The following account details the Birding Abroad tour to Cyprus in March 2018. It is an edited version of a fuller account written by participants Ian and Jean Southworth from Christchurch in Dorset, to whom we extend our thanks. The group participants were Mark Dillingham, Denis and Dorothy Jackson, Martin Limbert, David Poole, John Price, Tony Rhodes, Ian and Jean Southworth and Richard Sprakes. Lance and Nick were the Birding Abroad tour leaders. We based ourselves in Paphos for four nights and in Larnaca for three.

21 March – Group members flew out to Paphos on morning flights from three different UK airports; Bournemouth, Doncaster and Manchester, though it was early evening with light fading before we arrived at our first hotel, the Vasilias Nikoklis Inn, our base for a four night stay. The inn, which is set in an original vine-covered stone building with traditional decor, is located just outside the village of Nikoklia in the valley of the River Diarizos, just over four miles from the airport. After unpacking, we enjoyed a pre-dinner beer or two followed by a nice meal and a chat over our plans for the tour.

22 March – Peering from our bedroom windows, the brilliant spring sunlight revealed fabulous views to the front and the back. It was quite chilly first thing but the temperature rose quickly and peaking at 23.5C later in the day. Amongst the numerous House Sparrows around the accommodation, were half a dozen magnificent male Spanish Sparrows. We noticed that Hooded Crows were common and Barn Swallows were nesting in the eaves of the balcony. A few of the group had a pre-breakfast stroll along the valley road noting Hen Harrier, Common Buzzard, Peregrine and Merlin.
Breakfast was taken at 07:30 after which we loaded our two 9 seater people carriers, seeing fly-past Alpine Swifts, Great Spotted Cuckoo and Kestrel as we did so. We then travelled to Paphos Headland archaeological site, a well known migrant hot-spot only half an hour drive away. A Sardinian Warbler, a common species throughout, was singing and showing well in the car park when we arrived. After climbing a series of steps we discovered a rich habitat of wild flowers and scrub, criss-crossed by sandy tracks and interspersed with Roman ruins and mosaics, plus low walls, gardens and some taller trees. There wasn’t much cover from the sun but the sea breeze tempered the heat. In the course of our walk, a great variety of species were seen, included a Short-eared Owl watched coming in off the sea, Hoopoe, Wryneck, a male Eastern Black-eared Wheatear, Isabelline Wheatear, a lovely male Eastern Subalpine Warbler, Cretzschmar’s Bunting, Pallid Swift, Red-throated Pipit, Richard’s Pipit and a brief Eastern Orphean Warbler.

A male Eastern Black-eared Wheatear, Asprokremnos Dam

The supporting cast comprised Yellow-legged Gull, Ring-necked Parakeet, Common Swift, Crested Lark, Short-toed Lark, numerous Black-headed Yellow Wagtails (*feldeggies*), White Wagtail, Meadow Pipit, House Martin, Northern Wheatear, Whinchat, Black Redstart, Lesser Whitethroat, Eastern Subalpine Warbler, Zitting Cisticola, Great Tit, Greenfinch, Goldfinch and Corn Bunting.

Alongside a female Common Stonechat we located a bright male Siberian Stonechat of the ‘Caspian’ race *hemprichii*, a true vagrant to the island, though they have been seen with more regularity by birders in recent years, as the distinguishing features become more widely known. Nevertheless this was the first of the spring so we were highly delighted.
At lunchtime we found an open-sided shelter with benches, which made an ideal place for our picnic. Suitably refreshed, we diverted to the remains of the amphitheatre, then gradually we birded our way back to the vehicles via the mosaics room, arriving mid afternoon. Adjacent to the car park was a promenade alongside the sea occupied by a variety of cafes. We chose the nearest, King’s, where we enjoyed a cool drink or coffee as we watched the tourists enjoying the palm-fringed beach front.

Returning to the vans we moved on to Mandria, a much smaller resort, which involved a short journey of just ten minutes. The habitat here was a mixture of agricultural fields (many with ploughed up potatoes which were being collected by hand) and scrub. From the car park we walked along a beach side track noting several Northern Wheatears, a small flock of Short-toed Larks as well as Tawny Pipit, Chukar and Lesser Black-backed Gull. A fine Masked Shrike showed nicely in the late afternoon sun and a Quail called nearby.

It was almost 19.00 by the time the group returned to Vasilias, where we enjoyed some pre-dinner beers. A Cyprus Scops-owl was calling from bushes opposite the hotel entrance but it didn’t show tonight. Dinner was followed by the log before we headed for bed, concluding an excellent first day.

