

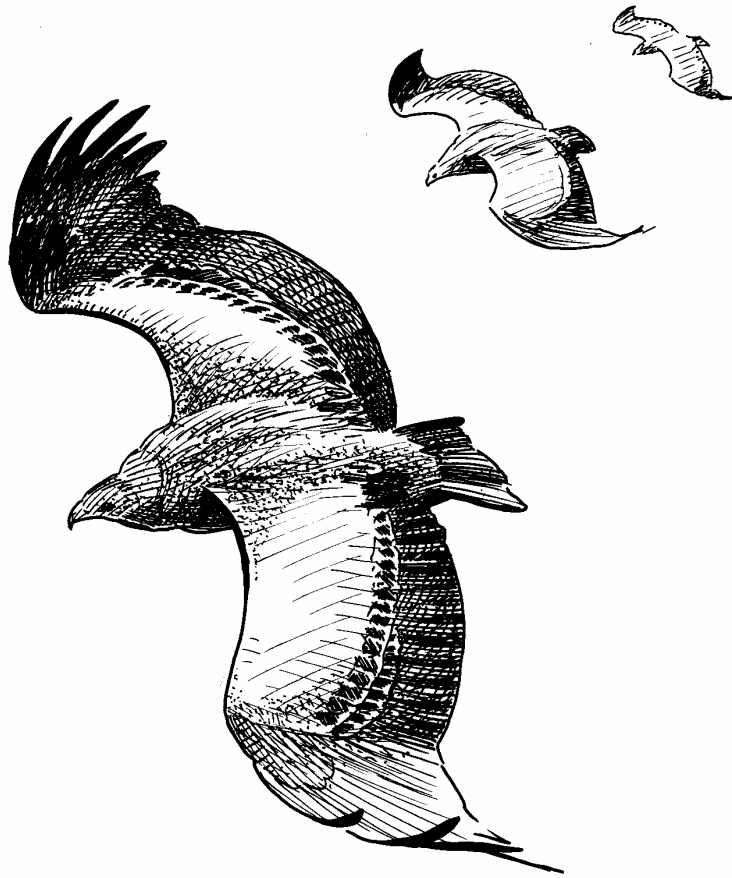
Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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Crete
18 – 25 April 1995

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The group

Mike Pill
Doreen Pill

Anthony Shipton
Elizabeth Shipton

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Christine Wakerley

Alan Greengo

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Sheila Thompson

Leaders:

Mick Rebane and Chris Durdin

Report written by Chris Durdin

Note: English spellings of Greek names are reliably inconsistent, For example, what we usually know as Phaestos (or Phaistos) is on the local road signs as Festos, Gortys = Gortyna, Agia Triada = Ayia Triada/Hagia Triadha; Heraklion = Iraklion ...

Original document scanned for web use with OCR (Optional Character Recognition), December 2014. Species names are kept as then noted, though some have changed since, especially Ophrys orchids for there are several new species recognised or other changes.

Daily dairy

Tuesday 15 April – Stansted-Heraklion-Plakias

'No walking is allowed' said the lady marshalling us into airport buses from the Stansted flight into buses, as I suggested we might walk the 75 yards into the airport terminal. There we collected our luggage, drachmas, holiday leader Mick Rebane and the coach and headed west.

There was a stop on the outskirts of Rethymnon for coffee and cake, then we headed south across the island towards our base on the south coast at Plakias. Giant fennel was lit by the coach headlights by the roadsides on the way. Mick fetched a minibus – one of two we used all week – to carry the suitcases for the last few yards on streets too narrow for the coach, and there George Dimakis, proprietor of the Hotel Sophia, settled us into our rooms for the week.

Wednesday 19 April - Local walk to: Myrthios

We had heard tales of poor weather on Crete until we arrived, but today was warm and that was how the weather stayed for the whole holiday.

The olive groves through which you can walk to Myrthios start just a few yards from the hotel. Before dipping into then we looked in some scrub, attracted by singing Cetti's and great reed warbler (neither were seen this time), and a common sandpiper shot through where there was no visible water. Even here there was immediately a profusion and confusion of wild flowers. The yellow and white of crown daisies; purple pitch trefoil with its smell of tar; scarlet and blue pimpernel; the deep crimson pea flower of dragon's-teeth.

