence, as was the Temminck's stint, plus three common sandpipers. After a quick view of these species we headed east towards Armeni Tombs. On arrival, we were met by the green fresh foliage of the grove of *Quercus macrolepis*, where we hunted for flowers and tombs under their canopies. We came across giant orchids (*Himantoglossum robertianum*), plus a variety of *Serapsis* orchids, that we identified as *lingua* and *orientalis*. We heard a golden oriole and some of us saw it, which was the birding highlight of our stop here.

Our next stop was at the rather surprisingly named Bali, where we had lunch at the resort, saw no wildlife whatsoever, then ran out of time to look for the spot we were seeking! Our day of culture commenced on arrival at Knossos, where we had an informative guided tour of the palace, seeing the oldest throne and paved road in Europe, which gave us a better understanding of the history of the Minoan civilisation. As we were being guided around a beautiful hobby made an appearance - the ornithological highlight of our visit to Knossos. After a somewhat eventful ticketing mishap and a lot of driving, we were all happy to reach the Hotel Mare Monte and enjoy a quiet evening meal of sensible proportions, run through the checklist and retire.

Day 7: Malia Marsh - Aposelemis - Marsh - Krasi

Thursday 20 April 2023

Weather: Overcast with a cool north breeze, 20°C

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After waking in the east of the island for the first time we headed for nearby Malia Marsh, where we immediately spotted some crested larks. A walk through the maquis brought many small birds into view, including a handsome woodchat shrike. Five passing greater short-toed larks flew overhead; thankfully - we later had a very clear sighting of one in a field. A red-throated pipit passed, giving out its monosyllabic call. After spying a passing female marsh harrier and a very nice whinchat, we decided to move on, satisfied that we'd made the best of our fairly early start.

The next stop was Aposelemis Marsh, a saltmarsh site that was not quite as glorious as it once had been, as the locals clearly regard such spots as somewhere to drive over and fill up with waste. However birds appeared straight away, and we saw a tawny pipit and then, while walking, a squacco heron. On further investigation we saw a pair of little stints, a common sandpiper and two little-ringed plovers, and the squacco heron reappeared.

We spent the rest of the day in the mountains, and headed for the gorgeous mountain town of Kراسi, where we had a coffee followed by a look at the famous huge oriental plane tree. We lunched under its canopy, paying homage to this tree Earth Mother (although we resisted hugging it!). A nice walk up a very steep hill revealed kermes oak (mislabelled holm oak in the village's interpretative information) and some beautiful wildflowers that included woodcock orchid (*Ophrys scolopax*). After such a full day all we had time for was the drive back to base, to give us time to pack and prepare for our next day departure.

Day 8: Drive back to Chania

Friday 21 April 2023

The only downside to the end of a memorable trip to Crete was a delay to our return flight, but after lots of laughs, great wildlife and perfect weather we didn't care too much.

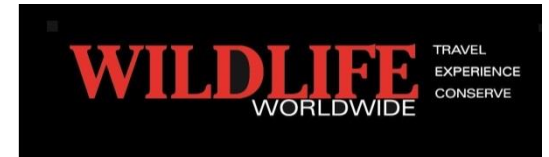
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Checklist



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8
	BIRDS	<i>AVES</i>								
1	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓					
2	Ferruginous duck	<i>Aythya nyroca</i>			✓					
3	Chukar partridge	<i>Alectoris chukar</i>		✓						
4	Little grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		✓	✓		✓			
5	Squacco heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>							✓	
6	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>					✓			
7	Purple heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>		✓						
8	Little egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓			✓				
9	Bearded vulture	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>			✓					
10	Griffon vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
11	Western marsh harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
12	Honey buzzard	<i>Circus pygargus</i>		✓			✓			

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13	Common buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
14	Little ringed plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>					✓	✓	✓	
15	Temminck's stint	<i>Calidris temminckii</i>					✓	✓		
16	Little stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>							✓	
17	Common sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		✓	✓			✓	✓	
18	Green sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>	✓							
19	Wood sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>					✓			
20	Yellow-legged gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
21	Rock dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓					✓	
22	Common wood pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>			✓					
23	Eurasian collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
24	Alpine swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>		✓	✓		✓			
25	Common swift	<i>Apus apus</i>		✓	✓		✓			
26	European bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>		✓		✓			✓	
27	Eurasian hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>						H		
28	Common kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓				✓	✓	
29	Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>						✓		
30	Woodchat shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>			✓	✓	✓		✓	

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31	Golden oriole	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>				✓				
32	Eurasian jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>			✓				H	
33	Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>				✓				
34	Western jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>				✓				
35	Hooded crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
36	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
37	Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
38	Blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>			✓	✓			✓	
39	Crested lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>							✓	
40	Greater short-toed lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>							✓	
41	Sand martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>							✓	
42	Barn swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
43	Eurasian crag martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>			✓	✓				
44	Common house martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		✓			✓		✓	
45	Red-rumped swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>					✓		✓	
46	Cetti's warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		H	H	H	H		H	
47	Wood warbler	<i>Phylloscopus sibilatrix</i>					✓			
48	Sedge warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>		✓	✓				H	

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49	Garden warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>		✓	✓					H	
50	Lesser whitethroat	<i>Curruca curruca</i>								✓	
51	Sardinian warbler	<i>Curruca melanocephala</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
52	Eurasian wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		H	H	✓	✓	✓	✓		
53	Short-toed treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>			H						
54	Common blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
55	Blue rock thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>		✓	✓						
56	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>								✓	
57	European stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓	✓						
58	Northern wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		✓	✓						
59	Eastern black-eared wheatear	<i>Oenanthe melanoleuca</i>		✓	✓	✓					
60	House sparrow	<i>Passer italiae</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
61	Tree sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>		✓	✓						
62	Western yellow wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava flava & feldegg</i>					✓	✓	✓		
63	Grey wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>					✓				
64	White wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba alba</i>					✓	✓			
65	Tawny pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>								✓	
66	Tree pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>		H	H		✓				

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67	Red-throated pipit	<i>Anthus cervinus</i>							✓	
68	Common chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
69	European greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
70	Common linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓	✓					
71	European goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓		
72	European serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		✓			✓			
73	Corn bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		H	✓					
74	Cirl bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>		✓						

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	REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS	REPTILIA & AMPHIBIA
1	Balkan green lizard	<i>Lacerta trilineata</i>
2	Balkan terrapin	<i>Mauremys rivulata</i>
3	Red-eared slider	<i>Trachemys scripta</i>
4	Cretan wall lizard	<i>Podarcis cretensis</i>
5	Marsh frog	<i>Rana ridibunda</i>
	BUTTERFLIES	LEPIDOPTERA
1	Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>
2	Eastern festoon	<i>Zerynthia cerisy</i>
3	Large white	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>
4	Small white	<i>Pieris rapae</i>
5	Eastern bath white	<i>Pontia edusa</i>
6	Clouded yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>
7	Cleopatra	<i>Gonpteryx cleopatra</i>
8	Holly blue	<i>Celastrina argiolus</i>
9	Southern comma	<i>Polygonia aegae</i>
10	Painted lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>
11	Southern speckled wood	<i>Parage aegerica ssp tircis</i>
12	Wall brown	<i>Lasiommata megera</i>
	MISCELLANEOUS	
1	Common blue damselfly	<i>Ischnura elegans</i>
2	Red-veined darter	<i>Sympetrum johnsonii</i>
3	Cretan door snail	<i>Albinaria inflata</i>

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