**23 March** – With breakfast at 07:30, most opted for a spot of pre-breakfast birding noting Hawfinch, two Woodchat Shrikes and a singing Sardinian Warbler. After breakfast we had arranged to meet a representative of CABS (Campaign against Bird Slaughter) who came to give a brief résumé of their work. He explained that CABS was a German organisation dedicated to stopping the illegal practice of trapping and killing birds. Birding Abroad made a donation to CABS of £250, a very worthy cause.
We then headed for the Troodos Mountains, following the valley road and climbing steadily through attractive hamlets and villages where goat herds and bee hives were commonplace. Part way up, we stopped to stretch our legs. A wheatear on roadside wires turned out to be a Cyprus Wheatear, and it was whilst watching this bird that we had sightings of Long-legged Buzzard, Red-rumped Swallow, Cretzschmar’s Bunting, Northern Wheatear and Crested Lark. The road became increasingly steep and windy as we made our way through extensive pine forests to Troodos village, which hosts a collection of tourist restaurants and gift shops. Here we parked before setting off on a short walk through the pines, where we found the endemic Cyprus sub-species of Jay, Coal Tit and Short-toed Treecreeper. All these are candidates for separation sometime in the future. We also had four further trip ticks, these being Cuckoo, Siskin, Serin and Chaffinch.

Short-toed Treecreeper of the endemic race *dorotheae*
Leaving Troodos, we learned of a Cream Coloured Courser which had been found early morning at Mandria, but we were already sitting down for lunch at this time. We ate in Platres, at Dendro Psilo, a large tourist restaurant that specialises in trout, where Grey Wagtail and Blackbird were added to the list.

As soon as our lunch had settled we set off for Mandria, with the temperature being a pleasant 22.5C at this stage. A pair of magnificent Bonelli’s Eagles slowed us down for a few minutes as they circled right over the road, so it was not until 15.30 that we eventually arrived at Mandria. We started searching the fields straight away, the courser being such an attractive and infrequently seen species. However we soon learned from other birders that it had been chased off by the local Hooded Crows soon after it had appeared. Nevertheless we had a good birding session as we scoured the fields, with Hoopoe, Chukar and a flock of Short-toed Larks all seen plus both Isabelline and Northern Wheatears as initial prizes. A recently ploughed potato field held two Stone Curlews and two female Desert Wheatears. The latter are very rare migrants to Cyprus, so we phoned out news of their presence and pondered why this desert specialist had arrived in an agricultural field in Cyprus! No doubt it was the result of the recent southerly winds emanating from North Africa, which probably also accounted for the courser and perhaps the Caspian Plover that had arrived the week previously.

As we explored nearby, we spotted a single Spur-winged Plover, whilst a ring-tail Hen Harrier, Black-winged Stilt and a flock of 25 Garganey flying offshore all added interest. With evening approaching we were almost put off by a short rain shower but in the end we were all glad we persevered. Just before dusk the rain stopped and spectacular numbers of Yellow Wagtails emerged to dry themselves on the top of crops before they dropped down to roost. The males were mainly of the Black-headed race (feldegg), but also represented were some superciliaris, some of the form dombrowskii and as well as identifiable individuals of thunbergi and flava. With about 2000 individuals present it was quite a sight. Of course some were rather more indeterminate inter-grade types, and as for the females, well who knows?

We arrived back at the hotel at 18.00. After a couple of beers we sat down to dinner with the log being done in between courses!

**24 March** – Pre-breakfast birding was particularly profitable this morning with the notable sighting of a male Pallid Harrier which spent half an hour hunting the valley bottom just below our hotel. It showed really well quartering the fields, before disappearing up-river. A male Hen Harrier was also seen plus eight Purple Herons flying over.

Breakfast was again at 07:30, before we left an hour later and made the short drive to Anarita Park, an area of rolling hills, scrub and rocky outcrops. We stayed for just over an hour more or less birding from the vans. We had good views of a Wryneck plus a pair of Eastern Black-eared Wheatears, a Long-legged Buzzard, Alpine Swift and singing Corn Buntings. Afterwards we headed for Paphos, arriving at the headland at 10:40. We revisited the archaeological site where we encountered a similar selection of species to the previous visit, the highlights being a large number of Yellow Wagtails, mainly of the black-headed variety, also Tawny Pipit, Woodchat Shrike, Isabelline Wheatear, Wood Warbler, a female Eastern Subalpine Warbler, Quail and a flock of twelve Glossy Ibis. Just after mid-day we ate our packed lunches in the same shelter, followed by coffee at the King’s just across the road. We then left Paphos and drove to the Asprokremmos Dam arriving just after 14:30 where an Eastern Bonelli’s Warbler was heard and seen very briefly. A scrubby area below the dam produced Red-rumped Swallow. We then had excellent and prolonged views of a singing Cyprus Warbler and both Cyprus and Eastern Black-eared Wheatears were also present.
One of the most memorable of birds, a male Cyprus Warbler

