

# Winter in Western Greece

## Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

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### Outline itinerary

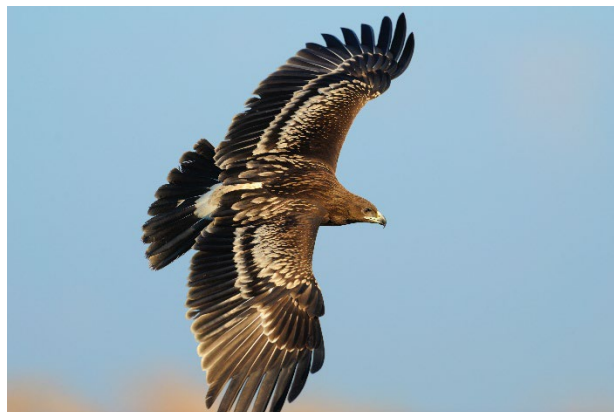
**Day 1** Fly Athens and transfer to Kalogria

**Day 2** Strofylia National Park

**Day 3** Ancient Olympia

**Days 4 – 7** Messolonghi National Park

**Day 8** Transfer Athens, fly UK



### Departs

January

### Focus

Birds, History & Culture

### Grading

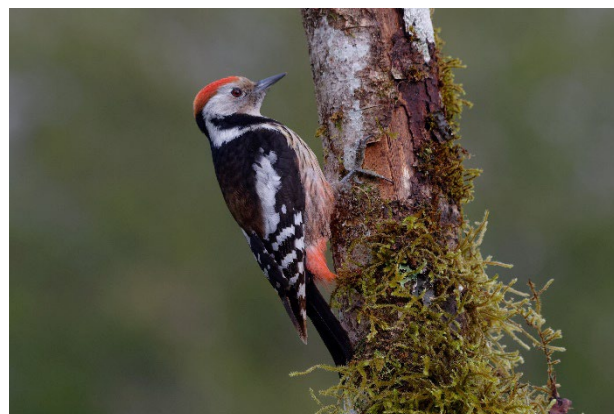
A/B. Easy to moderate walks only

### Dates and Prices

See [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk) (tour code GRC15).

### Highlights

- Explore the national parks of Strofylia and Messolonghi
- Dalmatian Pelicans in good numbers at Messolonghi National Park
- Visit Ancient Olympia – birthplace of the Olympic Games!
- Greater Flamingo, Black Stork, Greater Spotted Eagle, Lesser and Middle Spotted Woodpecker all possible
- Led by an expert naturalist guide



Images: Greater Spotted Eagle, Middle Spotted Woodpecker, Dalmatian Pelican (Shutterstock)



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## Introduction

Western Greece's coastal wetlands are surely some of the finest in Europe. The mild climate and varied habitats offer a home to a staggering number of species during the winter, all seeking refuge from the harsher climates of the northern continent. An estimated 40,000 ducks, grebes, divers and waders fill the many salt pans, channels and inlets of the coastal lagoons, whereas the oak and riparian forests that line the surrounding hillsides are rich with woodpeckers and wintering warblers.

This 8-day itinerary aims to encompass both western Greece's rich wintering birdlife and its ancient history, therefore appealing and offering tremendous value to those interested in the natural environment, as well as local history and culture. A sure highlight will be a guided visit to the archaeological site of Ancient Olympia, the birthplace of the Olympic Games, and the ancient city of Pleuron, dating back to around 200BCE. We'll visit the National Parks of Strofylia and Messolonghi, home to large numbers of Grey Plover, Pied Avocet,



Eurasian Spoonbill, Eurasian Teal, Northern Shoveler and Dalmatian Pelicans, whilst raptors including Osprey and Greater Spotted Eagle can be found. We'll visit colonies of Griffon Vultures and, at dusk, watch and listen for Short-eared, Eurasian Eagle and European Scops Owls.

## 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 Athens, transfer to Strofylia National Park

Our holiday begins with a scheduled flight from London to Athens, Greece's capital city. From here, we begin our journey west to the wetland National Park of Strofylia, situated in the northwest corner of Greece's Peloponnese. We'll bypass the Greek capital and cross the famous Corinth Canal, which cuts through the narrow isthmus of Corinth and separates the Peloponnese from the rest of the Greek mainland. We aim to arrive at our hotel by late afternoon, a charming family-run place nestled between the beach and wetland lagoons. Should time and daylight permit, we shall explore the surrounding wetlands to enjoy our first taste of local birding, and perhaps chance across a Golden Jackal.

## Days 2 & 3

## Strofyli National Park

Strofyli National Park holds a fabulous mosaic of salt marshes, coastal lagoons, reedbeds, wet meadows and dune forests, covering over 14,000 hectares. The park offers refuge for an exciting variety of wildlife in the winter months, with over 130 species recorded in January alone.

