

Bonelli's Eagle and Bull Jumpers: Nature and Culture of Crete
April 9 - 19, 2016
With Elissa Landre



Photo of Chukar by Elissa Landre

With a temperate climate, Crete is more pristine than the mainland Greece and has a culture all its own. Crete was once the center of the Minoan civilization (c. 2700–1420 BC), regarded as the earliest recorded civilization in Europe. In addition to birding, we will explore several famous archeological sites, including Knossos and ancient Phaistos, the most important centers of Minoan times.

Crete's landscape is very special: defined by high mountain ranges, deep valleys, fertile plateaus, and caves (including the mythological birthplace of the ancient Greek god, Zeus) Rivers have cut deep, exceptionally beautiful gorges that create a rich presence of geological wealth and have been explored for their aromatic and medicinal plants since Minoan times. Populations of choughs, Griffon Vultures, Lammergeiers, and swifts nest on the steep cliffs.

A fantastic variety of birds and plants are found on Crete: not only its resident bird species, which are numerous and include rare and endangered birds, but also the migrants who stop over on Crete during their journeys to and from Africa and Europe. The isolation of Crete from mainland Europe, Asia, and Africa is reflected in the diversity of habitats, flora, and avifauna. The richness of the surroundings results in an impressive bird species list and often unexpected surprises. For example, last year a Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, usually only seen in northern Africa and the Middle East, was spotted. Join us for this unusual and very special trip.

BONELLI'S EAGLE AND BULL JUMPERS: NATURE AND CULTURE OF CRETE**DAY-TO-DAY ITINERARY**

Day 1 - Saturday April 9: Arrival, Malia Marsh, Palekastro Village

Please plan to arrive at Herakleion International Airport by midday. We will meet local manager Alexander, ornithologist Michalis, and driver at the airport, and then transfer to our hotel in an olive grove isolated on the beach, down from Palekastro Village. If time allows we will bird on the way at the Malia marsh and the Seliniari Gorge. This area of rough and cultivated fields has Stone Curlew, Hoopoe, Short-toed Lark, Wheatear, Whinchat, and Collared Pratincole in spring. Walking along the shallow shore cliffs we might find Mediterranean and Cory's Shearwaters in the bay. The beach can be also good for waders and herons.

The business of the village of Palekastro is primarily agriculture. Olives and grape vines are cultivated and a few fishermen remain. We will have our welcome dinner and overnight here at the Marina Village Hotel (3 nights), an intentionally "green" hotel in the village of Palekastro, located right next to a couple of small wetlands on the Eastern coast of Crete as well as an interesting ancient Minoan site impacted by the 1500 BC volcano eruption at Santorini.

www.marinavillage.gr

**Day 2 - Sunday April 10: Kouremenos wetlands, coastal birding, Toplou Monastery**

This morning we will visit Hiona and Kouremenos wetlands on the coast nearby, where there is a good chance for the Whimbrel, Grey Plover, the migrant Whinchat, and Hoopoe, as well as the locally common Crested Lark.

Next stop will be the Vai beach forest of native Cretan date palm trees and Itanos ruins. Itanos is an archaeological excavation where settlement dates back to prehistoric times. Most of the ruins visible today on site date back to the Hellenistic era, with several Byzantine foundations peering through the ground around the ruins of a Basilica. The archaeological site is found within walking distance from the beautiful beaches we call Erimoupoli. Here we will look for European Shags, nesting Cory's Shearwaters, Eleonora's Falcon, and Red-footed Falcon. We might also find Sardinian Warbler, Bee-eaters, and Audouin's Gull while we explore the area.

After lunch we will visit the very lovely 15th century Toplou Monastery, one of the most significant monasteries in Crete, dedicated to the Panagia (Virgin Mary) and St. John the Theologian. It was founded around the mid 15th century, plundered by the knights of Malta in 1530, and shattered in 1612 by a strong earthquake. Due to its strategic position, the senate of the Republic of Venice, then ruler of Crete, decided to rebuild it. The monastery flourished until the surrender of eastern Crete to the Turks in 1646, after which it was abandoned for a long time. In 1704, it acquired special protection privileges from the Patriarch and was re-inhabited. After its monks were slaughtered by Turks in 1821 during the Greek Revolution of Independence, Toplou was again deserted until 1828. In 1866, during the massive Cretan revolt against the Turks, it was once again devastated. And later, during the German occupation of 1941-44, Toplou was providing shelter to resistance fighters and housed their wireless radio.

