

The Butterflies & Birds of North Macedonia

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly Skopje and transfer Popova Kula
Day 2/3	Kavadarci area
Day 4/7	Pelister and Galicica NP
Day 8	Fly London.

Departs

June.

Focus

Birds, Butterflies and other wildlife.

Grading

Grade A/B. Easy to moderate day walks only.

Dates and Prices

Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code MKD01) or see the current Naturetrek brochure.

Highlights:

- Pioneering wildlife tour to a little-visited corner of the Balkans
- Around 100 butterfly species possible
- Look for Zephyr & Chapman's Blue, Southern Comma & the endemic Macedonian Grayling
- Birds including Masked Shrike, Rock Nuthatch & Black-headed Bunting
- Balkan Fritillary, Grecian Copper & Little Tiger Blue
- Explore the Pelister National Park & Galicica Plateau and visit the Roman ruins at Stobi & the UNESCO World Heritage Site at Ohrid
- Expertly led by a Naturetrek naturalist & local guide



Little Tiger Blue, Pelister National Park & Common Rock Thrush



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Introduction

Although North Macedonia is largely unknown to those of us in Western Europe with an interest in natural history, it is an extremely rich and exciting wildlife destination. The most southerly of the six republics that were previously a part of Yugoslavia, North Macedonia boasts an impressive variety of habitats and scenery, from the high, forested peaks of the Baba Mountains to the hot, rolling plains of Pelagonia. This hidden jewel of the Balkans is also one of Europe's very best destinations for butterflies. To date, over 200 species have been recorded in this small, land-locked country and we can expect to see around half of these on this unusual and pioneering tour, as well as an exciting diversity of birds and other wildlife.

Itinerary

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 maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Fly Skopje & transfer to Popova Kula

We depart London's Luton Airport on a direct Wizz Air flight to Skopje. On arrival we will meet our local guide and transfer to our base for the first three nights at the winery of Popova Kula near to the historic town of Kavadarci. Here we are situated near the Vardar River in the heart of Macedonia's wine country with super views across the surrounding countryside and excellent habitat all around us. The journey is around 1.5 hours from Skopje and depending on flight times we may have a chance for a stop before reaching the hotel. Recent flight times however have been an evening arrival on day one and an evening departure from Skopje on day eight.

Day 2 & 3

Kavadarci Area

We have two full days in the Kavadarci area and being based here, we are in an excellent position from which to explore the varied habitats along the Vardar River valley including rough pasture, broadleaf woodlands and dry limestone hills bisected by dramatic gorges. Butterflies should be numerous and may include such species as Tufted Marbled Skipper, Zephyrus Blue, Delattin's Grayling and Marbled Fritillary. There is even a chance of a late Eastern Festoon! The birdlife is equally diverse and, with



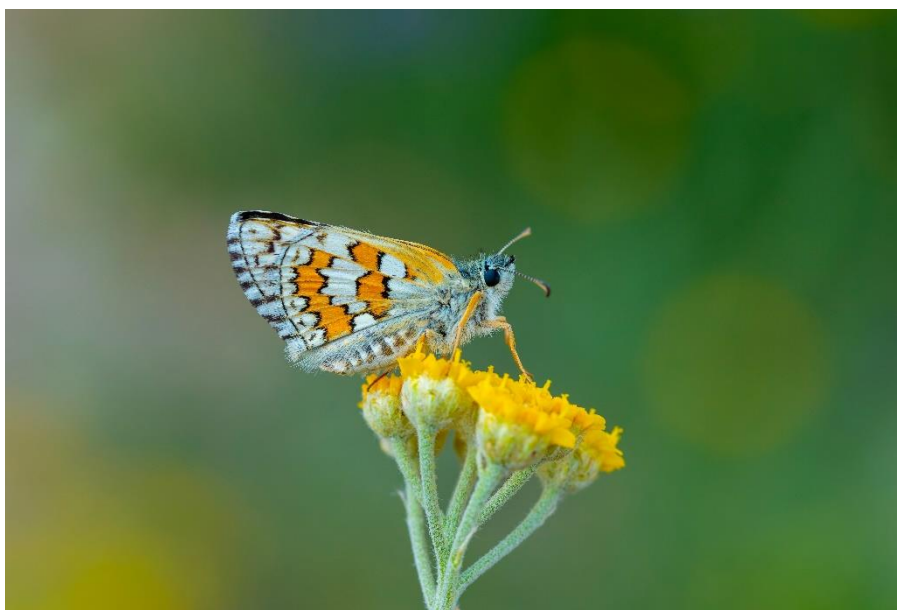
European Roller

colourful Bee-eaters hawking for insects overhead and Woodchat Shrikes adorning roadside wires, we

will be looking out for Black-headed Bunting, European Roller, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler and Booted Eagle.