Through the woods the flower list multiplied (see below). Highlights included a start to our orchid list with *Orchis italica* (Italian man, naked man or naked monkey orchid), late spider and bug orchid. A wood warbler was singing, a temporary territory on migration. A golden oriole was heard and a spotted flycatcher - Mick's first on Crete this year – was seen. The butterfly net was in action too. A speckled wood was examined in the Ferrero Rocher box, then our first Eastern festoon.

Climbing out of the wood, the local buzzards could be seen well, and there were distant griffon vultures, In the Mediterranean scrub, Sardinian warblers and stonechats were common, Here many shrubs are prickly to resist grazing: spiny thyme, spiny burnet, Greek spiny spurge and smilax, for example. Others are strongly scented; commonest was the yellow-flowered Jerusalem sage. The thick leaves from massive bulbs of the autumn flowering sea squill were there alongside somewhat similar spring flowering asphodels.

We passed a Venetian water mill where the stream was once tamed and channelled to make olive oil. Then upwards to the welcoming white walled village of Myrthios, past the old laundry, where we were expected at the Platia Tavern. Here Greek salads were interrupted twice, firstly to move tables when a bus needed to turn in the square. Then a Norfolk couple, John and Ann Oxenford, told us stories of orchids above Spili, before needing a bump start when their car refused to start. (They made it safely back and changed their hire car for another with no further mishap and send their thanks for our help.)

The afternoon walk back to Plakias was downhill, to everyone's relief, and on a wide track. That evening, our first taverna dinner was at Zorba's.

Flowers seen on the first day's walk

Not all species have English names but where they are known they are used where possible, usually taken from Blamey & Grey-Wilson's Mediterranean Wild Flowers. Latin names are in italics. Where a name is in brackets it is the same flower as the other name next to it.

Osyris

Fig

Silene colorata
Anemone heldreichii
 Turban buttercup *Ranunculus asiaticus*
 Yellow horned poppy
 Oriental plane
 Navelwort
 Spotted medick
 Carob
 Star clover
 Asparagus pea = dragon's-teeth = winged pea *Tetragonobulus purpurea*
 Bladder vetch
Vicia villosa fodder vetch
 Little robin
 Round-leaved cranesbill
 Long-beaked storksbill *Erodium gruinum*
Coronilla cretica
Convolvulus elegantissimus = *C. althaeoides tenuissimus*
 Mediterranean spurge
 Greek spiny spurge *Euphorbia acanthothamnus*
Lavatera cretica a tree mallow
Hypericum empetrifolium a shrubby St John's wort
Cistus salvifolius – white-flowered, sage-leaved
Cistus creticus – pink
 Cretan bryony *Bryonia cretica*
 Prickly pear
 Giant fennel – in full flower
 Fennel – just beginning to sprout first leaves
 Scarlet & blue pimpernel
Onosma graeca a goldendrop
 Purple viper's bugloss *Echium plantagineum*
 Blue houndstongue *Cynoglossum creticum*
 Borage
 Jerusalem sage
 Three-lobed sage *Salvia fruticosa*
 Satura *Satureja thymbra* – smells like thyme
Verbascum sinuatum a mullein
Verbascum arcturus – an endemic mullein
 Cretan wall lettuce *Petromarula pinnata* – actually a bellflower, endemic
Pallenis spinosa
 Crown daisy
 Salsify – like a pinky-purple Jack-go-to-bed-at-noon)
 Common (spring) asphodel
 Sea squill – leaves only
Ornithogalum narbonense a spiked star-of-Bethlehem
 Tassel hyacinth
 Smilax
 Barbary nut *Gynandris sisyinchium*
 Field gladiolus *Gladiolus italicus*
 Dragon arum
 Naked man orchid *Orchis italica*
 Late spider orchid
 Bug orchid
 Eastern tongue-orchid *Serepias vomeracea* ssp *orientalis*
 Large quaking grass
 Giant reed

Thursday 20 April – Spili

East of Plakias there is a number of low lying fields, well placed for a migrant bird flying north. The small wet area in the first field had drawn in a ruff, and in the second an extraordinarily tame squacco heron with fine plumes on its nape. The ordinary sparrows on Crete are the brown-capped Italian subspecies. We had barely adjusted to these when we also found a Spanish sparrow on a tamarisk, the only one seen during the week. Crested larks perched still for clear views; whinchats were on fences and bushes; goldfinches were brighter than seemed possible; and Mick found a tawny pipit on the ground. Passing the two fields, we turned briefly inland past sheets of gladioli on the right, when from the left a bittern flew up over the dry part of the field.

