

Wader migration in Corfu, southern Adriatic, May 1998

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Considerable numbers of Little Stints *Calidris minuta* and Curlew Sandpipers *C. ferruginea* were seen in early May on two small saline wetlands on the island of Corfu, north-west Greece. These data fit into a documented pattern of spring migration to the north-east between Italy and Bulgaria. There are indications that at least some of the Corfu birds have flown directly across the Mediterranean from the Gulf of Gabes.

INTRODUCTION

The island of Corfu (Kerkira) lies a few kilometres off the north-west coast of Greece at the junction of the Adriatic and Ionian (Mediterranean) Seas. The south-east tip of Italy is 100 km to the west whilst a direct sea passage to Tripolitania or the Gulf of Gabes is about 1000 km, on a north-east/south-west line that would terminate on the coast of the Gulf of Guinea. I spent the period 5–11 May on Corfu to investigate bird migration and saw more waders than had been anticipated.

STUDY AREAS AND METHODS

There are two major wetlands in the southern part of Corfu. The disused salt pans on the eastern coast at Lefkimi comprised, during this study, about 35 hectares of wet mud and shallow water together with a larger area of dry mud and saltmarsh. Twelve kilometres to the west on the open sea coast is Lake Korission; this is also saline, having a direct connection to the sea, and is five km long and between 0.5 and 1 km wide; however the main wader site is restricted to the shallow muddy bay covering about ten hectares at the south end of the lake although a few small muddy bays occur elsewhere.

Owing to transport problems neither site was visited on every day. However, I am fairly sure that the data discussed here are based on essentially complete coverage of the sites. To minimise disturbance a ∞ 30 telescope was used for counting and identification. On both 9 and 10 May, I was able to visit both sites and make two counts at Lake Korission, one morning and one afternoon.

RESULTS

The main data are presented in Table 1. The striking features are the large numbers of Curlew Sandpipers *Calidris ferruginea* and Little Stints *C. minuta* with totals on the island on 10 May of at least 533 and 289 (these totals include a few birds away from the main bay on Lake Korission). The record of Sanderling *C. alba* is also of note.

Migrants not in Table 1 include a few Turnstones *Arenaria interpres*, two Gull-billed Terns *Sterna nilotica* and five Glossy Ibises *Plegadis falcinellus* at Lake Korission together with, at Lefkimi, a Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea* and seven

Spoonbills *Platalea leucorodia*. Kentish Plovers *Charadrius alexandrinus*, with young, were frequent at both sites, whilst up to 20 Little Egrets *Egretta garzetta* were also presumably resident.

There are several indications of a high turnover rate of migrant waders. Table 1 shows several marked day-to-day changes: increases in Curlew Sandpipers at Lake Korission from 8 to 9 May and from 10 to 11 May and at Lefkimi from 9 to 10 May, whilst Little Stints peaked at the first site on 10 May. The duplicate counts demonstrate several changes within a day, with the afternoon counts being clearly larger for Curlew Sandpiper on 9 May and for Little Stint on 10 May. Both species were also restless, moving spontaneously from one feeding area to another. In addition, at Lake Korission on the afternoon count of the 11 May, although many Curlew Sandpipers had switched from feeding to sleeping, small parties were taking off with loud calling and then circling far to the south before returning.

DISCUSSION

In spite of the small area of suitable habitat in this study, the considerable numbers of Curlew Sandpipers and Little Stints are comparable to records from some sites in Italy (Serra *et al.* 1992), the mainland of north-west Greece (Englemoer & Bloksma 1982), north-east Greece (Meininger *et al.* 1990), and Bulgaria (Nankinov *et al.* 1997), and to numbers of the latter species at Pag in the northern Adriatic (Stipcevic 1997). However, relatively few Curlew Sandpipers were noted at Pag; the data of Serra *et al.* suggest this is due to random year to year variation rather than to a narrow front migration.

This study found few Dunlin *C. alpina* and no Redshank *Tringa totanus* which is not surprising since both Nankovic *et al.* (1996) and Stipcevic (1997) found the main passage of these species to be in March. My small numbers of Wood Sandpipers *T. glareola* cannot be explained by date, the natural explanation resides in the lack of freshwater habitats in this study. It is not clear which explanation applies to the absence of Ruffs *Philomachus pugnax*.

Many waders winter in Tunisia in the Gulf of Gabes, including Little Stints and Curlew Sandpipers (van Dijk *et al.* 1984), and this area is also used by these species as a migration stopover, probably after a direct crossing of the Sahara from the Gulf of Guinea (Smit 1986). The Gulf of Gabes is thus a likely source of the migrant waders in Corfu and sev-



Table 1. Counts of waders at Lake Korission and Lefkimi saltpans.

Site	Lake Korission					Lefkimi		
	6	8	9	10	11	7	9	10
<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>						10	8	6
<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>				(3)		2		
<i>Calidris alba</i>	23							
<i>Calidris minuta</i>	2	20	20/30	50/115	25	30	180	160
<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>	25	17	100/210	120/167	255	100	165	360
<i>Calidris alpina</i>					2			1
<i>Tringa erythropus</i>	1							
<i>Tringa nebularia</i>				0/1		1		
<i>Tringa glareola</i>		4		0/1	1			3
<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	(5)					1		

(Bracketed counts were made on Lake Korission away from the main site whilst double counts on 9 and 10 May refer to morning and afternoon visits.)

eral facts suggest some direct flights across the Mediterranean, in addition to the documented passage through northern Tunisia and Sicily (Serra, *in litt.*). First, there are indications of an afternoon arrival and since many waders depart around sunset this would indicate a flight time of around 15 hours, consistent with Gabes as a source. Second, the waders at Corfu were clearly spending at least some hours in feeding and resting. This suggests recuperation from a long flight rather than stopping after a moderate flight from the nearest likely site in southern Italy. For example, on 26 and 27 April 1997 I watched at a dune pool on the west coast of Morocco (Oualidia); this pool is the first permanent coastal water north-east of the Sous estuary (Agadir) and, at 300 km, is at a distance more similar to that of Sicily (Vendicari) – Corfu (500 km) than Gabes – Corfu (1000 km). Parties of small waders, including most species listed in Table 1, were continually dropping in, feeding for some minutes and then leaving to the northeast. This is quite different to the behaviour seen at Corfu. During the main periods of passage at Corfu, the daily weather maps of the Meteorological Office show weak anticyclonic conditions in the central Mediterranean with very light winds that were often variable in direction, though mainly westerly around Malta. Thus there is no suggestion that birds that arrived on Corfu had been drifted to the south from a north-easterly movement emanating from Sicily or southern Italy.

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