

Santorini, Greece, August 2008



Trip report by Per Henningson

Background and logistics

This is a short report on a week's vacation on the Greek island(s) Santorini in the southern Aegean Sea in last week of August. The character of the trip was primarily relaxing, but as always with great curiosity about the nature. My girlfriend, Teresa and I left Sturup Airport, Sweden, at 11:15 am (2 hours delay) on the 23rd of August and the flight was ca 3.5 hours. The traveling agency was the Swedish company "Apollo" and we flew with SAS. The emissions from the flight was compensated using Green Seat (www.greenseat.com) at a cost of 13 € including both ways. From the airport we took a transfer bus to our hotel, 'Madalaria', in the outskirts of the small village Emporio, southeast on the island. The hotel was ok and the location was good from a birders' point of view, but less so for a sunbathers', I would guess. It is situated outside the village in a quiet area and ca 1.5 km from the sea.

To get around the island we rented a scooter for the whole week at a cost of 70 €. Look around a bit and compare prices and insurances of the different rental offices, they vary. We used 'Luca's Bikes' that lies along the main road towards the coast in Perissa, they were very friendly and had a good offer. This island is so small so that there is really no point in renting a car. Therefore, there are many scooter rentals and extremely many scooters swirling around the island. Traffic was ok, but be careful when going by scooter, many accidents occur, especially with tourists. Use helmets! The roads on Santorini are good and most have asphalt surface, even the gravel roads are all in such good shape that you can go there on a scooter without any problems. We covered absolutely the entire island during the week, it is really not a very big island. There is actually one point on the mountain peak Profitis Ilias, from where you can see the whole island.

Introduction to the island

It should be said immediately: Santorini is not a birders' island. The island possesses a very moderate number of birds, both with respect to number of species and number of individuals, at least if not taking into account migrating birds. So, why write this report? Well, even though the island may be poor in birds, it is not completely empty. It has its own little share of interesting species and since few birding trip reports from this island exist (for obvious reasons) this one may fill the purpose of giving for example the birder on family vacation a few hints and tips on what to expect.

Santorini is a very special little island (or actually island group) in the southern Aegean sea. It is a small circular archipelago of volcanic islands and is the southernmost member of the Cyclades group of islands, with an area of approximately 73 km². The geological history of Santorini is very dramatic. The island in its present shape was formed during a gigantic volcanic eruption, 3 600 years ago. During the eruption, which is considered as one of the largest in the history of the Earth, the volcano (or volcanoes) collapsed in the middle, leaving a ring shaped caldera. This is what strikes you the most when arriving to the island; its very obvious geology. It is very apparent wherever you look; the shape of the caldera, the black colored lava sand on the beaches and the clear layers in the mountain rocks showing before and after the big eruption, etc. All of this is very fascinating, but what about the birds?

As mentioned, Santorini is modest in terms of avian life. This is due to several factors; the island is small, it lies fairly far away from any mainland and it is dry with scarce vegetation, almost lacking bigger vegetation than bushes (see picture below). All these natural factors limit the number and range of species of the island. Furthermore, as on many other islands in the Mediterranean, there is clearly the tradition of hunting birds for fun. During our visit we

saw many, many shotgun cartridges and the impact from such an over-dimensional hunting must be huge on such a small and isolated island.



Typical landscape of Santorini. Dry and with scarce vegetation.

The weather during our stay was good; almost no clouds during the whole week and temperatures in the range of 28-32 degrees. Winds were often very strong, especially during evenings and nights, which is apparently typical for the Cyclades. Also, winds were changing very fast from, for example, storm during the night to complete calmness in the morning. Typical for Santorini is the mist, almost constantly during our stay a thin mist was lying over the caldera. Other than that, nothing is worth mentioning about the weather.

The birding

Day 1 (23/8-08) (Emporio)

First day. Settling in and getting our bearings. No records on bird sightings this day.

