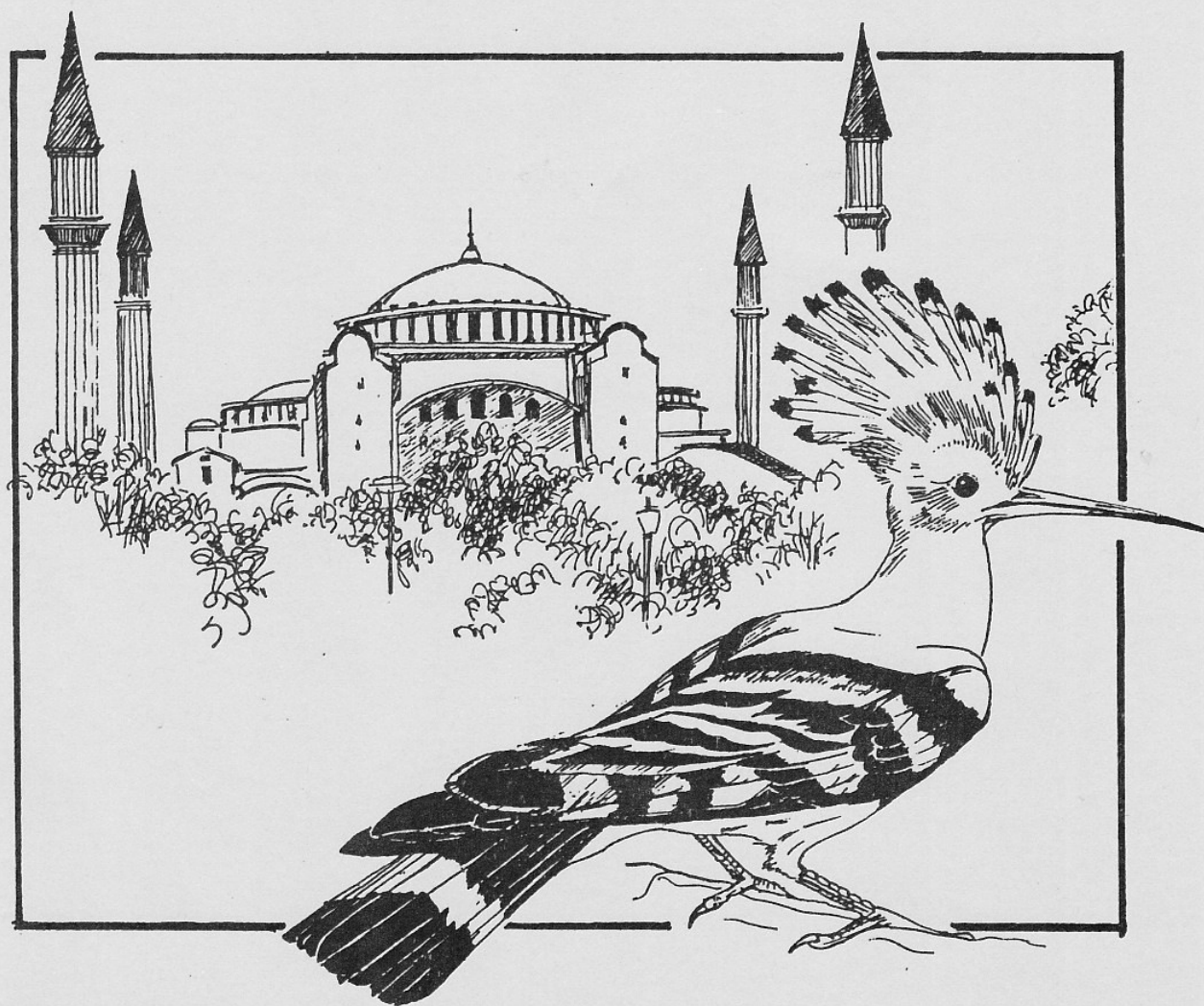


SWAN 
HELLENIC



Mediterranean Cruise 285



BIRD REPORT

3-16 September 1986

**Chris
Durdin**

SWAN HELLENIC CRUISE 285: 3 – 16 September 1986

BIRD REPORT

INTRODUCTION

Be it olives or Olympia, sunshine or shearwaters we will all have memories to warm winter days from when we went "Swanning around the Mediterranean".

