

Cyprus: Birding Road Trip

Morten and Bee Choo Strange seek out the avian treasures of Cyprus, from its salt lakes and marshes to its mountains.



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In April 2024, we visited the Mediterranean island of Cyprus for 10 days of bird-watching. Cyprus lies 35 degrees north of the equator covering an area of 9,250 km². The northern third of the island is a Turkish-controlled enclave outside the jurisdiction of the Greek-speaking EU-member state of the Republic of Cyprus. Our birding trip covered only the Grecian part of Cyprus.

The best time for birding is springtime from March to May. After the winter rains, the landscape is green. Migrants pass through on their way north, while resident birds start to sing and breed. During our stay, it only drizzled for one day. The rest of the time was bright

and clear with daylight from 6 am to 8 pm, while the temperature remained a pleasant 15-28°C.

Cyprus can be reached from Singapore on several Middle Eastern airlines. We used Lufthansa (via Frankfurt) which had the cheapest deal then at \$1,288 return. We paid a reasonable \$73 per night on average for excellent resorts. The Mediterranean-style food and local wine were outstanding and good value for money. Nine days of car rental cost \$227. Fuel for our 983-km road trip cost only \$85. All in all, our billings were below budget.

With some 12,000 years of human history, numerous archaeological sites, nice weather, good food and sandy beaches, Cyprus is a magnet for visitors including eco-tourists like us. We are not twitch-

Above: We stopped at a recommended birding spot, the Evretou Dam. The dam is an important water supply to the region. It was a beautiful and tranquil place where we picked up six new species. We also went to the Akamas Peninsula in the extreme west of Cyprus. We checked out this rocky and rugged terrain with both a hike and a boat trip up the coast from Latchi Marina.

ers. We simply enjoy a nice habitat, hiking and watching the critters living there. Seeing a lifer now and then adds to the value.

Cyprus is an endemic bird area and has three birds found nowhere else on earth. We saw two of these, an owl and a wheatear, but dipped on the last one: the Cyprus Warbler (*Sylvia melanothorax*). Some British birders we ran into at Troodos Forest said that this bird has declined a lot in recent years. In

addition, Cyprus has three species endemic to subspecies level. We had good views of all three: A jay, a treecreeper and a tit.

The main birding sites in Cyprus are generally easy to locate. Many of them have walkable trails, elevated hides and signboards. The Republic values eco-tourism, although it has problems with illegal hunting and trapping. Martin Hellicar, director of BirdLife Cyprus has more to say on bird trapping: <https://cyprus-mail.com/2024/03/13/boycott-is-the-wrong-response-to-bad-news-on-bird-trapping/>. Communities around the Mediterranean, from Malta to Lebanon, are also struggling with these issues.

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Currently, Cyprus has 406 bird species on its checklist, a similar number to Singapore. Like us, most species listed are uncommon or rare vagrants with a few national records. In our week of birding, we saw 93 species in a variety of habitats: coastal terrain, salt lakes, freshwater marshes, arid scrub and montane forest. We missed some expected and presumably numerous species but added a few surprises. That is how birdwatching will always be. Apart from our 93 confirmed species, we saw some birds that we could not positively identify and heard others, like the Eurasian Hoopoe (*Upupa epops*) and Common Cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*), which we did not count. We only added birds that showed well and were preferably photographed to confirm their identities.

We present here a photo essay of the key places visited and animals found.



Larnaca town on the southeast coast of Cyprus is the gateway to the island. Famous for its resorts and beaches, we were there for the salt lakes and ponds around Larnaca Airport. Important nature sites in Cyprus are usually well signposted and often have elevated hides and information boards at the trailheads. This rental car is the cheapest and greenest we could find, with a 685 cc engine, giving us 28.2 km per litre. In Singapore, these economical small cars are never imported.



People have lived in Cyprus for thousands of years. Today, the island has a population of almost one million residents. Most of the original forest has long been cleared and replaced by agriculture and urban sprawl. But up in the interior hills, in the Troodos Forest, there is still some good habitat left. The hills reach their highest point at the 1,952-m Mount Olympus. There is even a ski resort up here, although the snowy season is short. The vegetation is mainly pines, spruce and other conifers. Near the summit of Troodos, many of the trees were infested with caterpillars of the Pine Processionary (*Thaumetopoea pityocampa*). The larvae weave a silky nest for protection before they turn into moths later in the year.



April is the breeding season in the Mediterranean. Driving from Larnaca towards Paphos, we stopped at the Limassol Salt Lake. The big salt lake itself was pretty empty, but Akrotiri Marsh and the lagoons around Lady's Mile were more productive. We found a few Greater Flamingos (*Phoenicopterus roseus*) and lots of shorebirds here including the Ruff (*Calidris pugnax*), Black-winged Stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*), Little Stint (*Calidris minuta*) and Kentish Plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus*). Cyprus is famous for big flocks of Greater Flamingos that fly in from their breeding grounds in nearby Turkey and spend all winter on the island. We had good views of them at Oroklini Lake, a 50-hectare wetland at the northern fringes of Larnaca that is home to 190 bird species.



Cyprus has three full endemic bird species. One of them is the Cyprus Wheatear (*Oenanthe cyprica*). Most wheatears are associated with open country. Somewhat surprisingly, we found this species to be mainly a woodland bird. This male is perching in a tree within Troodos Forest.



The widespread Common Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*) was indeed common and vocal around Troodos. Here, a male has come down to the ground for a drink.



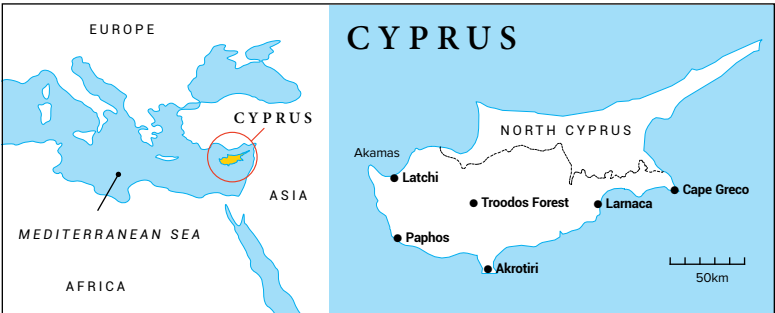
The Cyprus Scops Owl (*Otus Cypricus*) is another local endemic. At one of the Troodos Forest trails, we ran into two hot-shot British birdwatcher friends who showed us this individual hiding well inside a dead tree. In addition, three forest bird species are endemic to subspecies level. We found all three, including the local taxon of the Eurasian Jay (*Garrulus glendarius glazneri*) which is common in the Troodos Mountains.



Left: In our 10-day road trip, we only saw one wild mammal, a rat that quickly scuttled away. The warm and dry Mediterranean habitat was good for lizards though. We found four species with little effort. With some help from iNaturalist experts, we identified them as (from top to bottom): Snake-eyed Lizard (*Ophisops elegans*) which is common around Cape Greco; Shreiber's Spiny-footed Lizard (*Acanthodactylus schreiberi*) which is an endangered Mediterranean species seen at Cape Greco; Cyprus Rock Agama (*Laudakia cyprica*) which is numerous around Cape Greco and other locations, coming in variable sizes and colours; Troodos Lizard (*Phoenicolacerta troodica*) which is a Cyprus endemic seen at a small waterfall in Troodos Forest.



We made a stop at the Troodos Botanical Garden and added a few bird species, including this pretty European Serin (*Serinus serinus*).



REFERENCES

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