

Lefkas, Greece, September 2007



Trip report by Per Henningsson

Background and logistics

This is a short report on a week-long trip to the Greek island Lefkas (or Lefkada) in the Ionian Sea in first week of September. The character of the trip was primarily relaxing, but with lots of birding as always. My girlfriend, Teresa and I left Sturup Airport, Sweden, in the early morning on 1st of September and the flight was ca three hours. The traveling agency was the Swedish company Apollo and we flew with Malmö Aviation. From the airport, which lies on the mainland outside Preveza, we took a transfer taxi to our hotel, 'Alkyon', in the small village Ligia, northeast on the island. The hotel and its location were good. There was a very nice wetland area (or lagoon; ca 1 km² big) just a couple of hundred meters northward along the coast.

To get around the island we rented a scooter for four days. We used 'Broumis', which were run by the hotel and recommended by the traveling agency because of their insurance. They worked fine and had reasonable prices. The island is not very small, but it was no problem to cover it on a scooter. Furthermore, since the island is very mountainous it is very convenient to travel by scooter on the narrow winding roads. Traffic was very good and the roads on Lefkas are in fairly good shape even though they are narrow and winding in the mountains. Even the gravel roads are in such good shape that you can drive there without any problems. We used a map found on the internet which worked fine for us for the whole week. It is detailed enough to include most roads, here it is:

http://www.arethousa.gr/images/lefkada_map.jpg

We covered more or less the entire island during the week apart from the central parts of the Elati Mountains.

Introduction to the island

Lefkas is a very mountainous and green island in the Ionian Sea. It lies very close to the mainland and is even connected to this by a causeway and a floating bridge. The island has an area of approximately 350 km². It has a dominating mountain area in the centre called Elati Mountains with peaks up to above 1100 meters (see picture below). Almost the whole island is mountainous apart from the north end tip. The nature is strikingly beautiful and away from the resorts, up in the mountains, you easily find undisturbed and tranquil areas.



The Elati Mountain is the central massif and has peaks above 1100 meters.

As mentioned, this island is very green, with pine forest and olive groves and typical Mediterranean macchia. The whole island feels "alive" compared to many other Greek islands

where often parts of them are dry and scarce on vegetation. On the other hand, the vegetation types or habitats are fairly similar all over the island, which lowers the overall variation. Even though we only visited a single week, I am tempted to say that this lack of variation was reflected in the diversity of the avian community. The amount of birds was not very high, neither with respect to number of species nor number of individuals, which was a bit surprising given the fact that it is such a verdant island, that also lies so close to the mainland. As you will notice as you read the diary below, the amount of birds recorded are quite low. However, the island is not at all uninteresting and this short report may fill its humble purpose since there are very few birding trip reports from this island (I have not found any on the net). It might be nice for a birder going to this island on holiday to at least get some idea of what to expect.

The weather during our stay was okay; a few days slightly cloudy and one day grey with some rain, but otherwise sunny and temperatures in the range of 20-30 degrees. In the mountains it was sometimes a bit chilly, though. Although the weather was good, it was apparent that autumn was approaching; the weather was a bit “fragile”, not as constantly hot and sunny as in the middle of the summer.

The birding

Day 1 (1/9-07) (Ligia)

First day. Settling in and getting our bearings. We only walked to the nearby wetland area just north of Ligia (see picture below). Here we saw a couple of **Little Egrets** and a pair of **Stonechats**. Not much more was noted during this day apart from some **Collared Doves**.



180 degree panorama over the wetland area in Ligia.

Day 2 (2/9-07) (Ligia)

Also this day was spent around Ligia. We took a walk up above the village and along the walk we saw many **Red-rumped Swallows** and **Barn Swallows**. **Sardinian Warblers** were also heard and seen. In the afternoon we visited the wetland area again and this time we saw a couple of **Squacco Herons**, some more **Little Egrets** and some **Kingfishers**. The latter was later on shown to be quite common along the coast around the village.