You may have booked on the cruise with birds in mind or it may have been an unexpected – and I hope welcome – extra. Either way, it was very pleasing to see the high level of interest in birds and other wildlife. This report is intended to be a small souvenir of this aspect of the cruise.

The highlights? To my mind, they were Cory's shearwaters, Eleonora's falcon and rock nuthatches. Both the shearwater and the falcon have their world headquarters in the Aegean and were seen well by many Swanners. Rock nuthatches must have been the bird of the classical sites, calling loudly and sitting prominently in view for most of us at one stage or another.

The reports on a day by day basis that follow are mainly what I saw, usually shared with others, plus reports from others particularly from excursions where we were split into separate groups. Not all the birds seen on any one day are included but a full list appears at the end.

So as you read this, think back to when you were – in Colin Badcock's words – a Greater or Lesser Yellow-tag, getting browner by the day as you moved round the site in your matriarchal groups. Think of sand, sea and sun; think of oleanders, hibiscus and bougainvillea; think of the good company of your fellow Swanners.

Wherever you are now and wherever your travel plans may take you may I wish you good birdwatching.

Chris Durdin

Postscript, 32 years later

This holiday report was scanned from a printed copy with Optical Character Recognition. Apart from some very light edits and shuffling of the text to fit better on the page, it appears much as the original did. That includes Ruth Murray's splendid line drawing of St Sophia, Istanbul on the cover and the old version of the RSPB logo, though the cover is converted to black & white – the original was printed on coloured card. The typeface is Palatino Linotype, similar to Palatino then used by the RSPB: if it looks familiar, it might be because the *Honeyguide* on every brochure cover is in Palatino italic. The RSPB address above is kept for historical interest: the regional office in Norwich has moved twice since then.

Swan Hellenic "was a British cruise line specialising in tours of historical or cultural interest aimed at the upper end of the cruise market" (Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swan_Hellenic). Originally an independent family firm, for several years there was a partnership between Swan Hellenic and the RSPB promoting Mediterranean and River Nile cruise with a birdwatching component. The RSPB provided guest lecturers / guides on a selection of cruises. Swan Hellenic later became part of P&O, then Carnival Corporation and finally was within All Leisure Holidays Group which ceased trading in 2017.

Chris Durdin, March 2018

Daily Account

4 September: cruising

Delays at Gatwick also meant no birds seen at Dubrovnik after dark so our first few birds were whilst cruising. Yellow-legged herring gulls¹ were the first and remained the most regularly seen birds at sea. Add a black-headed gull and three migrating swallows and that was it!

5 September: Piraeus, Athens

About 18 Cory's shearwaters following the boat outside Piraeus were a fine start to the day and were seen well by perhaps 50 of us after a breakfast-time tannoy. Those that continued with their tea and watermelon saw them on other occasions, so we did well for this classic Mediterranean seabird. We had heard about and talked about how Cory's shearwaters are unusual amongst shearwaters in following boats, but it was good to have it proved in such fine style. Collared dove, house sparrow and feral pigeon were added to our lists in Piraeus, but the real surprise was a peregrine at the Parthenon, which alarmed the local pigeons. A female wheatear popped up amongst the thronging sightseers but perhaps the star wildlife appearance was a Scarce Swallowtail butterfly that drifted round while our Greek guides tried to keep our attention.

6 September: Mykonos

The day started with some 40 Cory's shearwaters first thing and the usual yellow-legged herring gulls. The storms kept us out of Delos so it was all day at Mykonos. The Orpheus moored in the lee of the storm a mile or two away from the town, we went ashore in smaller boats then bussed or walked into town. Dozens of hooded crows flew lazily around, many attracted to a pile of rubbish on the beach. A cormorant and an unidentified tern were seen. Apart from the tame and rather sad-looking pelicans at Mykonos, the best birdwatching here was in a small valley of oleander near where Orpheus was moored and many swam. Two male golden orioles, one female and one juvenile red-backed shrike plus a willow warbler had all stopped here on migration south to Africa for the winter.

For the botanists amongst us September was not a good month as most flowers were dried up and long dead, but here at Mykonos on the seashore there were yellow horned poppies, rock samphire (*Crithmum maritimum*) and a pink flower with fleshy leaves (*Carpobrotus acinaciformis* or Hottentot fig).

7 September: Volos

This was the day that the unexpected motor rally in the streets rather hindered the Mount Pilion excursion.

