

Go Slow... In Northern Greece (Lake Kerkini)

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

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

Departs

May

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code GRC04)

Grading

Grade A. A range of mostly gentle walks

Focus

Birds and wild flowers

Highlights

- Breeding Dalmatian Pelicans
- Relaxing boat trips to view nesting water birds
- Daily passage of migrant birds
- Impressive breeding species such as Lesser Grey and Masked Shrikes
- Comfortable lakeside single-centre base
- Delicious local cuisine and warm hospitality
- Guided by an expert Naturetrek naturalist



From top: Dalmatian Pelican, Golden Oriole & Glossy Ibis



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

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. The lake, and its surrounding regions, is the focus of this new 8-day 'Go Slow' tour which begins with a direct 3-hour flight from London to Thessaloniki and a 2-hour drive to a delightful lakeside hotel, our base for the next seven nights. Although most



Lake Kerkini

famous for its breeding populations of endangered Dalmatian Pelicans and Pygmy Cormorants, the huge heronry in the centre of Lake Kerkini (which we will visit) provides sanctuary for a wealth of other waterbirds, including Night Herons, Purple Herons, Squacco Herons, Spoonbill and numerous egrets. As we explore the surrounding countryside we will be captivated by the sights and sounds of spring as Bee-eaters swoop down acrobatically in pursuit of insects and Golden Orioles utter their fluty calls from stands of trees. Red-backed, Woodchat and delicate Masked Shrikes wreak havoc among the local insect population, whilst Black-headed, Cirl and Corn Buntings sing from roadside bushes. A wide variety of warblers, including Subalpine, Olivaceous and Olive-tree — the latter something of a speciality of northern Greece — should also be in song, although their more skulking nature may make them somewhat harder to observe!



Black-crowned Night-heron

As we explore further afield we should also find Lesser Spotted, Short-toed and Booted Eagles soaring overhead, Black Storks, Penduline Tits and Great Reed Warblers around the lakeshore and Western Rock Nuthatches, Rock Thrushes and both Ortolan and Rock Buntings on the nearby mountain slopes.

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

Fly Thessalonika, transfer to Lithotopus

We depart London on an early morning flight and upon arrival in Thessalonika, collect the tour vehicles and embark on the 2 hour journey South, through the countryside of Northern Greece.

Approximately one hour in we will stop at a recently formed wetland for a picnic lunch, where we will enjoy our first birdwatching experience of the holiday. After hopefully getting some good sightings of a variety of birds, including Terek and Curlew Sandpipers, Turnstones, Dalmation Pelicans and Oystercatchers, we will depart for the final hour long drive to the village of Lithotopus, which will be our base for the next week.



View from our hotel

After checking in at the comfortable hotel overlooking Lake Kerkini 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,



Red-footed Falcon

further 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, with further colour being added by Golden Orioles that may be seen 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.



Rock Nuthatch

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 Nuthatch, 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 breeding Long-legged Buzzard which inhabits this area. Moving on to investigate scrub-filled valleys near Achladochori, we will hope to find Syrian Woodpecker, Orphea, 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.

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

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.



Black Woodpecker

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 Eurasian 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

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.