This heavily fortified structure is historically and architecturally interesting, but we will not forget to bird in the area looking for Common Buzzards, Kestrels, and the Cretan subspecies of the Great Tit. We will continue on to peaceful Sitia and stroll in the harbor with its Eleonora's Falcons, Little Egrets, Audouin's Gull, and Kingfisher. After dinner we will listen for the Little Owl and the Barn Owl, as well as the Nightjar at Palekastro.

Overnight Marina Village Hotel in the village of Palekastro, www.marinavillage.gr

Day 3 - Monday April 11: Kato Zakros, Gorge of the Dead, Xerokambou Gorge

This morning we will travel to Kato Zakros on the coast along a winding road and a lovely, mountainous landscape. Zakros is a site containing ruins from the Minoan civilization and believed to have been one of the four main administrative centers of the Minoans, and its protected harbor.

We will visit the ancient Palace of Zakro, originally built around 1900 BC, and bird in the wetland nearby as well as the Farangi Nekron (Gorge of the Dead). This gorge carries the mood of these ancient roots and bonds of humans with nature. Throughout this morning we should find most of the heron species as well as the Peregrine Falcon, the locally common Blue Rock Thrush, Raven and Cetti's Warbler, to name just a few.

On the way south to Xerokambos village, we will stop at the Xerokambou Gorge, looking for the Golden and Bonelli's Eagle. We will continue to Alatsolimni (Salt Lake) with the occasional Greater Flamingo, Black-tailed Godwit, and Collared Pratincoles on its shores. The three small uninhabited Kavali islets, close to the shore of Lasithi are home to European Shags.

If time permits we will ascend a winding road to the plateau above through the low, thorny, aromatic shrub habitat called phrygana, found around the Mediterranean on limestone soils. Small villages, old churches, farmland, orchids, and Wheatears are found on the plateau. While descending, views of Palekastro and the sea are dramatic.



Overnight in the Marina Village Hotel in the village of Palekastro, www.marinavillage.gr

Day 4 - Tuesday April 12: Travel from Palekastro to Zaros and the Gorges of Cha and Lapathos

We will start early for a long travel day which will take us to central Crete. On the way we will stop at the very impressive Cha Gorge, the most dangerous gorge in Greece, with a 700 foot high waterfall. The habitat here is good for Red-billed Chough, Griffon Vultures, and Golden Eagles.

As we travel across the island, we will pass Ierapetra, Europe's southernmost city. The name means Sacred Stone. Shortly after, we may drop by the Bramiana Reservoir looking for ducks, Garganeys, and the Pallid Harrier. Along the edges we might find Woodchat Shrike, Stonechat, and common Hoopoe. We will head back to the coast and continue westwards with short stops off the road at the Lapathos Gorge – also known as the “Holy Apostles Gorge”. Lapathos Gorge is the second longest inaccessible gorge of Crete, which is located in Kato Symi, one of the most beautiful areas of Crete. The canyon is generally dry except in winter when the snow at the Plateau of Lapathos melts. We will spend some time here looking for the Black Vultures (the only possible place in Crete!), Griffon Vultures, Lammergeiers, and Golden Eagles.

In the afternoon, if time allows, we will stop at another Important Bird Area, the Iniou Dam for a look at Purple Herons, Cormorants, and Yellow Wagtails.

We will finally rest in our hotel at the foot of Mount Ida's range, Crete's highest peak, in a peaceful setting. Hotel Idi, tucked against the mountain in the village of Zaros

<http://idi-hotel.gr/index.webman?section=hotel&lang=en>

Day 5 - Wednesday April 13: Central Crete, Laloumas Reservoir, Phaistos, and Kalamaki

We start our first day in Central Crete looking at Lake Faneromeni, a.k.a. Laloumas Reservoir. This is an extremely important wetland, where rare birds and other animals breed. We will look here for Booted Eagle, Ferruginous Duck, Little Crake, and numerous waders.

