

Spring in Northern Greece

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1 Fly Thessaloniki and transfer to Nestos.

Day 2 Nestos Gorge

Day 3&4 Nestos Delta

Day 5-7 Lake Kerkini

Day 8 Fly London



Departs

April / May

Focus

Birds.

Grading

A/B. Easy to moderate walks only

Dates and Prices

See www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code GRC15).



Highlights

- Enjoy the varied landscapes of north-eastern Greece
- Direct flights into Thessaloniki
- Migrating waders in Nestos Delta
- Dalmatian & White Pelicans at Lake Kerkini
- Resident and migrating raptors in the Nestos Gorge
- Olive-tree Warbler, Eastern Orphean Warbler, Masked Shrike & Black-headed Bunting also possible
- A variety of butterflies, reptiles & other wildlife
- Led by expert naturalist guides



From top: Lake Kerkini, Masked Shrike & Spur-winged Lapwing (Shutterstock Ltd)



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Introduction

The birdlife of northern Greece has a decidedly eastern flavour. Tucked between Turkey, Bulgaria and the clear blue waters of the Thracian Sea, the region lies on an important migration 'flyway' between Africa and Europe and attracts birds from both the east and west of the continent. In early May the forests, scrubby hillsides and wetlands will be alive with returning summer migrants, as well as other birds passing through en route to their breeding grounds further north. Familiar species such as Blackcap, Nightingale and Spotted Flycatcher vie for perches with Masked Shrike, Olive-tree Warbler and Collared Flycatcher, whilst overhead, parties of Red-footed Falcon's dash past. The coastal wetlands are at their best in early spring and a few key inland wetlands, such as Lake Kerkini, act as a safe haven for large colonies of herons, pelicans and other waterbirds.



On this varied tour we will go in search of these, and other species whilst exploring some of northern Greece's key wildlife sites: the Nestos Delta & Gorge, Vistonida Lakes and Lake Kerkini. Although birds will be the primary focus of this holiday, we will also enjoy the butterflies, reptiles and other wildlife we find along the way.

Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and 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 Thessaloniki, transfer to Nestos

Our holiday begins with a scheduled flight from London's Gatwick Airport to Thessaloniki, Greece's second city, which sits on the northern side of the three-fingered, Halkidiki Peninsula. From here we take the coastal highway east to the low-lying coastal region of the Nestos Delta, a journey of around 2.5 hours. We aim to arrive by late-afternoon, taking some time on the way to explore some of the wetlands or pine forests that northeastern Greece offers, before checking in to our accommodation for the evening. We will be based here for the next four nights, splitting our stay between two hotels to maximise our time in the varied habitats of the Nestos Gorge and Delta.

Day 2

Nestos Gorge

The Nestos Delta holds a fabulous mosaic of salt marshes, coastal lagoons, reedbeds, wet meadows and riparian forests, covering over 93,000 hectares. The Delta offers a refuge for an exciting variety of wildlife, with over 270 different bird species recorded annually. The region's high biodiversity

has resulted in its designation as a Ramsar Site, IBA (Important Bird Area) and Natura 2000 reserve, and forms one of the largest national parks in all of mainland Greece.



Levant Sparrowhawk

On our first full day we will follow the river north to the spectacular Nestos Gorge. The narrow ravine here has been cut over the millennia by the Nestos River, but the disused railway track and tunnels that can be seen were laid down by French engineers during the Ottoman Empire and, during its heyday, were used as a key trade route to what is now Istanbul.

We spend our time leisurely across the two days here, walking through the dense, mixed forest and along the shrub-lined trails that follow the route of the gorge. Blue Rock Thrush, Honey Buzzard, European Bee-eater, Eastern Subalpine Warbler, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, Ortolan Bunting, Syrian Woodpecker, plus various shrikes and flycatchers are all possible.

A number of raptors can also be found throughout Nestos Gorge, including Short-toed, Golden and Bonelli's Eagles, Levant Sparrowhawk, Eurasian Goshawk, Common and Long-legged Buzzards and, recently, several breeding pairs of Griffon Vultures. We will ensure time is spent visiting a nearby raptor feeding station, where animal carcasses are regularly left, allowing excellent views of a variety of species.