Day 3 (3/9-07) (Mountains southwest of Ligia; Nidri, Dimossari, Karya and Kolivata)

This day was the first with scooter. The plan for the day was to explore the mountain areas west of Ligia including a visit to Dimossari Waterfall. We headed south along the coast towards Nidri and already just south of Ligia we saw a group of 10 **Alpine Swifts**. These birds are truly fascinating and beautiful. After some short detours into the mountains where it looked interesting we reached Vlichos Bay. This small bay contained just a couple of **Little Egrets** and some **Yellow-legged Gulls**. We drove out on the peninsula on the opposite side of the bay and back again and after this headed towards Dimossari Waterfall. The walk up along the creek to the waterfall is very nice. Along the walk one **Golden Oriole** was seen very briefly as it flew over the path.

After the waterfall we drove further up into the mountains along the road towards Karya. A couple of **Common Buzzards** are the only birds noted along this route, but the mountains are very beautiful and the vegetation verdant in this area. We drove past Karya which lies beautifully in a valley in the middle of the mountains and then slowly made our way back towards Ligia. We did not see very much in terms of birds on this trip, at least not much worth mentioning, but enjoyed the nature in the mountains very much. In the afternoon we went to the Ligia wetland again and saw apart from the previous species, a couple of **Kentish Plovers** and four juvenile **Sandwich Terns**. This time we also saw seven or eight **Kingfishers**. To summarize this first day of exploring the island: The landscapes and the sceneries are extremely beautiful, but in terms of birds not very impressive.

About 60 km driven this day.



Along the road in the mountains near Karya.

Day 4 (4/9-07) (Trip to Lefkatas in the south; Nidri, Efgiros, Vassiliki, Porto Katsiki)

This day the goal was to make our way down to the southernmost peninsula of the island called Lefkatas. We took the coastal road down past Nidri as the day before. Along the road after Nidri we saw a flock of maybe 20 **Alpine Swifts** foraging in the sky above us. We continued along the main road and took off towards Efgiros. We past through Efgiros, which lies on the steep mountain slope, and headed towards the small cove down by the sea (see front page picture). Down by this little cove (which by the way is an excellent place for a swim) four **Blue Rock Thrushes** were seen, one of them landed just some 10-15 meters away. Also in the slope above the cove, one **Orphean Warbler**.



View over the valley below Efgiros.

After this pleasant stop we went on towards Vassiliki for lunch. In the harbour, only a couple of **Yellow-legged Gulls**. Vassiliki is a busy little tourist town but lies in a nice location by the coast inside the Vassiliki Bay. We continued along the main road past Aghios Petros and along this route you have great views over the central mountain massif, Mount Elati (see picture in the introduction). Just after taking off from this road towards Lefkatas we spotted a raptor flying above us. It turned out to be a **Short-toed Eagle** that we then could watch at fairly short distance. Nice! We continued towards Lefkatas and down here the landscape changes, it becomes gradually dryer with lower vegetation and in the end it is rocky and dusty. Just before reaching Lefkatas, by Agios Nikolaos, we saw one **Black Kite** soaring over the ridge.

After our visit to the southern cape we went back and visited Porto Katsiki, which, I can't deny, is a spectacular beach; spectacular enough to get a picture in this report! In the slope above the beach a couple of female **Black-eared Wheatears**. From here we made our way along the main road home to Ligia.

About 150 km driven this day.



Porto Katsiki. Ridiculously turquoise water!

Day 5 (5/9-07) (The west coast; Agios Nikitas, Kathisma)

The plan for this day was to explore the northwest coast. We headed north towards Lefkada Town and made a short detour over to the mainland, mostly for scanning the shallow waters on the south side of the causeway. Here we saw many **Little Egrets**, maybe around 30 or so. Also, along the coast, one **Great White Egret** was seen flying. We paid a visit to the ruins of

the stronghold that lies on the mainland just after crossing the water and here we saw two **Blue Rock Thrushes**. After this we headed back to the island and drove on the narrow ridge on the north of the big lagoon north of Lefkada Town and made our way towards Tsoukalades. In this village we saw a big flock of **Alpine Swifts**. From here we drove to Aghios Nikitas, which is a very nice little village just by the coast. In the village only some **Red-rumped Swallows**. We continued to Kathisma Beach. The coast here is very nice. We saw from the beach one **Blue Rock Thrush** up in the hills. Here we turned around and slowly made our way back home, via Touskalades and Apolpena. Along our drive homewards we saw one **Long-legged Buzzard**.
About 60 km driven this day.