We then cross the main road, heading south to visit the ancient Phaistos archaeological site. Once one of the most important centers of Minoan civilization, this was a wealthy and powerful city in southern Crete. It was inhabited from the Neolithic period until the foundation and development of the Minoan palaces in the 15th century B.C. Although many inscriptions, including the famous disk of Phaistos, were found by the archaeologists, they are all still un-deciphered and all we know about the site is based on the ancient writers and findings from Knossos.

According to mythology, Phaistos was the seat of king Radamanthis, brother of king Minos. It was also the city that gave birth to the great wise man and soothsayer Epimenidis, one of the seven wise men of the ancient world. The site has spectacular views overlooking the fertile plain of Mesara with Mount Ida in the distance.

Our next stop is the beach area, once Crete's biggest delta, still teeming with birds, and a fantastic stretch of coast from Tymbaki to Kalamaki. There are enough birding opportunities here to fill the whole day. We will watch for Montagu's Harrier, Long-legged Buzzard, Great Reed Warbler, and the rather rare Red-throated Pipit here, among others.

If time allows we will visit nearby Matala. The artificial caves in the cliff of the bay were created in the Neolithic Age and the town was the port of Phaistos during the Minoan period. In the 1st and 2nd centuries the caves were used as tombs. Legend has it that one of these caves was frequented by the Roman general Brutus. In the 1960s the caves were occupied by hippies and immortalized in Canadian folk singer Joni Mitchell's 1971 song Carey. For our purposes, now, these coastal caves are good spots to find Rueppel's Warbler and Bee-eaters!

Overnight Hotel Idi, in the village of Zaros <http://idi-hotel.gr/index.webman?section=hotel&lang=en>



Day 6 - Thursday April 14: Gortys, Mount Asteroussia, Amba Gorge

After breakfast we will visit the nearby Gortyn archaeological site. With an unbroken history of 6,000 years and one of the most extensive archaeological sites in Greece, Gortyn is the site of the first human habitation of Crete at the end of the Neolithic period (5th millennium BC). From the middle of the 1st millennium BC, Gortyn replaced Phaistos as the chief power in the Messara.

We then drive less than twenty miles east to go birding in the central and eastern Mount Asteroussia. We will focus on the lovely villages of Charakas and Paranympoi, and end the day at Amba Gorge, which leads straight into the sea. Here we hope to find Griffon Vultures, complete with nests, Golden Eagle, Imperial Eagles, Bonelli's Eagle, Peregrine Falcon, Lanner Falcon, Chukar, Red-billed Chough, Rueppell's Warbler, and several migrants.

Overnight Hotel Idi, in the village of Zaros <http://idi-hotel.gr/index.webman?section=hotel&lang=en>



Day 7 - Friday April 15: Knossos, Gouves Wetland, Lasithi Plateau, and Mount Dikti

Early this morning we will travel north to Knossos, the gem of the Cretan civilization and maritime empire, considered as Europe's oldest city and an imposing archaeological site! Located just outside of Herakleion, the Cretan capital, we will take two hours to fully explore and have a guided history tour.

Next stop is Gouves wetland along the island's northern coast, a must for birders, especially early April as the egrets, Wood Sandpipers, Black-winged Stilts, and herons abound. We will move inland and reach Mount Dikti, a grandiose landscape and mountain range. The dominant feature of Dikti is the Lasithi Plateau, the largest and arguably most picturesque plateau in Crete. It is a place with a long history. According to mythology, there is a cave here where Zeus was born.

Today it has an abundance of warblers and small birds such as Corn Bunting, Cirl Bunting, Short-toed Lark, Tawny Pipit, and several birds of prey.