Days 3 & 4

Nestos Delta

For the next two days we will be based at a hotel near the Nestos River delta. In early May, northbound migration will be in full swing and, amongst many other species, we hope to see such birds as Slender-billed Gull, Marsh Sandpiper, Eurasian Spoonbill, Greater Flamingo, Ferruginous Duck, Glossy Ibis and the localised Spur-winged Lapwing here.

Waders and terns should be plentiful throughout the wetlands and we will be on the lookout for all three species of marsh tern - Black, White-winged and Whiskered. Pygmy Cormorant, Osprey, both Black and White Storks and Marsh Harrier may be seen, too. Not only is the park home to an impressive avifauna, 20 mammal species have also been recorded here, including Eurasian Otter, European Wildcat and Golden Jackal.

We will make sure we also explore Lakes Vistonida and Ismarida which sit in the eastern fringes of the park. The lakes are edged with a mix of reedbeds and willow carr, in which Great Reed Warblers and a variety of migrants shelter. Lesser Kestrel, White-tailed Eagle and Booted Eagle are often seen soaring overhead, whilst in the late afternoons, flocks of Collared Pratincole can be seen hawking for insects over the water. We will also look for the many reptiles that inhabit these wetlands, including Hermann's Tortoise, Balkan Terrapin and Blotched Snake.

Days 5 - 7

Lake Kerkini

We end our tour with three nights at one of the finest wetland sites in Europe, the wonderful Lake Kerkini, set against a backdrop of high forested hills. The journey should take us in the region of four hours, although if the weather is clear we may divert en route to one of the nearby mountains to try for a couple of high-altitude species such as Common Rock Thrush. The lake – actually a river valley originally dammed in 1932 – is a designated RAMSAR Site and home to a multitude of breeding, wintering and passage species. We will have two full days to explore the lake and its surroundings.



One of the main attractions of Lake Kerkini in May is the huge colony of herons, egrets, cormorants (Great and Pygmy) and Spoonbills that have taken over a flooded forest on the edge of the lake, along with a large colony of Dalmatian and White Pelicans on an island nearby. Our time exploring the region will include a boat trip out to this colony and the opportunity to enjoy this spectacular sight, one of the largest heronries in Greece.



The lake's fringing reedbeds hold plenty of Great Reed Warblers, whilst on drier land we will look for Western Rock Nuthatch, Sombre Tit, Middle Spotted, Black and Grey-headed Woodpeckers, Olive-tree Warbler and Black-headed, Cirl and Corn Buntings. Various raptors, including Booted Eagle, White-tailed Eagle and Honey Buzzard, soar high overhead, while at a lower level, European Bee-eaters, Golden Orioles and Hoopoes add a splash of

colour. There are also a wide variety of butterflies, amphibians and reptiles to enjoy. We will be based for four nights in a comfortable guesthouse a short distance from the lakeshore.

Day 8

Fly London

After a thorough exploration of Lake Kerkini and the surrounding hills, we must make the one-and-a-half-hour drive back to Thessaloniki Airport where we will catch our return flight back to London's Gatwick Airport.

Tour grading

This tour is graded A/B, consisting of easy to moderate day walks only. We will travel to each site by minibus then take leisurely walks to explore the area, generally over easy terrain, although some

paths can be rough and steep in places. The holiday is therefore suitable for anyone who enjoys walking in the countryside and is of an 'average' level of fitness.

Tour leader

Groups of eight and over will be accompanied by a Naturetrek tour leader from the UK and a local naturalist guide. Smaller groups will be led by an expert local naturalist who will meet tour participants on arrival in Thessaloniki.

Weather

The weather in May in north-eastern Greece is usually warm and sunny with midday temperatures in the low to mid 20s centigrade. The occasional cooler and wetter day is always possible as are short, but sharp, afternoon thunder showers.

Food & accommodation

All food and accommodation are included in the price of this holiday. We use comfortable hotels and guesthouses for this tour, all rooms having private facilities.

Please note that the accommodation outlined above may - very occasionally - need to be amended. Replacement hotels will always be of the same standard as the ones outlined in the itinerary and will in no way affect your holiday. Should we have to implement any changes to the above we will notify you as soon as possible.

Your Safety & Security

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.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/greece prior to travel.

How to book your place

In order to book a place on this holiday, you will need to read the Naturetrek terms and conditions in the back of our brochure or on our website, and then book either online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, by calling us on 01962 733051, or by completing and returning the booking form in the brochure together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost. If you do not have a copy of this brochure, please call us on 01962 733051.

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