

Greece – Wildlife & History

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly Athens and transfer to Kalogria
- Day 2** Strofyliya National Park
- Day 3** Ancient Olympia
- Day 4/7** Messolonghi National Park
- Day 8** Transfer Athens, fly UK



Departs

May

Focus

Birds, History & Culture

Grading

A/B. Easy to moderate walks only

Dates and Prices

See www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code GRC28)

Highlights

- Explore the national parks of Strofyliya and Messolonghi
- Enjoy Dalmatian Pelicans and Greater Flamingoes in large numbers at Messolonghi National Park
- Visit Ancient Olympia – birthplace of the Olympic Games!
- Spring migrants include Bee-eater, Golden Oriole, Olive-tree Warbler
- Led by an expert naturalist guide



Images: Ancient Olympia, European Bee-eaters, Dalmatian Pelicans (Shutterstock)



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Introduction

Western Greece's coastal wetlands are arguably some of the finest in Europe. In early May, the forests, scrubby hillsides and wetlands will be alive with spring 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 Olive-tree Warbler and Collared Flycatcher, whilst overhead, parties of Red-footed Falcons dash past. The coastal wetlands are at their best in early spring, acting as a safe haven for large colonies of herons, pelicans and other waterbirds.

This 8-day itinerary aims to encompass both western Greece's rich 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 200 BCE. We'll visit the national parks of Strofylia and Messolonghi, home to large numbers of Pied Avocets, Eurasian Spoonbills, White Storks, Greater Flamingoes and Dalmatian Pelicans, whilst raptors including Peregrine Falcon, Western Marsh Harrier, Lesser Kestrel and Short-toed Snake Eagle can be found. We'll also 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 north-west 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

Strofylia National Park

Strofylia National Park holds a fabulous mosaic of salt marshes, coastal lagoons, reedbeds, wet meadows and riparian forests, covering over 14,000 hectares. The park offers refuge for an exciting variety of wildlife in the spring, with over 200 species recorded between April and June.

Our first day will be spent exploring the northern shores of Strofylia by foot and by minibus, where summer-dry mudflats will still be fresh with water following the winter and spring rain. At Kalogera Lagoon, Great and Pygmy Cormorants gather in large numbers, along with Great and Little Egrets, Squacco Heron, and Collared Pratincole. We'll also keep our eyes on the shoreline in search of smaller waders including Kentish Plover, Little Plover, Little Stint, Dunlin, Curlew Sandpiper and, if lucky, the odd Broad-billed Sandpiper found migrating to its Arctic breeding grounds.

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 are 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. 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.



Ancient Olympia

Day 4

Transfer to Messolonghi National Park

Today we must sadly leave our base in Strofylia 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 waterbirds and waders, and in one afternoon, we can expect to see impressive colonies of Dalmatian Pelicans and Greater Flamingoes, plus good numbers of Common Shelduck, Slender-billed Gull, Pied Avocet, Spotted Redshank and Kentish Plover, with perhaps a few surprises thrown in, such as Spur-winged Plover or migrating Eleonora's Falcon.

Days 5 - 7

Messolonghi National Park

Spanning over 33,000 hectares, Messolonghi National Park forms one of the most significant wetland habitats of the Mediterranean. An impressive 32 of the 38 European raptor species may be found here during the course of a year, and we will have three full days in Messolonghi to fully explore the region's impressive birdlife.

We'll be sure to visit Lakes Lysimachia and Trichonida during our time here, the latter being Greece's largest natural freshwater lake. Grey Herons and Little Egrets are ubiquitous around the margins, and we will be sure to scan reedbeds for the signs of warblers, including Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, Cetti's Warbler, and Greater Reed Warbler. One day, we will head towards Kleisoura Gorge, a striking local ravine where the narrow 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 and Woodlark. We'll continue through the gorge on foot, enjoying the spectacular scenery alongside the wonderful birdlife.

We will also visit the Acheloos River and Fraxos Riparian Forest, where Middle-spotted and Lesser-spotted Woodpeckers are frequently seen, as well as Golden Oriole and Bee-eater. A nearby village named Lesini frequently sees Lesser Kestrels, so we will also be sure to make a stop. We will also make a visit to the archaeological site of Oeniades, nestled amongst the banks of the Acheloos. The theatre was built in 4 BCE after Athenian occupation and remains well preserved to this date. The site remains well preserved after excavation in the early 20th century, and we will enjoy our time here, also keeping an eye out for Blue Rock Thrush, Peregrine Falcon and possibly Semicollared Flycatcher.

Day 8

Fly London

After a thorough exploration of western Greece's varied wildlife, habitats and ancient history, we must make the 3-hour drive back to Athens Airport, where we will catch our return flight back to London.

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 May in north-western Greece is usually warm and dry, with midday temperatures in the mid-twenties. 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.

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 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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