

Northern Greece's Lake Kerkini in Autumn

Naturetrek Tour Report

31 October - 4 November 2016

Report compiled by Philip Thompson



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Tour participants: Philip Thompson (leader) with five Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Monday 31st October

With the group having all arrived safely into Thessaloniki just after 1pm, we were soon on our way north towards Lake Kerkini in the warm autumn sun. The journey was straightforward with our arrival at the dam end of lake after a little more than an hour.

Making the best use of the daylight and our time, we undertook a preliminary spell of birding in the southern end of the lake. The most obvious first birds were the small number of Dalmatian Pelicans drifting serenely among the fishing boats of Lithotopus Harbour. Around them a multitude of Black-headed Gulls swirled as they picked insects and morsels from the water's surface. Scanning across the placid waters, numerous Great Crested Grebes were thinly scattered throughout the lake. Other notable birds of the lake were the many Pygmy Cormorants resting on any available perch in the lake, joined by a multitude of Great Cormorants.

A short move was taken where we then walked through some scrubby bramble patches and out onto the dry exposed mud of the lake to scan the shoreline birds. Grey Herons and Great Egrets stalked and posed on the water's edge whilst White Wagtails and Water Pipits scurried about their feet on the muddy shore. Among the flocks of Black-headed Gulls a lone Caspian Tern passed by, giving an indication of its superior size. The bramble thickets held a mix of chattering finches and sparrows, of which a few Cirl Buntings and Spanish Sparrows were the most notable. Returning to the minibus, the first of many Black Redstarts put in an appearance on a nearby fence post before being chased off by a belligerent Robin.

Making our way towards the village of Hrisohorafa where our hotel was located, we made a last stop as we crossed one of the many irrigation channels that feed from the lake. After a pleasant spell of birding an interesting and diverse list of birds had been noted, including Green Sandpiper, Common Snipe, Cetti's Warbler, Kingfisher, Great Egret and Buzzard. The short distance from here to the hotel was soon completed and we were quickly checked in. We went out to eat at one of the local restaurants in the nearby central square.

Day 2

Tuesday 1st November

Before breakfast we were able to spot a number of the Little Owls that reside in the village on the rooftops and sunning themselves under the eaves, something that was a regular feature of our stay.

Today was spent exploring the eastern side of the lake, beginning with the short drive from the hotel to the pumping station on the Eastern Embankment. A pair of Green Sandpipers loudly called as we disturbed them from the small holding tank where we parked. At least two pairs of Kingfishers were constantly moving about the area and perching prominently as they fished. Numerous Chiffchaffs and Tree Sparrows were present, joined by a few Serins and Black Redstarts. The nearby arable fields held large numbers of Chaffinches, Corn Buntings and a few Crested Larks.

Next we drove up onto the raised embankment that surrounds the lake and began to make our way slowly around the perimeter with several stops along the way to scan the lake. On the open water a similar mix of birds to yesterday was present, but this changed when we reached the area of open mud exposed by the low water

levels at this time of year. Here were large numbers of grunting Greater Flamingos, with Pochards diving among their legs. On the water's edge a range of wildfowl was present that comprised mainly Mallard, Pintail and Teal. Scanning the distant large expanse of exposed lakebed, a huge number of birds were present, of an exciting range and diversity. The highlights were up to six Spotted Eagles with a single juvenile Eastern Imperial Eagle and a trio of Common Cranes. After a considerable period of careful scanning and observation, we moved on towards the north-eastern corner of the lake. A couple of large pools of water still remained here, on which a small family party of Bewick's Swans remained as we stopped and got out of the vehicle, giving some excellent close views. Waders here included a few Spotted Redshanks and Common Snipe, with yet another obliging Kingfisher perched on a small boat.

A short drive further brought us to a small picnic spot where we stopped and took a short walk across to the River Strimonas. As we passed a small marshy area, a couple of Jack Snipe flushed from two small exposed pools, only to drop almost immediately back into the thicker marshy vegetation 15 metres away. We continued on to the riverbank where we could see large numbers of Mallards resting on the alluvial islands in the river. We returned to the picnic site where we had our lunch after having spotted a soaring Black Stork. The polite and patient stray dogs deserved a couple of scraps, even if it was mainly pasta and no sausages!

