

Greece – Lake Kerkini in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	<u>Fly Thessaloniki; drive Lake Kerkini (Lithotopos)</u>
Day 2/7	<u>Exploration of Lake Kerkini and surrounding area</u>
Day 8	<u>Drive Thessaloniki and fly London</u>

Departs

May

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code GRC04)

Grading

Grade A. A range of mostly gentle walks.

Focus

Birds and wildflowers.

Highlights

- Breeding Dalmatian Pelicans
- Boat trip to view nesting waterbirds
- Daily passage of migrant birds
- Impressive breeding species such as Lesser Grey and Masked Shrikes
- Single-centre holiday
- Unspoilt flora and fauna



From top: Glossy Ibis, Dalmatian Pelican & Golden Oriole

Introduction

Contained by the natural barriers of the Kerkini Mountains to the north and Mavrovouni Mountains in the south, Lake Kerkini lies close to the Bulgarian border in northern Greece and is renowned as one of the finest wetland sites in Europe. Historically the wild marshlands along the flood plain of the Strymōn River were regarded as virtually uninhabitable and largely abandoned to nature but in the early 20th century a sustained campaign over many years witnessed the conversion of thousands of hectares of marsh into arable land, a process assisted by the creation of a huge irrigation reservoir which together with a network of canals and ditches helped control the flow of water. The river was however reluctant to relinquish its influence on the landscape and alluvial deposits washed down from the mountains continued to limit the effectiveness of the new reservoir for over fifty years until a new, higher dam was constructed in 1982 defining the shape of present-day Lake Kerkini.

Our tour begins with a flight from London to Thessaloniki followed by a two hour drive to a pleasant hotel where we stay for seven nights enabling that rare luxury on birdwatching tours of being able to unpack suitcases! From here we get our first views of the lake shimmering in the spring sunshine and over the following week we will be able to explore every facet of this Ramsar acknowledged wetland paradise. Skirting the popular areas set aside for public recreation we will be seeking the quieter corners of the huge reserve where Little Bitterns, Purple Herons, Squacco Herons egrets and many other waterbirds enjoy the sanctuary of waterside vegetation from which the guttural rasping of Great Reed Warblers compete with a chorus of frogs to provide a constant background symphony. In deeper water the branches of drowned trees still reach towards the sky above the surface of the lake and these form the platforms for a noisy congregation of avian tenants which we will view at close range from boats. Two of Kerkini's most distinguished residents are the endangered Dalmatian Pelican and Pygmy Cormorants, both of which breed here and thrive on the abundant supply of fish in the lake. As 'stars of the show' the former always demand particular attention whether soaring in thermals high over the lake or excitedly chasing a shoal of fish through the water, often joined in their hunt by rafts of both Greater and Pygmy Cormorants. During our exploration of the surrounding areas, we will visit a wide range of habitats from the higher elevations of the mountains to the flood-plain of the Strymōnas River. The corresponding diversity of birds and plants will thus include species characteristic of the upland areas as well as the wetland inhabitants. This is an exceptionally rich area for birds but in addition to the anticipated residents and summer visitors there will also be daily chances of encountering less expected migrants dropping by to seek food and rest before continuing longer journeys to more distant shores. Waders are particularly likely to take advantage of the lake shoreline and marshes at this prime time for spring passage and we will be looking out for one or two rarities among the more familiar travellers.

Although birds will be the principal focus there are plenty of other natural history attractions to supplement the birdwatching. The flora is magnificent, lizards abound, and the endangered Hermann's Tortoise is comparatively numerous in this part of Northern Greece. Herds of feral Water Buffalo grazing the lakeside vegetation are an unusual sight in Europe whilst wild mammals inhabiting the surrounding hills include Beech Marten and Wildcat, both not infrequently encountered during excursions.

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



Dalmatian Pelican

Lithotopus

We depart from London and upon arrival in Thessaloniki we collect the tour vehicles for the week. A short way into the journey we will stop at Kalochori Lagoon a wetlands on the outskirts of Thessaloniki to kick start our birdwatching break before heading north to Lake Kerkini our base for the next week.

After checking in at the comfortable hotel, we should have time for some preliminary birding from the lake shore. The abundant population of both Great and Pygmy Cormorants will be immediately apparent as will

the conspicuous White and Dalmatian Pelicans. It is the breeding population of Dalmatian Pelicans, which represent their only range expansion in recent times that makes Kerkini such an important wetland refuge.

Day 2

Lithotopus

Today we will explore the eastern embankment of the lake. Again, both pelicans and cormorants will be much in evidence alongside many Squacco and Night Herons. There is a good chance of Black, White-winged Black and Whiskered Terns whilst Gull-billed and Common Terns are also likely. We should also witness an enormous population of Great Crested Grebes on the lake, further



Pygmy Cormorant

evidence of the richness of the fishing. No doubt some of the grebes will be engaging in their extraordinary spring courtship display. In the fields behind the embankment, we will be keeping a look out for raptors such as Red-footed & Eleonora's Falcons, Honey, Common and Long-legged Buzzards and Levant Sparrowhawk. The willows overhanging the ditches in this area are much favoured by Penduline Tits and in the surrounding fields Bee-eaters, rollers, shrikes and buntings are ever present on the telephone wires. Further colour is added by Golden Orioles uttering their fluty calls from roadside trees.