Overnight Hotel Idi, in the village of Zaros <http://idi-hotel.gr/index.webman?section=hotel&lang=en>

Day 8 - Saturday April 16: Travel Zaros to Chania with stops at Kamaraiiko Gorge, Amari valley, Kourtaliotiko Gorge

Today will be a full day of traveling as we drive to the western part of Crete with several short birding stops along the way. Our first will be Kamaraiiko Gorge where we will try to find the Lanner Falcon, Alpine Chough, and Jay. Continuing westwards we will enter the beautiful Amari valley and reach the scenic plateau of Gious Kambos, full of wild tulips including the endemic Red tulip. Also home to some special birds such as Blackcap, Orphean Warbler, Blue Tit, Wren, Turtle Dove, and Ortolan Bunting.

Afterwards we reach the equally pretty Kourtaliotiko Gorge, looking again for the Lammergeier, Golden Eagle, Bonelli's Eagle, and the vultures. We will continue toward the sea and picnic in a palm grove.

Next stop will be the Petres Gorge which has water all year and forms an important wetland of Crete, especially at its mouth near Episkopi. Our last stop is at Georgioupolis, Almiros delta on the western side of the town, and a small wood on the eastern end. Our hotel for the few nights is in an oasis, a green area, but still within the Chania city limits. This is a modern hotel which includes a Venetian tower with some rooms. Overnight in Oasis Guest House <http://www.oasis-guesthouse.com/index-en.htm>

Day 9 - Sunday April 17: Samaria Gorge to Chania

Today we will drive up to Samaria Gorge. This National Park is famous for its flora, fauna, hiking, and beauty. The gorge became a national park in 1962, particularly as a refuge for the rare kri-kri (Cretan goat), which is largely restricted to the park and an island just off the shore of Aghia Marina. There are several other endemic species in the gorge and surrounding area, as well as many other species of flowers and birds. It is a Biosphere Reserve, 16-km long, starting at an altitude of 1,250 m at the northern entrance, and ending at the shores of the Libyan Sea. We will not walk the gorge as it generally opens after May 1. However, we will go up to the hamlet of Omalos, then on to Xyloskalo, on Mount Gigilo, where the path goes down into the gorge with good looks at the Choughs flying overhead. We will also look for Alpine Accentor, Wheatear, Blue Rock Thrush, Crag Martin, Short-toed Treecreeper, and Peregrine Falcon.



After we have fully enjoyed this area, we will go either west to the stunning Aghia Eirini Gorge, or north to traverse the nice Meskla-Zourva road, full of woods, gorges, and birds. If time permits we will stop at a Botanical Park halfway up the mountain, one of a few in the open air with plants from all over the world.

Overnight in Oasis Guest House <http://www.oasis-guesthouse.com/index-en.htm>

Day 10 - Monday April 18: Chania city tour, Agyia Lake, Souda Bay

Early morning we will head to Agyia Lake, a great wetland, barely 5 miles south-west of Chania with the Marsh Harrier, Wood Sandpiper, Glossy Ibis, several herons, and all kinds of ducks. Also found here are Nightingale, Sedge Warbler, Cetti's Warbler, and Baillon's Crake (the surest place to see it on the island).

A cultural exploration of Chania will be this late morning/early afternoon's activity, including the Venetian Harbor, ancient Aptera, Minoan Kydonia, and the old town Byzantine, Ottoman, Venetian architecture and historical sites. We will stop at the old market, a warren of shops and stalls, before lunch.

After lunch we will explore the Akrotiri peninsula where part of Zorba the Greek was filmed and stop at the beautiful Aghia Triada monastery with its small museum displaying 12th century scrolls. We will look for Serins and others in the surrounding habitat and vineyard. If we are still not satisfied, we can have a peek at the small Souda Bay's wetland right on the eastern edge of town, where the Moroni River flows into the sea. We will end our full day with a farewell dinner near Chania.

Oasis Guest House. <http://www.oasis-guesthouse.com/index-en.htm>

Day 11 - Tuesday April 19: departure via Herakleion Airport

Sadly, late this morning, we will say farewell to Crete and transfer to Herakleion airport (85 miles away) to catch our afternoon/evening flights home.

