

Lesbos in Autumn

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1 Fly Mytilini

Day 2/7 Lesbos – with daily programme of birdwatching excursions from Skala Kallonis

Day 8 Fly London

Departs

September

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code GRC09) or brochure

Grading

A. Gentle birding walks

Focus

Birds.



Images from top: Red-backed Shrike, European Bee-eater and Skala Kallonis



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Introduction

Lesbos is the third largest of the Greek islands and lies in the Aegean Sea just a few kilometres from the coast of Turkey. Unlike many of its congeners, the economy of the island is not dependent upon tourism and the traditional industries of Olive Oil production and fishing are major sources of revenue. The quality of the Olive Oil from Lesbos is considered to be amongst the best in the world and groves of Olive trees are one of the most conspicuous features of the island's landscape. Despite the proximity of Turkey, the island is quintessentially Greek in character and in rural districts many villages follow a way of life that has hardly changed for centuries. Most of the limited holiday developments are in the north of the island but even here there are none of the excesses that have blighted other Greek islands. A rugged mountainous interior is dotted with scrubby bushes and at higher elevations there are pine forests filling the air with scent. The coastline is also a delight with long stretches of both shingle and sandy beaches, secluded coves and a shimmering blue sea. All these natural attributes would be reason enough to spend a holiday on Lesbos but for birdwatchers the island has gained a reputation for being one of the very best places in Europe to experience the exciting phenomenon of migration principally in spring, but increasingly so in autumn, when it is possible to see an impressive range of species, including the chance of rare vagrants if suitable conditions prevail. Regardless of the vagaries of migration, the island's resident and summer visitors are also of great interest, with attention particularly focused on the resident Krüper's Nuthatch which is difficult to find elsewhere in Europe.



Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

In Flight

We depart from London Stansted, arriving in Mytilini typically around midday. On arrival in Mytilini we then transfer to Hotel Pasiphae at Skala Kallonis for a stay of seven nights. This small, family-run hotel has a swimming pool and all the amenities necessary for a comfortable stay, making this tour particularly suited for anyone with a non-birding partner who might wish to enjoy the facilities while the group is out birdwatching. Those wishing to relax after the flight will find the Pasiphae a pleasant location to do so, but if time allows we will make a trip to one of the local wetlands.

Days 2 - 7

Skala Kallonis

The pleasant little town of Skala Kallonis is at the head of a large shallow inlet from the sea, approximately in the centre of the island. The town is renowned for its sardine fishery but the empty beaches and sun-warmed sheltered waters of the bay are beginning to attract an increasing number of tourists, although these have yet to have any impact on the sleepy pace of life in this typically Greek resort. Apart from being centrally located, the town is also close to some of the best wetlands on the island and those guaranteed to be in suitable condition to attract migrants during the autumn. Our programme will be entirely flexible and partly dictated by the weather conditions, as a change in wind direction or overnight rain may presage the arrival of migrants and necessitate an appropriate itinerary for the day. Whatever the route to be followed, each day will usually begin with an optional pre breakfast walk at one of the closest sites and with a post breakfast departure for the day's excursion returning to the hotel again in the late afternoon. Distances between localities are not great, even though the roads are not designed for speed, and emphasis will be on a leisurely exploration of the best birding sites rather than rushing frantically from one place to another. On some days it may be expedient to return to Skala Kallonis for lunch, but on other occasions we will sample the cuisine in the nearest taverna to our chosen birdwatching locality or take a picnic meal. There could be no better end to an enjoyable morning in the field than a relaxed meal in a seaside taverna, with perhaps a delicious Greek salad or a plate of locally caught fish to tempt the palate. What may be less conducive to afternoon activity is a glass or two of another local product, the extra strength Ouzo which has to be treated with the greatest respect!

Within easy reach of Skala Kallonis are the Kalloni salt-pans which attract a wide variety of wetland birds including egrets, herons, ducks and waders. With the potential for new arrivals to drop in at any time, we will check this area as frequently as possible and hope to encounter some of the less regular visitors such as White and Dalmatian Pelican. Also close-by is the small Metochi Lake, fringed by reeds, which holds crakes and smaller herons like Little Bittern and Black-crowned Night



Krüper's Nuthatch

Heron. Although likely to be dry the Tsiknias and Christou rivers provide cover for small migrants and we will search these for shrikes (Red-backed, Lesser Grey and Woodchat), warblers (Icterine, Eastern Olivaceous and Great Reed) and flycatchers (Spotted, Pied and Collared) on a regular basis.

