

Northern Greece's Lake Kerkini in Autumn

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Departs
November

Dates and Prices
See website (tour code GRC08) or brochure

Grading
The tour is graded A with day walks only. Most of the walks are suitable for all ages and for all degrees of fitness

Focus
Birds

Highlights

- Look for rare & endangered Lesser White-fronted Geese
- Up to 500 Dalmatian Pelicans plus White Pelicans
- Thousands of cormorants, including a small number of Pygmy Cormorants
- About 40,000 wildfowl overwinter on Lake Kerkini
- Ferruginous Duck, Red-crested Pochard, Smew, Goosander & White-headed Duck
- Up to 1,000 Greater Flamingoes, plus Common Cranes & Spoonbills
- White-tailed & Golden Eagles, plus Eagle Owl & Goshawk in surrounding area
- Grey-headed, Syrian & Black Woodpeckers in woodlands

Outline itinerary

Day 1 Fly Thessaloniki; drive Lake Kerkini (Lithotopus)

Day 2/4 Exploration of Lake Kerkini and surrounding area

Day 5 Drive Thessaloniki and fly London



Birdwatching by Lake Kerkini (David Morris)

White Pelicans (David Morris)



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NB. 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 maximize best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Introduction

Contained by the natural barriers of the Kerkini Mountains to the north, and the Mavrovouni Mountains to 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 floodplain of the Strymon river were regarded as virtually uninhabitable and largely abandoned to nature but, in the early 20th century, a sustained campaign over many years witnessed a 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 to 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 50 years until a new, higher dam was constructed in 1982 which defined the shape of present-day Lake Kerkini.



Lake Kerkini

In spring, the lake and surrounding countryside offer all the ingredients for a superlative birdwatching holiday as evidenced by the experiences of previous

Naturetrek groups at this season, but for this very special tour we have chosen to visit Kerkini at the beginning of winter in search of a regular, but extremely rare visitor to the shores of the lake. Each year in early November small numbers of endangered Lesser White fronted Geese pause to feed and rest here for a few weeks before completing an epic journey from the Siberian *taiga* to a Mediterranean wintering ground. These dainty little geese will be our principal target during this tour but we will also encounter a fantastic variety of birds on and around the lake.

The tour begins with a flight to the city of Thessaloniki and from here it is a ninety-minute drive to Kerkini where we stay for four nights at a comfortable hotel. Although the shortening daylight hours of winter will probably reduce the birdwatching opportunities on this arrival day, the following three days will be devoted to a thorough exploration of the district, visiting not only a range of wetland habitats but also venturing into the nearby mountains where hopefully some of the summer denizens of the high elevations will be frequenting the lower slopes as winter approaches.

Between a dozen and 50 Lesser White fronts have been seen in early November during recent years but finding these rare geese will be no easy task although their association with more conspicuous Greater White-fronts will help pin-point the grazing birds. It may take some time to locate the flock, and it could involve a fair amount of walking, but there will be plenty of other birdlife to occupy us whilst we search for our quarry. Lake Kerkini is renowned for its population of Dalmatian Pelicans and up to 500 of these impressive birds might be congregated



Pelicans

on the open water together with perhaps a few White Pelicans. Thousands of Cormorants, and a small number of Pygmy Cormorants will also be exploiting the abundant fish shoals whilst Great Egrets and Grey Herons stalk their share in the shallows. An estimated 40,000 wildfowl winter on Kerkini with great rafts of Common Pochard comprising half this total. By careful scanning we may locate some of the scarcer visitors which include Ferruginous Duck, Red-crested Pochard,

Smew, Goosander and White-headed Duck. Around the shoreline up to a thousand Greater Flamingo form a spectacular pink mass and occasional over-wintering Common Cranes or Spoonbill may also be found. An exciting diversity of raptors occur here and of particular interest are the White-tailed and Spotted Eagles which create regular scenes of panic among the waterfowl. Golden Eagles may also be observed gliding over the hills and Eagle Owls are a spectacular resident in some of the local quarries.

Moving away from the lake to investigate the hills and woodlands we will hope to find, among other species, Grey-headed, Syrian and Black Woodpeckers, Goshawk, Sombre Tit and Hawfinch, whilst mountain slopes accessible by road might add Shorelark and maybe even a Wallcreeper to our list.

It will be readily apparent that a November visit to Lake Kerkini is certain to provide spectacular numbers of wildfowl together with a wide variety of bird species which will more than likely include one or two surprises in this relatively under-watched area of Greece. Add to these attractions, the chance of encountering one of the local Wildcats or Beech Martens, and you have the perfect break to defer the onset of winter blues!