After a picnic lunch we move to the northern shore of the Strymónas River where local carp ponds are frequented by a number of birds looking for an easy meal including Purple Herons and Little Bitterns. The strident rasping of Great Reed Warblers is a familiar background noise here and we should also listen for the reeling of Grasshopper and Savi's Warblers from the waterside vegetation. The flat, sandy flood-plain beside the river is a good locality for finding both Short-toed Larks and Stone Curlews.

Later in the day we travel up the western side of Ruppell's Gorge which leads north to the Bulgarian border. The gorge acts as a funnel for north bound migrant raptors and among the species we may encounter are Lesser Spotted Eagles effortlessly gliding from one thermal to another. The bushes and scrub in the valley floor are worth checking for Sombre Tit, Sardinian Warbler and Hawfinch. Our final stop will be at a disused quarry near Vironia where we hope to find Rock Nuthatches, Blue Rock Thrush, Crag Martin and Black-eared Wheatear.

Day 3

Lithotopus

We head eastwards from Lithotopus through flat farmland and tree-lined ditches as we head towards Sidirokastro. Migrant Red-footed Falcons may be hovering over the fields searching for insect prey whilst Rollers and shrikes on the telephone wires will be similarly occupied. Near Sidirokastro we will scan the nearby cliffs in the hope of seeing the breeding Long-legged Buzzard which inhabits this area. Moving on to investigate scrub-filled valleys near Achladochori, we will be hoping to find Syrian Woodpecker, Orphean, Subalpine and possibly Barred Warblers before following a rough mountain road higher into the hills where Golden, Booted and Short-toed Eagles are among the raptors that may soar into view. Calandra Lark, Ortolan and Woodchat Shrike also occur in these areas.



Red-footed Falcon

To end the day, we visit woodland near Promachonas where four species of woodpecker, flycatchers and Short-toed Treecreeper are on the agenda.

Day 4

Lithotopus



Booted Eagle

We return to the lake to explore the bays and inlets on the western shore to reacquaint ourselves with the abundant heron populations and perhaps obtain our best views of Pygmy Cormorant. The hills to the west of the lake are home to breeding Black Kites, Booted, Short-toed, Lesser Spotted and White-tailed Eagles so constant overhead vigilance will be required!

Lunch will be eaten in the beautiful mountain village of Ano Poroia in the leafy shade of the densely forested slopes. The birdlife here reflects a more British feel but also includes Sombre Tit and up to five species of woodpecker. South of Mandraki we can view the drowned forest in the lake which teems with a multitude of nesting herons, cormorants and pelicans. This is also a hot spot for Glossy Ibis and Spoonbill.

Day 5

Lithotopus

An earlier start today in order to travel to the resort town of Lailias on Mount Vrontous which rises to an altitude of 1849m. The pine forests here provide our best chances of finding Black Woodpecker and Nutcracker whilst Rock Partridge inhabit the slopes. Spring arrives later in these higher elevations giving

a cooler contrast to the hot Mediterranean feel of the lakeside. During a leisurely stroll through these montane habitats, we may find flowering Crocus and Scilla as well as many other plants and birds.

Day 6

Lithotopus

Travelling south from Lithotopus we will investigate the waterside meadows along a tributary of the Strymónas River. This area is favoured by that most delightful of the shrike family, the Masked Shrike, and we will be listening for the loud Sedge Warbler like song of Olivaceous Warbler and the deeper more Reed warbler-like utterances of Olive Tree Warbler, both of which occur here. A nearby quarry is also worth checking for Eagle Owls.



Masked Shrike

After lunch we will follow mountain tracks heading towards Mount Mavrovouni. This is another good spot for Masked Shrikes and in addition there will once again be chances of sighting various raptors soaring over the wooded slopes of the hills. The diverse flora is also worth attention and includes both Violet Bird's Nest and Pink Butterfly Orchids.

Day 7

Lithotopus



Spoonbill

For our final full day in this fascinating region we will again travel slowly along the western shore, stopping as and when required until we arrive at the village of Kerkini for a relaxed lunch at a local taverna.

After the meal we embark onto small boats to be guided to the drowned forest for close-up views (and the olfactory experience!) of the breeding cormorants, herons and Spoonbills festooning the trees. Pride of place goes to the colony of Dalmatian Pelicans occupying

special nesting platforms placed for their use and watching these endangered birds from the boats will surely be a suitable finale for our week at this superb Ramsar designated wetland

Day 8

London

A final view over the lake then we must head back to Thessaloniki for a return flight to London

Climate

May in Northern Greece is likely to be warm with temperatures up to 25c or possibly higher but it will be appreciably cooler at higher elevations. Rain can occur at any time and may be heavy on occasions.

Food & accommodation

Accommodation will be in a comfortable hotel close to the lake at Lithotopus. Rooms have private facilities. All food is included in the holiday cost beginning with evening meal on Day 1 and finishing with breakfast on Day 8. Some lunches will be in the form of picnics.

Extra expenses

Please note that we do not include the following in the cost of this holiday: all items of a more personal nature such as drinks, laundry and souvenirs. Lunch on day 8 is also not included in the holiday cost.

Bird & plant lists

Where available these are automatically provided on booking, and will gladly be sent to you before, if you wish for a more detailed preview.

Your safety & security

You have chosen to travel to Greece. Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – www.fco.gov.uk/travel regularly prior to travel.

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.