Having collected Sheila, we drove inland, stopping at Kourtaliótiko Gorge. Immediately there were ravens, griffons, a blue rock thrush and superb black-throated wheatears. There are steps to take you down into the gorge – one of 2000 gorges in Crete. At the bottom the water comes out of the limestone rocks in a sheet reminiscent of water features in shopping malls. A tiny chapel was visited by those with a more spiritual outlook on life.

Lammergeier is one the 'target' birds on Crete, and it was the ever alert John who picked up the bird of prey that showed its long wings and paddle-shaped tail as well could be hoped for. There are five or six pairs on Crete, ranging far and wide over the mountain ranges, so this was a real slice of luck. Among the rocks were the white flowers of the endemic *Cyclamen creticum*. Down in the gorge was the bush storax with sweetly scented, delicate hanging white flowers.

Back up by the minibuses there was a mini-drama when ravens and kestrels were mobbing a griffon vulture. The ravens' motivation became clear when we found a nest up on the cliff. Up in the sky with them were alpine swifts and crag martins.

Lunch was a gyro – the Greek equivalent of donner kebabs – or two, eaten by the fountains from stone lion heads in the square at Spili. Above Spili the landscape is more open, almost moor-like, where there was the 'lu lu' song of a woodlark as we left the buses by the roadside. Our destination was just a few yards away, a grassy hillock. First a stream had to be crossed by way of a fallen tree. It's a wide tree so this is less precarious than it sounds, and from the wear on the bark many naturalists had made this crossing. The reason is that the small hill is packed with an astonishing number and variety of orchids. We found the following 15 orchids in our three hours there:

Boryi's orchid *Orchis boryi* (early purple-like)
Milky orchid *Orchis lactea*
Few-flowered orchid *Orchis pauciflora* - until recently a subspecies of Provence orchid
Naked man orchid *Orchis italica*
Yellow bee orchid *Orchis lutea* var *galilaea* and *lutea*
Marengo orchid *Orchis heldreichii* (=Woodcock orchid *Orchis scolopax heldreichii* in Blamey)
Rainbow orchid *Ophrys iricolor*
Four-spot orchid *Orchis quadripunctata*
Cretan bee orchid *Ophrys cretica*
Man orchid *Aceras anthropophorum*
Sawfly orchid *Ophrys tenthredinifera*
Bug orchid *Orchis coriophora*
Late spider orchid *Ophrys holoserica* (*O. fuciflora* in Blamey)
Eastern tongue orchid *Serapias vomeracea* ssp *orientalis*
Sombre bee orchid *Ophrys fusca*

Cretan and black widow irises; *Anemone heldreichii*, *Ranunculus gracilis*, *Daphne sericea* and Cretan valerian were also found. But the flowers that almost stole the show from the orchids were the tulips; the red endemic *Tulipa doerfleri* in the meadows and pink rock tulips *Tulipa saxatilis* on the hillside.

A quail song 'wet-my-lips' joined the chorus of corn buntings before we again crossed the tree and left for Plakias.

Dinner was in the Taverna Christos. We had a spread of starters – octopus, salad etc – and some tried the 'big beans' and artichokes to follow.

Good Friday 21 April – Phaestos

First stop was by a river at Plati where a little egret flew by, showing its yellow feet to us and to the local Sardinian warblers. The drive to Gortys (= Gortyna) took us through the crowded market on the main road of Timbaki, then past banks of wild lupins.

At Gortys, once the capital of the Roman province of Crete, most of the group took time to visit the odeum for the famous code of laws, inscribed in a Dorian dialect on blocks of stone. Somewhere a scops owl called in broad daylight. Lunch was over the road in the shade of eucalyptus trees, in one of which was a kestrel nest.

Phaestos has the most superb hillside setting overlooking the Messara plain, and looking down onto it we made some attempt to interpret the ruins of this splendid Minoan palace with help of various guides. There were whinchats and greenfinches on the fences and a tree sparrow flew past. On the hillside nearby a brief botanical diversion found love-in-a-mist, mambose orchid *Ophrys mammosa* (a subspecies of early spider orchid in Blamey but now separated as a species), bug orchid, fan-lipped orchid (*Orchis collina*), and scores of pyramidal orchids.