Even a short pre-breakfast stroll from the hotel can produce many Black-headed Buntings, Little Owl, Woodchat and Red-backed Shrike and Turtle Doves with Balkan Marbled White, Southern White Admiral and Cardinal just some of the butterflies possible. We will discover the ancient Roman ruins of Stobi, the best preserved archeological site in the country and after viewing Stobi's beautiful mosaics and learning a little about North Macedonia's fascinating history, we will continue to the dramatic limestone cliffs of the Demir Kapija Gorge cut by the Varda River. Enroute we will explore a couple of arid valleys which are home to a wide variety of birds and butterflies. Both Olive-tree and Sardinian Warblers breed here, although the former would have stopped singing so may be tricky to track down at the time of our visit. Much easier to find will be European Bee-eater, Woodchat and Lesser Grey Shrikes and Black-eared Wheatear. Areas of short grass and bare ground are also home to numerous insect species such as the giant cricket *Bradyporus dasypus*, long-horned beetles and, above all, butterflies. Yellow-banded Skipper, Lesser Fiery Copper, Southern White Admiral, Southern or Delattin's Grayling and Little Tiger Blue are just a few of the species we hope to see here.

The towering cliffs of the Demir Kapija Gorge are home to several key rock-breeding birds such as Egyptian Vulture, Blue Rock Thrush, Rock Nuthatch, Crag Martin and Alpine Swift and also act as a magnet for thermalling birds of prey trying to gain height. We too will hope for sunny and warm weather here as we explore this area in the hope of finding such butterflies as Lang's Short-tailed Blue, Ilex Hairstreak, Balkan Marbled White, Great



Yellow-banded Skipper

Banded Grayling and Large Tortoiseshell. Dragonflies to look out for include Sombre Goldenring and Eastern Spectre, whilst additional birds may include Griffon Vulture, Booted Eagle, Subalpine Warbler, Hawfinch and, if fortunate, perhaps Masked Shrike, one of North Macedonia's east European specialties!

We will make a short drive to a small nearby village which is surrounded by a patchwork of interesting habitats including dry limestone hills, cut by the dramatic Babuna Gorge, and rough, flower-rich, grassland. The wider area is rich in birds such as Egyptian Vulture, Booted Eagle, Rock Partridge, Black Stork, Roller, Hoopoe, Cirl Bunting, Golden Oriole and Red-rumped Swallow. Interesting plants we might find include Yellow-star Thistle (*Centaurea solstitialis*), *Carthamus baeticus*, Madonna Lily (*Lilium candidum*), *Stachys alopecurus*, *Salvia ringens*, Bears Breeches (*Acanthus spinosus*) and Oriental Larkspur (*Consolida orientalis*). Typical butterflies include Inky and Oriental Skippers, Oberthur's Grizzled Skipper,

Lesser Fiery Copper, Little Tiger and Chapman's Blues, Lesser Purple Emperor, Southern Comma, Twin-spot Fritillary, Great Banded and White Banded Graylings and Krueper's Small White.

A small village we will pass through during our stay here holds over 100 pairs of Lesser Kestrel. These attractive falcons return to their nest sites in the village roofs around 1800 hours each evening after feeding in the neighbouring fields.

Day 4

Bitola

After breakfast we will depart Popova Kula and travel to our next base near the town of Bitola. Our comfortable hotel is situated in the Pelister National Park and will be our base for the final four nights of the holiday. It will take around two hours or so to reach Bitola which is in south-western Macedonia and set at the foot of the Baba Mountains, which rise to nearly 2,500 metres. From here we shall focus on the upland butterflies and birds and other natural history of the Pelister National Park and Galicica Plateau.