The last hour was spent at Mandria. Agricultural fields there still held at least one Desert Wheatear plus good numbers of Yellow Wagtails and a few Short-toed Larks. There was soon one wagtail less however as a Merlin spectacularly shot through and took one! Both Marsh Harrier and Skylark were added to the list and a ring-tail Hen Harrier made a pass. Information from a visiting birder resulted in us moving just down the road where we enjoyed excellent views of two Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters. Sadly there was a short but very heavy shower that prompted the bee-eaters to move off.

Blue-cheeked Bee-eater as the sun goes down
Back at the hotel we made use of the time to pack for the following day’s transfer to Larnaca. Before dinner the Cyprus Scops-owl was calling opposite the hotel entrance so we all assembled outside and enjoyed brief torch-lit views of the bird perched. Between the two courses at dinner, our waitress gave us shots of a local brandy, which everyone enjoyed. Dessert was a pannacotta served with fresh strawberries, widely declared as the trip favourite. After dinner we quickly did the log and then turned in as the clocks were moved forward an hour for summertime!

25 March – We woke to an overcast sky and it had clearly been raining overnight. After breakfast, we said our goodbyes, loaded the luggage into the vans and left at 08:35. First stop was Mandria in the hope that the Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters had returned, but we were out of luck although we did see a Short-eared Owl. We then joined the coastal highway heading for Larnaca. After about twenty minutes we took a side road to examine a scrubby hillside for Cyprus Warbler. We very quickly found a couple of singing males, so we waited and watched them at length, whilst overhead Alpine Swift and Red-rumped Swallows were noted.

The weather was very pleasant as we stopped for a short walk at Kensington Cliffs, a known site for Griffon Vulture. We had just one Griffon, the only one of the trip, though some of the group saw a Peregrine of the local race brookei.

By 10:45 we were back on route and ten minutes later we stopped at Kourion, an archaeological site a few kilometres west of Limassol. The site, which is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, has a very impressive Greco-Roman theatre plus architectural remains from as early as 300BC to 650AD. The group spread out over the site, which covers a large area. Here we found three species of wheatear around the ruins: Cyprus, Eastern Black-eared and Northern. The visitor centre offered benches with shelter from the sun, so we took the opportunity to eat our packed lunches there.

At 12:30 we left Kourion and headed for the coastal plain and the Phassouri reed beds. We followed a track to a hide that overlooked a small pool where Squacco Heron, Coot, Mallard and Little Grebe were added to the list, though of more interest were Garganey, Woodchat Shrike and Cetti’s Warbler. Three bee-eaters seen distantly in flight were probably Blue-cheeked, but due to their distance their identity wasn’t clinched. Some roadside pools produced Little Egret, Little Ringed Plover, Ruff, Green Sandpiper and Glossy Ibis. A Hoopoe and a Tawny Pipit were seen whilst a Black Francolin was also heard. By early afternoon, we moved on to the gravel pits and salt lake at Akrotiri. The area is quite inhospitable and dry for the most part, though we had distant views of a couple of hundred Greater Flamingos on the lake, whilst a male Pallid Harrier ghosted by and Kentish Plover and Sparrowhawk were new for the trip. We made a quick stop at the St. Nicholas Monastery where the lake held Black-necked Grebe, Grey Heron, Teal, several Ferruginous Ducks and Reed Warbler, before our final birding of the day produced at calling Eurasian Penduline Tit at Zakaki.

We arrived at the Lordos Beach Hotel on the eastern flank of Larnaca an hour later just before 18.00 and after checking in headed for the bar, where we were pleased to find that it was ‘happy hour’. Our evening meal was taken at the Diana restaurant across the road.