Day 2 (24/8-08) (Emporio-Vlichada-Thermi-Athinos Port-Pirghos-Profitis Ilias-Emporio)

This first full day was spent exploring the areas around our home-village Emporio. We headed out towards Vlichada in the south. Just after passing the village and heading towards Thermi we spotted two raptors flying high over the small narrow valley just outside the village. The distance was great, but our guess was that it was two **Long-legged buzzards**. Continuing

further on our little trip we went down the winding road to Athinos Port which lies inside the caldera. We did not see much in terms of birds here apart from some **Yellow-legged gulls**, but the view over the Caldera and Nea Kameni was great. The port is relatively busy considering its small size, so not many birds reside here. After the port we went by Pirghos and up to the mountain peak Profitis Ilias (567 m. above sea level) and to the monastery by the same name. From here you have almost a complete view of the island in all directions. You can see all the way to the northern tip and thereby actually the whole island, which gives you a special feeling. This island is really small and also with the extremely scarce vegetation you get an almost complete overview of the islands potentially interesting places. Around us were 10-15 **Alpine swifts** flying and among these one **Common swift**. The swifts flew very close and you could here there wings swooshing. Great observations!

In the evening we went to our closest village, Emporio and found a nice narrow road (too narrow for cars) that went through the village all the way to a small narrow valley up along the hillside north of the village. This place was very nice. We parked in front of the entrance to the valley and walked into it. The place had a special atmosphere especially now in the evening sun. It was quiet and from the hillside a **Blue rock thrush** was singing its beautiful song. We also saw the female. A bit further up in the narrow valley, which has nopals (or Prickly pear cactus) hanging over the path, lies a small church and from here we heard a couple of **Chukars** up in the mountain hillside. After a while we saw a whole flock (5-7) of these flying in and landing on the rocks. We saw these shy birds very nicely from this spot. A **Redbacked shrike** was seen among the nopals and further up in the mountain a **Kestrel** was flying. A very pleasant ending to our first full day.



The narrow valley filled with nopals north of Emporio.

Day 3 (25/8-08) (Emporio-Vlichada-Agia Ana-Akrotiri-Cape Akrotiri-Almira)

This day we aimed for the southwestern part of the island. We started as the day before by going past Vlichada and then made our way out on the small gravel roads towards the small church Agia Ana. Lots of **Crested larks** were seen and heard, these are by the way very

common all over the island. Also out among the vineyards we saw a female **Northern wheatear**. The vineyards on Santorini are quite unlike what you normally think of. The vines are kept low by pruning and are shaped into a basket to protect the grapes from the strong winds and the intense sunlight. Therefore vineyards on this island have very low vegetation and are easy to search (see picture below). On the other hand they are often fairly uninteresting in terms of birds and given the fact that the majority of the land on Santorini is vineyards a big part of the island has lost its potential in terms of avian diversity. Nevertheless, near Agia Ana an **Eleonora's falcon** flew past us at close range and gave us hope. The bird was a light phase and it was the only one we saw during the whole week. Just shortly after the pleasant encounter with the falcon, after passing Agia Ana, we found a couple of **Lesser grey shrikes**. Otherwise the most common shrike is the **Redbacked shrike**, which we saw also this day. Also close to Agia Ana, one **Spotted flycatcher**.



A Santorini vineyard with the typical low vines.
Sea daffodil (*Pancratium maritimum*) in the foreground.

After the small gravel roads we went towards Akrotiri. Along the road we saw one **Woodchat Shrike**. We looked at the 'Red beach' but fled the scene after seeing all the people crammed into the small cove and continued out to Cape Akrotiri. Along the road out there three **Kestrels** were seen but other than that not much more worth mentioning. The rest of the day was spent snorkeling.

Day 4 (26/8-08) (Emporio-Fira-Oia-Amoudhi-Tholos-Finikia-Fira-Karteradhos-Mesaria)

This day the idea was first of all to visit Fira and Oia to see these amazing villages. They are both very beautiful. In Oia we saw seven **Pallid swifts** and five **Alpine swifts** as they were flying over the village, but other than that not much more during the visits to the villages. After these we took the road out around the northern cape and then past the mountain Mavro Vouno on the return trip and saw along the route several **Sand martins**, many **Red-backed**

shrikes, a couple of **Kestrels** and a few **Yellow-legged gulls**. Also, near Mavro Vouno a couple of **Blue rock thrushes** were seen.



Near Mavro Vouno. Here a Blue rock thrush was found. Look for these in this type of habitat.