Day 6 (6/9-07) (Short trip to the mainland; Lefkada Town, Nea Plagia)

This day we made a short trip to the mainland. First we visited the ruins just on the other side of the causeway again and this time we saw, apart from the **Blue Rock Thrushes**, one beautiful male **Black-eared Wheatear** and one **Sardinian Warbler**. We drove down to the Castle Georgios by the village Nea Plagia and here we saw a pair of **Stonechats** in the castle ruins from short distance. On our way back along the coast of the mainland we saw one **Spotted Flycatcher** and in the distance one potential **Long-legged Buzzard**. We went back to Ligia and spent some time around our village. We saw some **Common Swifts** and some **Alpine Swifts**. In the afternoon we drove up above the village and parked in an olive grove and walked along a nice gravel road in the evening sun. We found one **Turtle Dove**, but not much more. The walk was very nice, though.
About 40 km driven this day.

Day 7 (7/9-07) (Ligia)

The scooter was returned the day before, so this day was spent around our home village. We visited the wetland again, of course, and here we saw one **Little Owl**, some **Common Swifts**, one **Black Tern**, a couple of **Little Egrets**, one **Squacco Heron** and some **Goldfinches**.

Day 8 (8/9-07) (Return trip)

Last day. Pick up time to go to the airport was 10 am, so we spent the morning around the hotel. No new interesting sightings.

Final comments

We both liked Lefkas. It is a very beautiful island, green and with some fantastic sceneries in the mountains and some amazing coastal areas. The closeness to the mainland makes it easy to make trips to other interesting areas as well, even though we did not do this. The island is, as mentioned in the introduction, quite uniform in terms of environments. We were a bit surprised by the islands fairly low density of birds, we expected much more and I can not really put my finger on what is the reason for this rather low number of species and individuals. As always on Mediterranean islands, we saw shotgun cartridges, but not in extreme numbers, we have seen worse, so this is not the only explanation. The fact that a

large proportion of the island is wooded does make the birding harder, simply since the birds are tricky to see in a dense habitat. It might be that a larger proportion of birds are left unseen compared to on other more typical (Greek) islands where large areas are covered by low macchia. Anyway, a visit to this island is not a bad idea, and the potential is high. It is in a few concentrated places very influenced by the tourism industry, of course, but this is easily escaped the minute one leaves these tourism hotspots and head up into the mountains, for example. Furthermore, the island is worth a visit even if only considering the landscapes and sceneries.

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

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Species list (selected species)

English name	Swedish name	Note
Squacco Heron	Rallhäger	Ligia Wetland
Little Egret	Silleshäger	Ligia Wetland
Great White Egret	Ägretthäger	Seen from the causeway to the mainland
Short-toed eagle	Ormörn	By junction from main road towards Lefkatas
Long-legged buzzard	Örnvråk	Somewhere around Touskalades
Common Buzzard	Ornvråk	Here and there in the mountains
Black Kite	Brunglada	Near Agios Nikolaos
Kestrel	Tornfalk	Here and there in the mountains
Kentish Plover	Svartbent strandpipare	Ligia Wetland
Yellow-legged Gull	Medelhavstrut	Fairly common
Sandwich Tern	Kentsk tärna	Ligia Wetland
Black Tern	Svarttärna	Ligia Wetland
Collared Dove	Turkduva	Common
Turtle Dove	Turturduva	Along a walk above Ligia in an olive grove
Little Owl	Minervauggla	Ligia Wetland
Common Swift	Tornseglare	Ligia
Alpine Swift	Alpseglare	Ligia, Nidri, Tsoukalades
Kingfisher	Kungsfiskare	Ligia Wetland and around Ligia
Barn Swallow	Ladusvala	Common
Red-rumped Swallow	Rostgumpsvala	Common
Stonechat	Svarthakad buskskvätta	Ligia Wetland
Black-eared Wheatear	Medehavsstenskvätta	Here and there
Blue Rock Thrush	Blåtrast	Here and there
Spotted Flycatcher	Grå flugsnappare	On the mainland near Peratia
Golden Oriole	Sommargylling	Trail towards Dimossari Waterfall
Orphean Warbler	Mästersångare	Cove below Efgiros
Sardinian Warbler	Sammetshätta	Several places
Goldfinch	Steglits	Ligia Wetland

