

ASIO OTUS (LINNAEUS, 1758) (AVES, STRIGIDAE), FIRST RECORD FROM THE ISLAND OF SYMI (DODECANESE, GREECE)

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to give the first indication of the long-eared owl's *Asio otus* (Linnaeus, 1758) presence on the island of Symi (Dodecanese, Greece).

Keywords: long-eared owl, Symi, *Asio otus*, Dodecanese.

Introduction

The island of Symi is part of the site GR4210025 of Natura 2000. Species referred to in Article 4 of Directive 2009/147/EC and listed in Annex II of Directive 92/43/EEC and site evaluation for them are all birds: *Apus apus*, *Tachymarptis melba*, *Buteo buteo*, *Calandrella brachydactyla*, *Caprimulgus europaeus*, *Delichon urbicum*, *Emberiza caesia*, *Falco eleonora*, *Falco peregrinus*, *Hippolais olivetorum*, *Hirundo rustica*, *Motacilla flava*, *Phalacrocorax aristotelis desmarestii*, *Pediceps cristatus*, *Pediceps nigricollis*, *Streptopelia turtur* (<https://natura2000.eea.europa.eu>). The long-eared owl, *Asio otus* (Linnaeus, 1758) is present in almost the entire northern hemisphere (North America, Eurasia, and North Africa). It prefers tree clusters or edges of coniferous forests and parks adjacent to open agricultural areas and meadows, which are important hunting habitats for the species (Mikkola 1983, Cramp 1989). In Greece, the species winters and breeds in many mainland areas and on some large islands (Handrinos & Akriotis 1997). Until now, this nocturnal bird of prey had not been reported to the island of Symi although it is present in Dodecanese (Keller et al. 2020).

Asio otus

The long-eared owl *Asio otus* (Linnaeus, 1758) is a mid-sized owl, which is closely relative to the short-eared owl *Asio flammeus*. Both species belong to the genus *Asio*, whose members are known for their characteristic feather tufts on their head. However, the tufts of long-eared owls are quite long and remarkable they are not always visible. Most of the time the owl lays the tufts back on its head. Only if it is excited it sets them up. It is a slender owl, which achieves a body length up to 40 centimeters and a weight up to 400 g. depending on their gender: Normally females are larger than the male birds. The rounded wings, with a span between 90 and 100 cm, are so long that they are

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crossed when the owl is perched. The tail is short. Typical of owls is the characteristic round face with forward-facing eyes. The big eyes of long-eared owls are yellow and their bill is black. Their sensitive ears are asymmetrically placed, whereas the size and the form are the same. This structure provides owls their unique sense of hearing. The feathers are brown-gray or brown-yellow colored and vertical streaked. Pale patches on the face resemble white eyebrows. In general, the females are darker than males. Legs are completely covered with feathers as well as toes. Juveniles do not distinguish from adults, but their feathers are looser. Occupies North America, Europe, and the former Soviet Union and up to east Japan. There are also some isolated populations for example in North Africa or on the Canary Islands (Jiguet & Audevard 2017). They live in areas with dense vegetation near grasslands or similar open landscapes as marshes and farmlands and sometimes-even deserts. These woodless areas are important for their hunting activities whereas forests are safe places to rest. They are found in regions up to 2000 m above sea level.

Study Area

Symi belongs to the Dodecanese Archipelago. It is located between Rhodes and the Turkish coast (Datça Peninsula, Muğla Province) from which is only 5 km. Its geographical coordinates are 27°50'11"E, 36°35'39.36"N. Symi has a surface area of 58 km² and a coastline of 85 km, articulated with numerous bays, capes and steep cliffs. Smaller uninhabited rocky islets, the largest of which are Nimos and Seskli, surround Symi. Symi is chiefly hilly and the highest relief is Mt. Vigla (620 m a.s.l.). It is made up mainly of limestone rock that characterizes the high costal cliffs and the deep inlet of Dhysalonas, Nanous, Laphathos and Ladhi. Some areas are also constituted by flysch (Desio 1924a, 1924b). Due to its rocky nature, cultivated areas are very few, except for Pedi and Niborios valleys. Symi lacks of a superficial hydrography. There are only wells and cisterns. Shallow waters among the small islet groups in the southeast and southwest provide suitable foraging grounds for most seabird species, as well as all three dolphin species (Striped, Common Bottle-nosed and Short-beaked Common Dolphin) and the Mediterranean Monk Seal. Agios Georgios Dysalonas is a little, beautiful beach of Symi. Its main characteristic is a vertical cliff about 300 m. tall that can be found there. The name Dysalonas comes from the word dysalotos (inaccessible); it is possible to reach it only by boat from the sea.

Materials and Methods

The author have investigated Symi on three expeditions: from 30 July to 11 August 2017, from 26 to 30 April 2018 and on 26 and 27 April 2019, for a total of 20 days of research. The daily excursions were around ten to twelve hours. A Garmin III GPS system and Nikon Aculon T01 binoculars were used for the field research.

Results and Discussion

During the first research session (August 2017) the descent of the steep walls, overlooking the beach of Agios Georgios Dysalonas was carried out, with the help of an expert local guide. Normally this beach is reached only by sea because of the great difficulty in descending the walls. A dead long-eared owl was found on the way down a recess in the wall. The carcass was much damaged but it was possible to take some feathers and the skull for the correct determination. Once the skull was prepared (Fig. 1 A, B) and the feathers cleaned (Fig. 1 C, two primaries and two tail), it was possible to confirm the *Asio otus* species.

A website related to the fauna and flora of Symi (symifloraandfauna.jigsy.com) lists all species of birds on the island. The long-eared owl is not present in this updated list. An in-depth research into scientific publications could confirm that this nocturnal bird of prey had never been reported before to Symi Island. Probably it was not possible to report this presence first since the beach is only occasionally frequented by a few tourists during the hot hours of the day and the descent of the steep walls is not traced and is reserved for very few and expert hikers.



Fig. 1. *Asio otus*, Symi, August 2017. **A, B.** Skull, lateral and dorsal view. **C.** Feathers.

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