26 March – Breakfast was at the usual 07:30 after which we set off for Cape Greco. We took the motorway, which bypassed the well known resort of Ayia Napa, for the thirty minutes drive to Cape Greco where we spent most of the day. We parked on a gravel area by a large stubble field that was full of wheatears. We then followed a track that ran between the stubble field and an extensive area of rocks and scrub. A perched Nightingale was the first of several new species for the trip, such as Spectacled Warbler, Chiffchaff, Song Thrush, Water Pipit and Tree Pipit. We also had excellent views of Pallid Harrier and Hen Harrier, both ringtails. There were four species of wheatear; Cyprus, Eastern
Black-eared, Isabelline and Northern, plus Tawny Pipit, c20 Short-toed Larks, Crested Lark, Woodchat Shrike, Chukar, Lesser Whitethroat and Cyprus Warbler.

Just after mid-day we went for lunch in nearby Protaras at the Ellena Adiko, a meze house. After our leisurely lunch, it was 14:30 by the time we headed back to Cape Greco. We tried a couple of different sites for Ruppell’s Warbler, but these birds had been difficult to find all spring, though we did see Shag and had brief views of a Merlin and two Audouin’s Gull which flew by.

At 16.00 we stopped at a site for Great Spotted Cuckoo which some of the group had missed earlier on the trip. After searching a small tract of woodland one was inadvertently flushed and eventually everyone saw it reasonably well. Our final stop of the day was equally productive with Cyprus Wheatear and Spectacled Warbler, though it was a brief female Rock Thrush and a male Ortolan Bunting which added the glamour. It was 17:35 when we set off back to the hotel, where we made the most of ‘happy hour’. Tonight we dined at a different local taverna. The proprietor was an ageing man complete with drooping moustache and a scruffy appearance. His rather pompous manner provoked a quite humorous reaction from the group and this became the source of much mirth for the rest of our stay! We made plans to alter the next day’s itinerary to include a pre-breakfast visit to Cape Greco for another go at finding Ruppell’s Warbler.

27 March – Those of the group who decided to go for the early morning foray to Cape Greco were well rewarded with a fine male Ruppell’s Warbler, plus Eastern Bonelli’s Warbler and a fly over Calandra Lark.
After returning for a late breakfast we set off to visit a number of sites in the region. Our first stop was at Oroklini Lake which we viewed from two raised hides, one at each end of the lake. Cattle Egret’s, which were nesting here, gave brilliant views as did Red-crested Pochard, Black-tailed Godwit and Sedge Warbler and many of us caught up with Laughing Dove. There was another Blue-cheeked Bee-eater from the second hide, plus much closer Greater Flamingos, Ferruginous Duck, Garganey, Ruff, Spur-winged Plover, Black-winged Stilt, three ‘Baltic’ Lesser Black-backed Gulls and a Hoopoe. A Black Francolin, our first actual sighting, showed well, and allowed itself to be ’scoped!

Sensational views of our second Blue-cheeked Bee-eater of the trip!
At 13.00 we drove to the Larnaca salt lake pools. From a raised hide Black-necked Grebe, Spur-winged Plovers, Yellow-legged Gull, Crested Lark and Isabelline Wheatear were seen plus a migrant flock of nearly 20 Bar-tailed Godwits. A Greater Sandplover was found on Spiro’s Pool, with three Kentish Plovers also present for comparison plus Little Stint and Little Ringed Plover.

We enjoyed some refreshment at the nearby Meneou Beach bar, before stopping at another roadside pool close to Larnaca airport where 60 Slender-billed Gulls accompanied the Black-headed.

For dinner we not surprisingly returned to the Diana restaurant. The table had been booked for 19:45 so after meeting in the hotel bar for a quick beer we made our way across the road to the restaurant. Evening log showed that the group total was at this stage some 138 species.

28 March – Our last day, so we were all packed ready for the flight home assembling for breakfast at 07:30. The vans were loaded and we were ready to leave just over one hour later. Ten minutes later we were at Oroklini Lake where we spent just under an hour and a half. The temperature was a very pleasant 23C. There was nothing new but the Blue-cheeked Bee-eater was still perching on the wires in front of the second hide, and we enjoyed good views of Greater Flamingo, Red-crested Pochard, Ferruginous Duck, Garganey, Spur-winged Plover and Hoopoe.

We then set off for the hour and half drive west to Mandria which is only a few minutes from Paphos airport. Here we had a brief tour of the area in our vehicles in the hope of finding migrants, but there was little of note except a few Short-toed Larks and the odd Tawny Pipit, plus two different Laughing Doves. By late afternoon we had all boarded our respective flights back to the UK, arriving safely home later that evening.
The group had enjoyed a very successful trip with all the island specialities showing well, together with a good selection of migrants. The bonhomie and fun amongst the group all assisted in making it a very enjoyable birding trip.

Many thanks to John Price for use of his photographs

LJ Degnan and NP Whitehouse June 2018

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