Some two miles or so away we stopped just before Agia Triada to look at a bank of Cretan ebony *Ebenus creticus* – a justifiably glamorous name for this superb pink pea flower, endemic to Crete, otherwise known as shrubby sainfoin. There were excellent views of a woodchat shrike for us and the rather agitated local stonechats. Our first scarce swallowtail of the holiday in the car park at Agia Triada flew far too far and fast to be caught in a butterfly net despite my best endeavours. We walked down past the closed remains of the church and village of the Holy Trinity to the dried up river bed of the river Geropotamus where great reed warbler, Cetti's warbler and quail were heard. On the way back, one bus stopped in Spili to visit the church which was in breathtaking, flower-filled Easter finery. Pursuing our ecclesiastical enthusiasm we checked the more modern church at Plakias, which was closed. Tony was persuaded that to ring the bell ourselves might cause a diplomatic incident.

Over supper that evening, a common sandpiper flew between the rocks out at sea facing the Taverna Christos. The starters were so generous we moved straight to pudding. All the wrong subjects were chewed over at dinner – politics, economics and religion – but still there were tears of laughter.

Easter Saturday 22 April

Kotsiphos gorge, Petres river and gorge, Georgiopolis lake, Lake Kournas, Rethymnon

First stop of the day was another of Crete's 2,000 gorges, and another local one, Kotsiphos gorge, through which one can approach or leave Plakias. A male redstart, a male black-throated form of the black-eared wheatear and chukars heard were three highlights.

The two minibuses set northwards across the island, though the convoy system suffered the odd hiccup as the back bus stopped for red-rumped swallows and a marsh harrier (I plead guilty, M'lud.) We arrived together at Petres river and gorge, pulling off the road along the north coast west of Rethymnon. By the small wetland close to the road bridge were little ringed plover, a *thunbergi* yellow wagtail (the grey-headed, Scandinavian subspecies), little egret and stripe-necked terrapins. At Georgiopolis there is a freshwater lake which held a drake garganey, many dabchicks, coots, and moorhens, six common and one wood sandpiper and a possible marsh sandpiper that Mick saw which then failed to appear for the scrutiny of the group. A rendezvous in Georgiopolis to swap one minibus (for another without a

groaning noise) was followed by a packed lunch by the quay. A walk around the reedy area then found several woodchat shrikes, fan-tailed warblers (zip...zip...zip); we saw Cetti's warblers and found loose-flowered orchids (*Orchis laxiflora*).

At the bar overlooking Lake Kournas we tried honey and yoghurts, then, despite the heat of the afternoon, walked towards the apparently birdless lake. There we found the hawthorn-like shrub storax with its sweet-smelling white flowers like an open snowdrop, By contrast, huge dragon arums smelt, as the book suggested, of dead goats. The chukar in a cage was, perhaps, mainly of interest to Chris who had recently been involved with a prosecution for the illegal release of chukar hybrids in Norfolk.

A short drive brought us to the castle above Rethymnon – complete with Cretan wall lettuce. There was time for a walk around this one-time Venetian port. We disappeared in various directions; Mike and Doreen to the harbour, Alan and I through photogenic back streets, before reconvening at a restaurant for supper and limericks, The menu's exotic sounding 'mushroom fright' and 'special lamp' turned out to be fried mushrooms and special lamb.

For some of the group, there was still more to come after our return to Plakias. One minibus went to Myrthios for the Easter service in the small church tucked into the streets above the square where we had had lunch on our first day. In the small but richly ornamented church the service started, late that evening. 'Kyrie eleison' were the only recognisable words from the flow from the elderly male reader, who was joined by a woman elsewhere in the church, sometimes in harmony, sometimes it seemed in competition. There were few in the congregation dedicated enough to hear the whole service but during the course of it most of the population of Myrthios, and probably Plakias too, processed through the church to pay their respects by kissing the picture of Christ. After the service, painted eggs and slightly stale cakes were handed to all those going into or out of the church. Meanwhile the local lads celebrated Easter by lighting and throwing interminable numbers of bangers on nearby rooftops.