Nonetheless, the party I was with went up into the green hills to the painted house of Theofilios. The garden flowers and shrubs were quite charming and goldfinches, jackdaws and pallid swifts were seen.

In the meantime, the party at the Meteora were finding still better birds. Magpie and kestrel en route plus black redstart and chaffinch there were eclipsed by at least three Egyptian vultures soaring over the rock.

Charles McCullough and I explored the hills beyond the town that afternoon adding Sardinian warbler, blackbird, whitethroat, the first rock nuthatches so far, several spotted flycatchers, and a red-backed shrike and a wild tortoise. This tortoise shuffled noisily through the undergrowth quite unworried by us, it seemed. We should have looked a little closer, though – it could have been one of three tortoise species.

On returning we found Simon Jervis-Read had outdone the rest of us by seeing a Caspian tern from the Orpheus. Another one up for those who favour the sit and wait style of birdwatching!

¹ Now 'split' and known as yellow-legged gull.

8 September: Mt Athos

Although a day at sea, a good one for birds. Round Mt Athos there were Cory's and the eastern Mediterranean form of the Manx shearwater². Two ravens soared and tumbled round the peninsula; the odd cormorant stood on a rock. Almost surpassing the amazing monasteries, though, was the star bird of the day; an Eleonora's falcon flew parallel with the ship for several minutes. It was our best day for dolphins; common dolphin was the species, at least of those seen well.

More Manx shearwaters appeared in the Dardenelles. The subspecies name for these is 'yelkouan', the same as its Turkish name, which translates roughly as "Lost souls of early Christians looking for a place to rest", a reference to their neverending and seemingly aimless travels around the eastern Mediterranean.

9 September: Istanbul

A young red-backed shrike was watched eagerly by a cat in the gardens between the Blue Mosque and St Sophia. Spotted flycatcher, house sparrow, swallow, collared doves and feral pigeon were all noted in central Istanbul. The city's most famous resident birds, palm doves, were a little scarce: I saw just four, including two outside the way into the bazaar.

The hoped-for passage of storks and birds of pray did not materialise, but there was still plenty of activity at dusk round the moored Orpheus. 10-12 little gulls were round the ship all day along with thousands of herring gulls. At twilight about 300 hooded crows and jackdaws were flying round the silhouetted mosques, and two herons flew from European Istanbul across the Bosphorus to Asia. Best of all was a throng of 100 or more Alpine swifts, wheeling and calling round the boat until nightfall, joined briefly by a peregrine falcon.

Actually falcons were all over Istanbul as the Turkish name for the ubiquitous Fiat Mirafiori cars is Fiat Dogan (pronounced doyan) which translates as Fiat Falcon!

10 September: Troy and Pergamum

Manx shearwaters and mallard ducks near the port at Canakkale was a good start to our dip into Asia Minor. In fact Turkey provided the best birdwatching of the cruise by a long way and Troy was an excellent start. A party of four or five Syrian woodpeckers were in the trees alongside the ruins. Other new birds for the trip were sombre tits, blue tits, hoopoes, crested lark, white and yellow wagtails, a juvenile great grey shrike, corn bunting, and there were a score or more wheatears around the ruins. During the long drive between Troy and the motel for lunch a white stork was seen clearly from the coach.

Around the motel, bee-eaters could be heard and occasionally seen. A quick sortie into the olive grove opposite found chaffinch, blue tit and two yellow Hippolais warblers – most likely to have been icterine warblers here. A red-rumped swallow flew over and a migrant whinchat perched nearby.

The Acropolis at Pergamum was where we first really enjoyed those wonderful rock nuthatches, called calling incessantly from every vantage point. Some 20 wheatears were around plus a superb male black-throated wheatear of the black-throated form, perching obligingly if somewhat surprisingly in a small tree.

The drive to the Orpheus followed, during which the birdwatchers' coach looked vainly for somewhere with wetland birds, but alas it was all too dry. A brief 10-minute stop in the evening light found golden oriole amongst some willows, flycatchers, crested lark and a calling Syrian woodpecker.

² Another species split, now yelkouan or Levantine shearwater.

11 September: Ephesus

A blue rock thrush sang amongst the buildings and the by now inevitable rock nuthatch called away but the best birds were along the Arcadian Way to the ancient harbour. Here six or more red-rumped swallows flew around and jay, swallow, goldfinches, a red-backed shrike, more spotted flycatchers and a flock of about 20 bee-eaters were to be found.