Our first day will be spent exploring the northern shores of Strofyli by foot and by minibus, where summer-dry mudflats are transformed into wetland havens by autumn rains. At Kalogera Lagoon, Great and Pygmy Cormorants gather in large numbers, along with Great and Little Egrets, Eurasian Bittern and Grey Heron. Wintering waders may include Spotted Redshank, Common Snipe, Dunlin and Black-winged Stilt, among others. We'll also take a gentle walk up the nearby limestone hills of Mavra Vouna in search of Rock Nuthatch and Sombre Tit.

Along the southern shores of the National Park, we'll find a very different habitat composition. Here, the open sand dune and scrub of the northern shores is replaced by some of the largest stands of Stone Pine in Greece, with Valonia Oak and Aleppo Pine mixed in. We'll seek out more herons and egrets along the shore and tree-lined channels, while Cetti's and Sardinian Warblers, European Stonechat and Crested Lark feed in the open scrub. As the light begins to fade in the evening, nocturnal species begin to emerge, including Eurasian Eagle Owl, European Scops Owl and Short-eared Owl.

Our second day here will include a private-guided visit to the archaeological site of Olympia, the birthplace of the Olympic Games, nestled in the hills of the Peloponnese. This UNESCO World Heritage site is a cornerstone of ancient Greek history.



Ancient Olympia

As we wander through the ruins where athletes once competed, we will spend time visiting the Temples of Zeus and Hera, which still hold significance for the modern games, for the lighting of the Olympic torch. To learn more about the history and significance of the different ruins, we will visit the nearby archaeological museum, offering an insight into the origins of the world's most celebrated sporting event.

## Day 4

## Transfer to Messolonghi National Park

Today we must sadly leave our base in Strofyli and head north to Messolonghi, a journey of around one and a half hours and along a route that will take us across the spectacular Charilaos Trikoupis Bridge. We will aim to arrive at our hotel by early afternoon and, after lunch, we will set off to explore Klisova Lagoon, a short distance from our hotel. The calm waters of Messolonghi's lagoons and salt pans attract an impressive number of wintering waterbirds and waders. In one afternoon, we can expect to see parties of Dalmatian Pelicans, with their characteristic bright orange bills,

impressive colonies of Greater Flamingos and good numbers of Common Shelduck, Black-necked Grebe, Slender-billed Gull, Pied Avocet, Spotted Redshank, Kentish Plover and Golden Plover with perhaps a few surprises thrown in, such as a wintering Osprey or Greater Sandplover.

## Days 5 - 7

## Messolonghi National Park

Spanning over 33,000 hectares, Messolonghi National Park forms one of the most significant wetland habitats of the entire Mediterranean region. An impressive 32 of the 38 European raptor species may be found here during the course of a year, but the wetland's greatest importance is most apparent during the winter months. Numbers of overwintering waterfowl regularly reach some 40,00 individuals each year, accompanied by almost 20,000 waders. We will have three full days in Messolonghi to fully explore the park's impressive birdlife.

if time permits, we may visit Lakes Lisimachia and Trichonida during our time here, the latter being Greece's largest, natural freshwater lake. Grey Herons and Little Egrets are frequent around the margins, while out on the open water, Great Crested Grebe, Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveler and Eurasian Teal all occur in good numbers and this can be a good area for wintering Ferruginous Duck. Marsh Harriers regularly quarter the reeds and surrounding fields and we may get lucky with a Greater Spotted Eagle.



Greater Spotted Eagle

One morning, we will head towards Kleisoura gorge, a striking local ravine where the limestone cliffs tower up to 300m high. The gorge is home to resident Griffon Vultures and can be a good location for Golden Eagle, Long-legged Buzzard, Woodlark and other winter passerines.

Our final morning will be spent travelling to the archaeological site of Pleuron, nested within the arid scrub hillsides that encompass the wetlands. The city is split into two settlements: 'Old Pleuron', and 'New Pleuron', the latter of which dates back to 230 BCE and makes up the ruins we will see today. Visible features include the city wall and masonry, both well preserved, as well as the Acropolis, chapel, theatre and agora. Sombre Tit and Blue Rock Thrush are all possible here.

## Day 8

## Fly London

After a thorough exploration of Western Greece's varied wildlife, habitats and ancient history, we must make the three-hour drive back to Athens Airport where we will catch our return flight back to London.

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## Tour grading

This tour is graded A, consisting of easy 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 Athens.

## Weather

The weather in January in north-western Greece is usually mild and dry, with midday temperatures in the low teens. Evenings and early mornings are decidedly cooler, so layers will be important! The occasional cooler and wetter day is always a possibility, 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. As we are travelling outside the main Greek 'tourist season' our hotels may not be fully opened, therefore some evening meals are likely to be taken at local restaurants or tavernas.

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

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.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/greece](http://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](http://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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Messolonghi National Park (Natural Greece)