About Your Mass Audubon Guide: Elissa Landre



Elissa Landre is the Director of Mass Audubon's Broadmoor Wildlife Sanctuary. She has led tours in Belize, Hawaii, Trinidad, and Tobago, Costa Rica, Hawaii, Ecuador, and Mexico. She has consulted on interpretation, guide training, and marketing for ecotourism at national parks in Bolivia and Poland, holds a master's degree in biology, runs a bird-banding station at Broadmoor, and is a past president of the Association of Field Ornithologists. On tours she likes to explore how protected conservation land is managed for birds and native plants.

About Your Local Guides

Our local guides include our favorite Tour Manager, **Alexander Contos**, who has led all our previous Greek tours. He is always a favorite with our travelers!

We will also be joined by: **Michalis Dretakis**, biologist and ornithologist at the University of Crete, and the Museum of Natural History. He is a member of the Greek Ornithological Society, the Greek Zoological Society, and the Archelon Committee for the Protection of the Sea Turtle. Currently writing the book *Birds of Crete*, and has been recommended by George Handrinos (author of *Birds of Greece*) as the expert ornithologist for Crete. **Nikos Samaritakis**, a local ornithologist for the western region will be with us on the 17th and 18th.

What You Need to Know About This Tour

Trip Summary: Ancient archaeological sites, gorgeous mountain gorges, fields of native wildflowers and orchids, and fantastic birding can all be found on this very special trip. Our favorite Greek guide has designed this tour just for us.

Birds and animals: Raptors migrating from their African wintering grounds are specialties. Many nest in the more than 600 gorges of Crete; others continue to Europe and Asia. The Cretan subspecies of many European birds and large flocks of returning migrants including bee-eaters, herons, and doves are among a list that should approach 200 species with good chances to see the rare Bearded Vulture or Lammergeier, Pygmy Cormorant, and Bonelli's Eagle.

Pace and comfort: A comfortable trip with full days and transportation in vans. Walks and birding are on moderate trails with some irregular footing and there is more extensive hiking through archaeological sites and on rougher trails on some days. Most of the birding is on foot (on moderate trails; distances up to 2.5 miles); or birding in the mountains near vehicles.

Lodging: Very good locally owned small hotels, each with private rooms with private bathrooms. Excellent food featuring locally grown vegetables, wild mountain greens, and wild artichokes mostly served family-style.

Weather: Generally warm, with cool nights. Occasional rain showers.

Price & Inclusions

PRICE: \$3600- based on double occupancy, Single supplement is \$400

Prices are based on a minimum of 10 travelers and a maximum of 15

Price Includes:

- All accommodations
- All Breakfasts and Dinners
- All transportation within Crete
- Park and preserve entrance fees
- Services of naturalist guides and drivers
- All tips and gratuities
- Medical and evacuation insurance

Does Not Include:

- Items of a personal nature such as beverages from the bar.
- Portage, laundry, phone calls, or gift items.
- International flights and Airport departure taxes

Travel Arrangements: You, the traveler, are responsible for booking and paying for your own international flights. Once you reserve your space, we will provide you with suggested flights and tell you which flights our leaders will be on. You may book flights directly with the airline, online, or with a travel agent. We will provide you with suggested flight schedule once we reach the minimum number of travelers. The tour will begin and end in Herakleion airport/seaport on the island of Crete.

TERMS & CONDITIONS

APPLICATIONS, RESERVATIONS, DEPOSITS: Early applications are strongly encouraged. Trip rosters usually must be finalized 4 months before departure! All applications must be accompanied by a completed reservation form and a \$1000 deposit. Deposits can be by check or credit card (Visa or MasterCard). We reserve the right to decline your application. In the case of questionable health, we reserve the right to require a physician's certification to affirm you are capable of the activities. Final payment is due 90 days before the departure date. Final payment must be by check or money order.

RATES: All tour prices are based on double occupancy. If you would like us to find you a roommate, we will do our best, but cannot guarantee a share. If we cannot find a share, you will need to pay the single supplement. All forms and fares are accurate at the time of publication June 2015 but are subject to change at any time prior to departure. It is our policy to only pass on the actual amount of any increases in airfares or land costs such as those increases due to the devaluation of the dollar. Rarely, a price increase may be called for if the group falls below the minimum, as listed in the itinerary.