Apollo

On our way we have a number of options and a site on the way at nearly 1,000 metres above sea level may hold such butterflies as Great Sooty Satyr, The Hermit and Tree Grayling, as well Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush and Ortolan Bunting. This is also an interesting site for orchids such as Pyramidal, Burnt-tip, Bug and Pink Butterfly Orchids. Additional butterflies to look out for include Mountain and Krueper's Small Whites, Lesser Fiery Copper, Eastern Short-tailed, Damon, Amanda's and Turquoise Blues, Gatekeeper, Cardinal, Marbled, Twin-spot and Lesser Spotted Fritillaries, Southern White Admiral, Balkan Marbled White, White-banded and Great Banded Graylings and Oberthur's Grizzled Skipper. We may also pay a visit to the beautifully set 12th century Treskavec monastery, which offers wonderful views of the Dren Mountains and Pelagonia plain and where only one solitary monk now lives!

We may also try a site for Macedonian Grayling today. We will be trying for it later in the holiday too and the leaders will always be making the best call to maximize our chances of a great range of species.

After a varied and butterfly filled transfer we shall arrive at our hotel which is close the Pelister National Park and again provides excellent habitat on our doorstep for the chance of exciting species just around the hotel. Syrian, Middle and Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers may be found, Golden Orioles and Turtle Doves.

Day 5

Pelister National Park

We will spend today exploring the Pelister National Park (or the Baba Mountains), a dramatic mountain range stretching between North Macedonia and Greece. The North Macedonian side is clothed in extensive alpine meadows, the most southerly range in the Balkans to show an 'alpine' character to its flora. The highest peak of Pelister (a name derived from the ancient Greek 'peristera', meaning pigeon) reaches over 2,400 metres and overlooks Bitola. This morning we will drive up into these scenic mountains in an off-road vehicle and explore the alpine meadows and woodlands on foot. The Pelister National Park has several butterfly species that are difficult to find elsewhere in North Macedonia, including Balkan Clouded Yellow, Balkan Fritillary and the rare Grecian Grayling. Surprisingly, Marsh Fritillary flies high above the tree line here, together with more expected species such as Eros Blue, Balkan Copper, Mountain Argos, Blue Argus and Bright-eyed Ringlet.

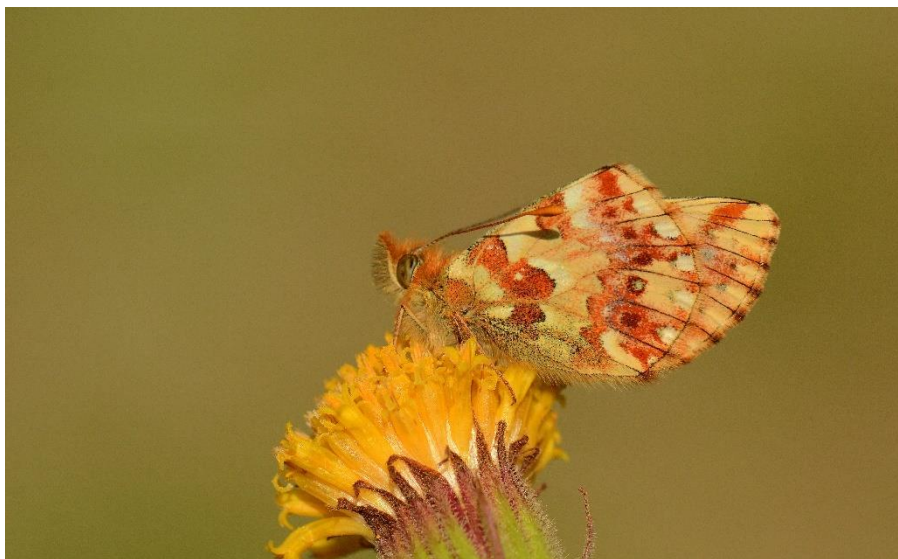
We will also be looking out for a few high-altitude birds including Alpine Accentor, Water Pipit and Golden Eagle with the chance of Nutcracker in the coniferous forests. A colourful spread of plants such as *Alkanna pulmonaria*, *Lilium albanicum*, *Dianthus myrtinervius*, *Pedicularis orthantha*, *Ranunculus incomparabilis* and *Viola orphanidis* can also be found. Flying below the treeline are many commoner mountain butterflies including Clouded Apollo, Black-veined White, Large, Turquoise and Adonis Blues, Marbled and High Brown Fritillaries, Northern Wall Brown, Camberwell Beauty, Large Tortoiseshell, Gatekeeper, Russian Heath and Large Grizzled, Hungarian and Mallow Skippers.