Day 1

Lithotopus

We depart from London and upon arrival in Thessaloniki collect the tour vehicles for a one and a quarter hour drive through the countryside of Northern Greece to the village of Lithotopus, which will be our base for the next week. After checking in at the comfortable hotel we may have time for some preliminary birding from the lakeshore although we will very likely be thwarted by nightfall.

Day 2-4

Lithotopus

Our programme for the next three days will be somewhat flexible and dictated by water levels on the lake, the distribution of the wildfowl flocks and other such local factors. One of our principal aims will be to locate the wintering flock of Greater White-fronted Geese and hopefully the small number of Lesser White-fronts associating with their bigger brethren. Like all grey geese they will have favourite grazing areas and safe roosting places but unless disturbed by passing predators or humans may not fly around very much other than travelling between these two places so locating the birds could present a challenge. Once we have found the geese we will watch them from a discreet distance as it is very important not to cause any additional disturbance to such rare and vulnerable birds. With practice the smaller more delicate proportions of the Lesser White-fronts make them relatively easy to pick out and they have a faster feeding action which is surprisingly distinctive and often leads to the smaller birds separating from the other geese as they roam over a larger area. The numbers of Lesser White-fronts vary but up to 50 birds may linger briefly around the shores of Lake Kerkini before departing later in the month. The lake is the winter home for vast numbers of wildfowl and from various vantage points we will scan through the huge assemblies of ducks to see what we can find. Nineteen species of duck have been recorded here but numbers fluctuate month by month and in response to conditions elsewhere in Europe. November is an excellent time to encounter large flocks and Pochard should be much in evidence with up to 20,000 recorded here at peak times. Amongst these great rafts we may spot a few Red-crested Pochard and we will also scan the lake waters for two other rarer visitors, Ferruginous Duck and White-headed Duck although neither can be guaranteed. The abundant fish in the lake will be attracting the attention of many hundred Great Cormorants along with a few Pygmy Cormorants and numerous Dalmatian Pelicans. These huge waterbirds are arguably the most important breeding species at Kerkini and whilst most of the White Pelicans spend the winter further south up to 500 Dalmatian have been counted during the winter. Other fish-eaters include the occasional Goosander and Smew, Great Egrets around the shoreline and a few over-wintering Black-crowned Night Herons. The resident White-tailed Eagles are also adept at snatching unwary fish from the lake and also scavenge for carrion around the shores, competing with a small number of Spotted Eagles over any tasty morsels. Raptors are yet another winter highlight at the lake with possibilities including Peregrine, Merlin and more rarely, Lanner.

Elsewhere around the lake we might find a few Common Cranes, Spoonbills and possibly even a lingering White or Black Stork. As many as a thousand Greater Flamingo may be present at this time of the year, forming a dense pink mass as they sift through the shallows. In summer the marshes resound with the song of numerous warblers, most of which will have long departed south by November but two hardy species, Moustached and Cetti's Warblers remain throughout the winter although finding these may be a lot more difficult as they skulk quietly through the vegetation. Penduline Tits also continue to frequent waterside bushes and we will listen out for their distinctive insistent calls. One or two Great Grey Shrikes keep a watchful eye on the appearances of these small birds and in some adjacent quarries, the resident Eagle Owls will also be on the look-out for passing prey.

The nearby mountains will warrant our attention and provide some contrasting birdwatching to the lake. Golden Eagle and Goshawk might be seen here and forests at the lower elevations contain Hawfinch, Sombre Tit, Black Woodpecker and possibly a few Nutcrackers. Using the road to access higher slopes we will search at different levels for the summer denizens of the mountaintops such as Rock Partridge, Shorelark and maybe even a Wallcreeper flashing crimson wings as it flies from boulder to boulder.



Spur-thighed Tortoise

Although the focus will be on birds, several interesting mammal species occur in the area including Wildcat and Beech Marten. There are also herds of feral Water Buffalo, snorting and wallowing around the edges of the lake and both Wolf and Jackal have been reported.

There are doubtless some surprises in store during a visit at this relatively under-watched time of the year. Vagrants from Asia or Northern Europe are always a possibility and some of the lake's summer visitors may be tempted to forsake the long flight to Africa in favour of a protracted stay in the place of their birth.

Day 5

London

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

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 5. Some lunches will be in the form of picnics.



Naturetrek picnic lunch

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 5 is also not included in the holiday cost.

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, you will need to read our main Naturetrek brochure thoroughly and complete and return the enclosed booking form, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost. If you do not have a copy of this brochure please give us a call on 01962 733051, and we will gladly post one to you.