Easter Sunday 23 April – Moni Préveli

There were red-painted hard-boiled eggs and Easter biscuits for breakfast at the Hotel Sophia to celebrate Easter Sunday.

We had almost reached Moni Préveli when a cuckoo flew by, causing us to leap out of the minibuses. Though the cuckoo had gone, there were superb telescope views of ortolan buntings – often a difficult bird to find – woodchat shrikes and a pied flycatcher.

It could hardly have been a better day to explore the trees and garrigue below the 'new' 17th century monastery with its fine views over the Libyan Sea, There are few birds where a back view is welcome, but it clinched the identity of a male collared flycatcher by the white collar round the back of the neck. Chris was so excited about a new bird for his life list that he managed to miss the male Ruppell's warbler that everyone else saw so well. The Sardinian warblers were giving great views; there was a trickle of migrating turtle doves; but best of all three male golden orioles, no doubt recent arrivals across the Mediterranean, perched on the outside of the bushes below like golden lollipops. Then, to cap it all, Daphne found the most beautiful orchid of the holiday, a pink butterfly orchid (*Orchis papilionacea*).

We stopped along the road to overlook the 'old' 17th century monastery, Christine, Liz and Tony who explored advised in favour of time spent here. Looking down, the rest of the group watched blue rock thrushes which, it became apparent, were nesting in the buildings.

Lunch was at the Platia Tavern at Myrthios again, overlooking the superb view down towards Plakias bay. An afternoon off followed; many walked back to Plakias down the hill where Cliff and Sheila had views of a subalpine warbler. An evening walk to the fields east of Plakias revealed two tame little stints, a squacco heron, lots of whinchats, woodchat shrike, nine grey herons and about 30 yellow wagtails, mostly the blue-headed subspecies but also two black-headed. John managed to pick out an

almost invisible bittern standing in a dry field. We returned to the Taverna Christos which, it being Easter, spoilt us with the most superbly moist and tasty plate of lamb cooked on the bone, with potatoes in herbs and artichoke salad. Sue's lovely sketches were much admired.

Monday 24 April – Frangocastello

A wall brown by the bus was the first of the trip. Somewhere west of Plakias the ever alert Mick stopped and showed us a land crab (freshwater crab) in the road that somehow he had realised was not a stone. Thirteen of us helped it across the road with an improvised tray. The next unscheduled stop was for an Eleonora's falcon. By a happy coincidence on the scrub by the roadside over which the falcon had flown there was a Ruppell's warbler; they seem to prefer taller vegetation than Sardinian warblers.

The castle of Frangocastello, a former coastal garrison built in 1371 to deter pirates, was where a Greek adventurer, Hadzimihali Daliani, and his men had their last stand when they might have been better off heading for the hills. Our visit was a little early date-wise and late time-wise to see their ghosts – the dhrossoulites – which are reputed to appear in the misty dawn in mid-May. The plain was rather birdless, save crested larks, but the activity was on the sea. Four groups of ten or so Mediterranean shearwaters plodded steadily westwards over the still sea, and a single, then two, Cory's shearwaters, larger and browner, appeared and flew around, occasionally settling not far out.

By the castle shell's entrance there was a mandrake plant, yellow pheasants-eye and squirting cucumber. Three Cory's shearwaters flew round a small boat; a 'real' swallowtail appeared; *Thymelea hirsuta* was identified; a baton blue settled on spiny thyme covered in parasitic dodder. But these were all sideshows compared with the excitement of the migrating herons. A steady trickle of small flocks, sometimes one species, sometimes mixed groups, was moving along the coast, arriving from Africa and heading east along the Crete coast. This took place over about an hour and a half in the middle of the day. The flocks of migrating herons are worth listing in full:

- 9 + 3 grey herons
- 29 grey herons
- 19 grey herons
- 5 little egrets + one squacco heron
- 15 glossy ibises, 6 squacco heron, c16 grey herons
- 6 purple herons + 3 grey herons
- 1 grey heron
- 6 purple herons - landed in a fig tree
- 23 purple herons + 2 squacco herons

We took time out to visit the café near the beach – just in case any more herons came along, of course – and walked a short distance through the hot afternoon sun to the low scrub on the plain where there were spectacled warblers and another Ruppell's warbler.