The Didyma excursion found few birds – just jackdaws, collared doves and house sparrows - but did find a splendid Green Toad (*Bufo viridis*).

Miletus, though, was more rewarding birdwise where in a nearby olive grove there was a roosting nightjar which I flushed quite by chance, plus a migrant wood warbler and yet more spotted flycatchers. Crag martins were reported and a magpie en route was our lot here. At Kusadasi the first starlings of the trip perched on a distant TV aerial.

12 September: Rhodes

A short bird list here: red-backed shrike, hooded crow, collared dove, herring gull, kestrel, crag martin and swallow. The shrike was amongst bougainvillaeas and hibiscuses in a municipal garden. The Lindos party reported very good views of crag martins.

13 September: Knossos

Not a lot here to be seen, just greenfinches and sparrows, although the house sparrows were of the brown-capped and bigger-bibbed Italian sparrow subspecies, found on Crete and Corsica as well as in Italy. We heard blue and great tit and scores of cicadas, eventually managing to see one well on a telegraph pole outside the entrance gate.

14 September: Olympia

Maybe it was the sight of English joggers round the stadium which kept the birds away. Another short list: greenfinch, swallow, red-rumped swallow, hooded crow, blue and great tits and chaffinch. This is one of many places where a spring visit to this lovely and well-treed site would be much more rewarding from the bird point of view.

At "official" birdwatching time as we sailed between the Ionian islands of Zante and Cephalonia, Cory's shearwaters obligingly put in an appearance.

15 September: cruising

Not a lot at sea but a yellow wagtail alongside the Orpheus was seen by several people, following the boat for a while before heading for land. Cormorant and herring gulls were the only other birds seen, but there were some distant dolphins and a large fish that might have been a swordfish. Naturally, we didn't get a second look!

16 September: Venice

We were skilfully manoeuvred into position through the fog before setting off on excursions. The famous pigeons were there in St Marks Square and elsewhere, and for those bound for Torcello and Murano dozens of little egrets could be seen through the mist. At Torcello a Cetti's warbler sang its explosive song and dozens of swallows were moving through. The sparrows were Italian, as on Crete. Finally, many more egrets and several whiskered terns appeared as we took the last leg of our journey along the canals to the airport, where we waited for the fog to clear for our flight home.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to all fellow Swanners whose good company Lindsay and I enjoyed on Cruise 285. Thanks to those whose records contributed to this report, especially Charles McCullough, Barry and Ann Taylor and Simon Jervis-Read.

Thank you also to all the cruise staff and crew of the Orpheus for their essential contributions to the running of the trip, sometimes in difficult circumstances, especially to Stuart Turpin, Cruise Manager, whose enthusiasm and considerable bird knowledge was a great help. Thank you also to my fellow lecturers for their welcome to the ornitho-philistine in their midst, and may they also welcome (and identify perhaps) the rock nuthatches which try to interrupt their site lectures.

This report was typed by Lyn Gardenchild and the cover illustration of a hoopoe at St Sophia, Istanbul, was drawn by Ruth Murray.

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Species List

Manx shearwater (yelkouan race)
Cory's shearwater
Cormorant
Grey heron
Little egret
White stork
Mallard
Egyptian vulture
Peregrine
Eleonora's falcon
Kestrel
Black-headed gull
Little gull
Yellow-legged herring gull
Caspian tern
Whiskered tern
Feral pigeon
Collared dove
Palm dove
Nightjar
Pallid swift
Alpine swift
Bee-eater
Hoopoe
Syrian woodpecker
Crested lark
Swallow
Red-rumped swallow
House martin
Crag martin
White wagtail

Yellow wagtail
Great grey shrike
Red-backed shrike
Cetti's warbler
Whitethroat
Sardinian warbler
Willow warbler
Wood warbler
Spotted flycatcher
Whinchat
Blue rock thrush
Wheatear
Black-throated wheatear
Black redstart
Blackbird
Great tit
Blue tit
Sombre tit
Rock nuthatch
Corn bunting
Chaffinch
Goldfinch
Greenfinch
House sparrow (including Italian sparrow)
Starling
Golden oriole
Jay
Magpie
Raven
Hooded crow
Jackdaw

TOTAL: 52 species