We are likely to take a picnic lunch out with us today and eat it at a wonderful mountain refuge.

Day 6 & 7

Galicica National Park

We have two full days to explore the various altitudes and habitats within the Galicica National Park. Our time here will include a visit to the town of Ohrid, set on the lake with the same name and with a history going back two millennia. Now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the town was settled by both the Romans and Ottoman Turks and its architectural heritage is superb, with an old fortress, amphitheatre, orthodox churches and mosques all contained within one small area.



Balkan Fritillary

From Ohrid we will drive to the high elevation Galicica Plateau from where we can look down on Lake Prespa and Ohrid, the two largest natural lakes in the Balkans. In common with Pelister National Park, we should find the meadows at 1,500 metres still blooming with rare plants such as *Alkanna nonneiformis*,

Astragalus mayeri, *Scrophularia canina*, *Asphodeline liburnica*, *Sideritis raeseri*, *Nepeta ernesti-mayeri*, *Eryngium serbicum*, *Rindera graeca* and *Viola orphanidis*.

We will also stop and explore the wooded slopes along the winding road up to the plateau. The butterfly list here can be very impressive and may include many of the following species: Apollo and Clouded Apollo, Black-veined White, Powdered Brimstone, Eastern Wood White, Ilex Hairstreak, Balkan and Lesser Fiery Copper, Alcon, Osiris, Eastern Short-tailed and Provencal Short-tailed Blue, Chequered, Zephyr, Turquoise, Eros, Meleager's, Escher's and Ripart's Anomalous Blues, Geranium Argus, Marsh, Freyer's and Balkan Fritillary, Esper's Marbled White, Woodland, Eastern Rock, White-banded and Delattin's Grayling, The Hermit, Great Sooty Satyr, Black and Bright-eyed Ringlet, Eastern Large Heath, Persian, Sandy Grizzled, Oriental Marbled and Yellow-banded Skippers. This is also one of the few places in Europe where Grey Asian Grayling is found (it flies in midsummer), whilst birds to look for include Rock Bunting, Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush and Rock Partridge.

It will be a most varied and fascinating two days exploring this area with endless fantastic views, a range of different habitats and elevations and hence such a wide range of species.



Galicica National Park

Day 8

Fly London

We will leave Bitola today and our transfer time to the airport will be around 2.5 hours covering 180kms. There are of course many tempting sites to stop at enroute as we make our way reluctantly back to the airport and we will be making best use of our time to see more wildlife.

We will likely visit the limestone massif of Pletvar and the main reason for stopping at Pletvar will be to look for Macedonia's only endemic butterfly, the Macedonian Grayling. Eastern Greenish Black-tip,

Delattin's Grayling and Ripart's Anomalous Blue are just two of the various specialities we may also find here and we shall enjoy exploring this area and enjoying everything we may find.

In recent years it has been an early evening flight back to London's Luton airport. Flight times will dictate how days one and eight play out but needless to say we will be making the absolute most of our time!

Focus

This is primarily a butterfly finding holiday with a superb range of birds to be seen along the way. Our local expert leaders have a wonderful knowledge of the countries butterflies and where to find them and we shall also send a leader to cover the varied birdlife of the country. The trip reports will give a good idea of what can be seen. The tour usually encounters around 100 species of butterfly, 100–130 species of bird, 15–20 Dragonflies and 10–15 species of reptile and amphibian.

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 paths can be rough and steep in places, especially in the Pelister National Park and on the Galicicia Plateau. The holiday is therefore suitable for anyone who enjoys walking in the countryside and is of an 'average' or better level of fitness.

Weather

The weather in North Macedonia in late June should be mostly settled with warm and sunny days in the lowlands. Temperatures will normally be in the mid to high 20s Centigrade, although if it is a particularly hot year it is possible for temperatures to get into the 30s, or even up to 40°C. Mountain weather can be more fickle, however, with cooler, cloudier conditions possible. The occasional rain shower or thunderstorm is possible and should be packed for.

Food & accommodation included in the price

All food and accommodation are included in the price of this holiday. Hotels in North Macedonia are comfortable, but not luxurious! Rooms are often simple in nature although all have private facilities. Our hotels have been chosen for their proximity to the wildlife sites. Lunches will be taken at different restaurants and inns each day with an occasional picnic too.

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 – <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/macedonia> regularly 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.



Church of St John, Ohrid