There was a wedding at the church in Plakias as we drove past on our return. Supper was at the Taverna Apanemo, just west of the centre of town. A fishing boat cruised gently through the Mediterranean twilight as we tucked into starters of squid, octopus, aubergine and green salad. The common sandpiper was out there again, calling away, and still the herons arrived from Africa:

- 28 purple herons + 6 grey herons
- 10 little egrets
- 60-70 night herons
- 45 little egrets

The last two groups were in rather less than twilight, and the night herons took so long to fly in and circle round that Mick was able to return to the hotel, collect a telescope and allow their identification to be confirmed.

Finally, we completed our checklists. To do this we were using Stephanie Coghlan's 'Birdwatching in Crete' when Stephanie herself walked along, recognised a voice and joined the group for a brief chat and to sign copies of her book.

Tuesday 25 April - Local walks

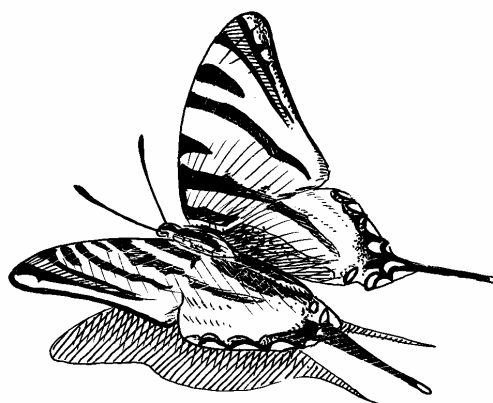
For our last morning at Plakias we explored the wet fields east of the town again. There was still a ridiculously tame little stint and stacks of yellow wagtails. It seems a shame that this little area, so full of migrant birds in April, is almost bound to be built on sooner or later. Our first sand martins were flitting around the stream in the middle of Plakias as we returned. Mick left us to join his next group after lunch at Myrthios. Some walked back and after a quiet hour or two shopping or pottering, the coach collected us for Heraklion. The 'plane was delayed, so there was a quick sortie outside and the following wayside plants were found, some to ponder over in the terminal:

Winged sea lavender *Limonium sinuatum*
Astericus aquaticus
Pallenis spinosa microcephala
White mignonette *Reseda alba*
Curry plant *Helicrysum italicum*
Hop trefoil
Large yellow restharrow *Ononis natrix*

There were also crested lark, stonechat and Italian sparrow, which all goes to prove that extra time is an opportunity for a Honeyguide naturalist.

Butterfly list

Swallowtail
Scarce swallowtail
Eastern festoon
Cleopatra
Small white
Clouded yellow
Dappled white
Painted lady
Red admiral
Speckled wood
Wall brown
Southern grayling
Baton blue
Common blue



Scarce swallowtail

Bird list

Little grebe
Black-necked grebe (probable off Plakias at dusk 21/4)
Mediterranean shearwater
Cory's shearwater
Shag
Bittern
Night heron
Squacco heron
Little egret
Grey heron
Purple heron
Glossy ibis
Garganey
Lammergeier
Griffon vulture
Marsh harrier
Buzzard
Kestrel
Eleonora's falcon
Chukar (heard)
Quail (heard)
Moorhen
Coot
Little ringed plover
Little stint
Ruff
Wood sandpiper
Common sandpiper
Yellow-legged gull
Cuckoo
Rock dove
Turtle dove
Scops owl
Swift
Alpine swift
Crested lark
Woodlark
Sand martin
Crag martin
Swallow
Red-rumped swallow
House martin
Tawny pipit
Tree pipit
Yellow wagtail
White wagtail
Wren
Nightingale
Redstart
Whinchat
Stonechat

Wheatear
Black-eared wheatear
Blue rock thrush
Blackbird
Cetti's warbler
Fan-tailed warbler
Great reed warbler
Spectacled warbler
Subalpine warbler
Sardinian warbler
Ruppell's warbler
Wood warbler
Spotted flycatcher
Collared flycatcher
Pied flycatcher
Blue tit
Great tit
Golden oriole
Woodchat shrike
Hooded crow
Jackdaw
Raven
Italian sparrow
Tree sparrow
Spanish sparrow
Chaffinch
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Linnet
Cirl bunting
Ortolan bunting
Corn bunting