Compared to spring in Lesbos the raptor movements are more noticeable and we will allocate time to scan the skies for the birds of prey as they drift southwards, especially from headlands and vantage points on the northern coast facing Turkey, with a chance of sighting several Eagle species including Lesser Spotted, Eastern Imperial and Booted and also Honey Buzzard. Short-toed Eagle, Buzzard, Long-legged Buzzard, Montague's Harrier, Eleonora's and Red-footed Falcons should all put in an appearance and give good views – some like the falcons allowing excellent views if we encounter lingering foraging groups during our stay.

One key destination will be the pinewoods in the vicinity of Achleleri on the east coast of Kaloni Bay. This is one of the best locations on the island to see Krüper's Nuthatch as well as other local woodland species like Short-toed Tree Creeper, Serin and the local "Turkish" race of Long-tailed Tit. Another location on the eastern side of Kalloni Bay that we visit more than once if conditions are suitable, are the saltpans at Polichnitos. These saltpans usually provide better wader habitat than those at Kalloni in autumn and we will search for scarcer species such as Marsh and Broad-billed Sandpipers amongst the stints, shanks and other sandpipers.

Although migrants can, and do occur almost anywhere certain areas are more favoured than others and we will seek out areas of freshwater - such as the Meladia and Vegias rivers and Pithariou reservoir in the west of the island and coastal fields and olive groves on headlands both in the west (eg Sigri and Faneromeni) and along the north coast (eg around Moilvos/Eftalou and the Korakas Headland). The numbers and variety of the migrants we encounter will depend on the weather condition, but could include species heading south towards Africa (Wrynecks, Subalpine Warblers and Black-eared Wheatears) as well as possibly some of the early arriving winter visitors (Black Redstart, Water Pipit and Hawfinch). The possibility of finding vagrants adds spice to every excursion and with many fewer people visiting the island in autumn than spring there is plenty of opportunity of finding something really rare.

As well as visiting the wetland and migrant areas we will have the opportunity to visit other habitats such as the areas of rocky hillsides, scrub, fields and woodlands to enjoy the local resident species including Chukar, Corn Buntings, Middle Spotted Woodpecker, Sombre Tit, Crested Lark, Rock Nuthatch, Blue Rock-Thrush, Spanish and Rock Sparrows.

In the course of our birdwatching outings we will travel through many little villages frozen in time, where Donkeys have only recently been replaced by vehicles as the means of transporting goods and fields are still farmed by traditional methods, much as they would have been a hundred years ago. In the north of the island, Molivos is often described as one of the most beautiful settlements in all the Greek islands, a jumble of elegant stone houses with red roofs rising above a small harbour filled with old-style wooden caiques. There are the ruins of a Genoese castle atop a hill above the town and from this vantage point a wonderful view across the straits to Turkey. More spectacular views of the coastline are afforded as we investigate further along the north coast and central regions of Lesbos and follow tortuous roads snaking through the range of hills which dominates the centre of the island. Here and there thickets of vegetation relieve the starkness of the boulder strewn hills, and in every sheltered corner there are Olive trees, spilling from hillsides into valleys where their silver leaves contrast with the green foliage of Oaks and Sweet Chestnuts. Wild flowers are at their best earlier in the year but botanists will still find plenty to admire in and sunny days



Sardinian Warbler

should still bring clouds of butterflies. Insects abound on the island and at night the buzzing of countless crickets and cicadas give a pleasantly tropical feel to the balmy evenings. Other, more strident amphibian voices may be heard coming from ditches and pools as Marsh Frogs proclaim their presence.

Not even the greatest optimist can expect to see everything in a seven-day tour, and autumn migration can vary from year to year, with peaks occurring at different times just as it does in western Europe. What can be assured, however, is an immensely enjoyable week on one of the least spoilt and most attractive Greek islands.

Day 8

London

We make our way back to Mytilini to catch a flight home, arriving back at London.

Tour grading

This tour is graded A, consisting of easy day walks only, and is suitable for those of all ages and degrees of fitness.

Weather

It is likely to be warm and sunny in late September/October with temperatures possibly reaching 25°C, however much colder conditions can prevail if winds are from a northerly direction. There is a risk of precipitation increasing into October.

Food & accommodation included in the price

We stay at the family-run Pasiphae Hotel in Skala Kallonis. Accommodation is on the basis of sharing twin-bedded rooms with private facilities but single rooms may be available on request. The hotel has a swimming pool, sun terrace, poolside bar, TV lounge and two restaurants.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

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