In Karteradhos one **Long-legged buzzard** was found soaring above the village and one **Little owl** was sitting close to the road just before Vothonas (see picture below). Later in the afternoon we found the only **Roller** for the week. It was sitting on a fence along the road between Megalochori and Akrotiri. This day we actually covered the majority of the island and it was very obvious how very few birds there are!



Little owl just by the road outside Vothonas.

Day 5 (27/6-08) (Imerovigli-Exo Ghonia-Kamari-Ancient Thira-Pirgos)

This day was mostly spent on exploring the ruins of Ancient Thira on Mesa Vouno (396 m. above sea level) and in the evening we paid a second visit to the small valley north of Emporio. The only new birds added to the list were a couple of **Ravens** and a **Common buzzard**.

Day 6 (28/6-08) (Vlichada-Almira beach-Akrotiri-Cape Akrotiri)

This day we spent on the southern part of the island. The small area along the coast between Vlichada and Kokini appeared to be the only part of the island where you could find some solitude. This area has small ridges and valleys that run towards the coast and is quite nice. Also you will find some nice empty beaches here if you just take some time to explore the many gravel roads. Go to the church Agia Ana and take the tracks down from there towards the sea. Here we saw, apart from already mentioned species, one **Peregrine falcon** flying along the coastline. Later during the day we went towards Cape Akrotiri and saw near Akrotiri one **Honey buzzard** soaring and before arriving to Cape Akrotiri we also saw one **Hobby**.



Habitat where many Shrikes are found

Day 7 (29/8-08) (Akrotiri-Mesaria-Anixi-Monolithos-Kamari-Akrotiri)

We explored the eastern parts of the island which has many small roads. The area is relatively empty on birds, but we did at least see two **Long-legged buzzards** at close range and two **Little owls**. In the evening after sunset, we spotted a flock of 11 migrating herons near Emporio. It was almost too dark to see, but our guess was that they were **Night herons**.

Day 8 (30/6-08) (Around the hotel)

Last day. Pick up time to go to the airport was 12 o'clock, so we spent the morning around the hotel. No new interesting sightings.

Final comments

We both liked Santorini because of its special character, but from a birding point of view the island is quite uninteresting. The list of birds was not impressive (29 species), but still some, at least for us, interesting species were found. Also, because of the islands relatively isolated location and its scarce vegetation it was interesting and fascinating to see which birds that were actually there. It was fairly obvious that 'open-field-species' were favoured, such as crested larks, wheatears and shrikes and also that almost all crucially water dependent species such as ducks, herons and waders were absent. Furthermore, we did not see a single warbler during the whole week (although some of these may be possibly to find if one searches the few wooded patches that exist).

So, in conclusion, even though the island sometimes felt empty on birds the avian community on this unusual island was interesting in its own minimalistic way!

If you have any questions or just liked this trip report, please drop me a line.

Per Henningsson, Sweden

perhenningsson@yahoo.com

Species List

	English name	Scientific name	Note
1	Chukar	<i>Alectoris chukar</i>	Hillside north of Emporio
2	Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	11 migrating south in the sunset over Emporio
3	European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>	One flying near Akrotiri
4	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	Emporio
5	Long-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>	Two uncertain near Vlichada and two near Monolithos
6	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	Here and there
7	Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>	One between Akrotiri and Cape Akrotiri
8	Eleonora's Falcon	<i>Falco eleonora</i>	One close fly-by near Agia Ana
9	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	By Almira beach
10	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	Common, especially inside the caldera
11	Rock Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	Common, including also feral pigeon
12	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaoto</i>	Here and there inside villages
13	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>	Four seen in total. Anixi, Mesaria. Keep eye on roadside
14	Alpine Swift	<i>Apus melba</i>	Oia, Profitis Ilias
15	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	One Profitis Ilias
16	Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>	Oia
17	European Roller	<i>Coracias garrulus</i>	One along road between Megalochori and Akrotiri
18	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	Seen everywhere
19	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	Especially along east coast
20	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	Emporio
21	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	Agia Ana and a few more places
22	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>	Seen at several places in rocky areas
23	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	Agia Ana
24	Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>	Here and there
25	Lesser Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius minor</i>	Agia Ana
26	Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>	Akrotiri
27	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	Here and there
28	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	North of Emporio
29	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	Common