FLIGHTS: You, the traveler, are responsible for booking and paying for your own international flights. Once you reserve your space, we will provide you with suggested flights and tell you which flights our leaders will take. You may book flights directly with the airline, online, or with a travel agent. Please be aware that most tickets are non-refundable, therefore you should not book your flight arrangements until you have checked with us to be sure the tour has the minimum number of participants for the trip to go. We ask that you provide us with your flight details so we can be sure to meet you at the airport upon your arrival.

PHOTOS: Mass Audubon reserves the right to make use of any photograph taken on the tour. We guarantee that no photos of a comprising nature will be used. If you have questions or concerns, please contact us.

TRIP INSURANCE: A brochure and application for optional trip cancellation, illness and baggage insurance will be sent to you upon registrations. We strongly recommend that you purchase trip cancellation insurance to protect yourself. Mass Audubon does provide Medical Evacuation Coverage as part of the tour price, but you can search for a complete Trip Insurance package at www.insuremytrip.com

CANCELLATION Policy: If you need to change your booking, you must inform us immediately in writing. All cancellations must be done in writing and are effective upon receipt in the Massachusetts Audubon Travel Office. Cancellations received up to 121 days prior to departure will be refunded deposits less a \$300 per person fee. For cancellations between 120 and 90 days prior to departure, all deposits will not be refunded. There are no refunds for cancellations 90 days or less from departure. We strongly urge all travelers to purchase trip cancellation insurance. You will be sent information from the Massachusetts Audubon Society upon receipt of your deposit.

Your Responsibility: Although every precaution is taken to safeguard you and your belongings, group travel trips by their nature involve a certain amount of risk. Trip participants should understand that the domestic and international trips sponsored/operated by Massachusetts Audubon Society (Mass Audubon Tours) - hereafter collectively "M.A.S." - involve known and unknown risks. M.A.S. assumes no responsibility for injuries, death, financial losses or damage to clients' property caused by or occurring during participation in any of the travel trips sponsored/operated by M.A.S. Trip participants must assume responsibility for having sufficient skill and fitness to participate in the trips and activities offered or sponsored by M.A.S. Trip participants must also certify that they have no medical, mental or physical conditions which could interfere with their abilities to participate in the activities and/or trips they are participating in and they must assume and bear the cost of all risks that may be created, directly or indirectly, by any such condition. It is the responsibility of trip participants to have in place adequate insurance to cover any injury, damage or emergency transportation costs related to their travel and/or participation in trip activities and/or to bear the costs of such injury, damage or emergency transportation costs. Because of the risks associated with the travel trips sponsored by M.A.S. we urge all trip participants to supplement their own insurance with travel or vacation or emergency response types of insurance. M.A.S. requires that all trip participants acknowledge and assume these risks by reading and signing an M.A.S. Release and Waiver and Assumption of Risk contract prior to departure.

CONDITIONS OF TRAVEL: Travelers will be provided with an itinerary and trip preparation information. It is expected that travelers will read this information prior to trip departure. Travelers will be responsible for completing an application reservation form, including the personal information and a release of liability. Travelers will be expected to abide by the terms set for in the invoice. During the tour, travelers are asked to respect and follow the directions of their guide and leader.



Reservation Application

Passenger 1 Name as shown on passport: _____

Nickname for Name tag: _____ **Date of Birth:** _____

Passenger 2 Name as shown on passport: _____

Nickname for Name tag: _____ **Date of Birth:** _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Phone: Home: _____ Work: _____ Cell: _____

Email address: _____

Room Preferences:

- _____ I request single accommodations where available and will pay the single supplement.
- _____ I would like to be assigned a roommate. If one is not available, I will pay the single supplement.

Personal Information:

____ I/We are non-smokers. (If you are a smoker(s), please check here ____ and note that smoking is limited to outdoors in non-group spaces)

____ Is there anything Mass Audubon should know about your health that might impact your ability to participate comfortably on this trip? Please describe: _____

Deposit:

____ Please find my enclosed **check** deposit of \$1000 per person: Checks should be made payable to "Massachusetts Audubon Society" OR ____ Please **charge** my credit card:

VISA MC Card # _____ Exp. _____

Signature