As a change of habitat and birdlife, we next visited the quarry north of Vironia. As soon as we were out of the minibus, a Golden Eagle was sighted drifting past the cliff face above us, to then be obscured by trees. We walked up the track lined by the thorny Christ's Thorn (*Paliurus spina-christi*) to arrive at the quarry floor. The Golden Eagle was then sighted once more, having presumably been perched on the rock face above us, as it then drifted away against the wooded mountainside. Our next target species, Western Rock Nuthatch, was then picked up moving and calling from among the boulders. We were able to enjoy some excellent prolonged views of this charismatic 'bobbing' bird as it searched for food in the many cracks and crevices present, intermingled with some posing atop several large rocks. A second, different Golden Eagle was next spotted, this time a full adult. After admiring the splendid view from our elevated position, we headed back towards Vironia.

Our final walk was taken along a forested track near the river, during which we picked out both Great Spotted and Green Woodpeckers, but little else of note. We returned to the hotel before taking another evening meal in the village square.

Day 3

Wednesday 2nd November

We returned to the eastern embankment for our first exploration of the day, in the hope of picking out any geese on the vast exposed grazing marsh and muddy fringes. We were out of luck, but were compensated with a sub-adult White-tailed Eagle and the rare '*flavescens*' colour form of Spotted Eagle among five or more of the normal dark form. An almost-overlooked male Hen Harrier drifted by, providing a pleasant surprise. The trio of Common Cranes seen yesterday made a grand arrival as they flew in from the surrounding fields to land close by in beautiful bright sunny conditions. Otherwise, the assembled multitude of birds was similar to yesterday.

We moved on to the north of the lake and a visit to Mandraki Harbour. Once more the water's edge was some considerable distance away, but there were numerous wet marshy creeks and lush grazing nearby which held some interesting species. Common Snipe were common, with several flushing from the pools near our observation point, and a smaller number of Green Sandpipers vocal in their protestations at the disturbance. We

were once again joined by the Common Cranes, which had been heard calling from some distance before they appeared flying low over the drowned forest trees to settle once more in the open marsh. A passing party of Whooper Swans kept going to settle on the lake some distance away, preventing a satisfactory view. Another arriving bird was a Black Stork that flew down into the wooded marsh, which was probably the same bird seen yesterday. The flat mud held large numbers of Wigeon, Teal and Northern Lapwing, whilst in the water the large numbers of Greater Flamingos were everywhere. The squealing Water Rails in the nearby reeds kept hidden, while the equally skulking Cetti's Warblers did give fleeting views as they moved within the reed stems, periodically uttering loud contact calls.

We moved on, taking a quick stop in a typical Greek taverna for an equally typical Greek coffee provided by the elderly owner. We then headed north towards Bulgaria where we pulled in to a pleasant picnic spot for lunch, during which a couple of interesting birds and several good butterflies were seen. Birds seen included a passing female Hen Harrier and a Hawfinch in the surrounding trees, whilst the butterflies included Eastern Bath White and Lang's Short-tailed Blue. Our next destination was alongside the Bulgarian border and a stunning riparian forest of majestic White Poplars (*Populus alba*) with a rich accompanying mix of trees. As we entered the wood a rather unexpected Nettle-tree Butterfly flew up from the path, this being according to several different guide books, rather outside their normal flight period, and probably a result of the very pleasant warm and sunny conditions we were enjoying. This woodland is renowned for its rich population of woodpeckers. We were not disappointed, as we almost immediately found a couple of Great Spotted Woodpeckers followed by Middle Spotted Woodpecker. As we quietly moved along the path, we next found a pair of very vociferous Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers that were rather upset by the presence of a Eurasian Nuthatch and repeatedly chased it with much flashing of wings and agitated calls. As our walk continued we came upon further Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers, this time in a similar state of agitation caused by the presence of a Middle Spotted Woodpecker. Calling Short-toed Treecreepers proved tricky to pick out, but did finally show well for most of the group. Having flirted with crossing the international border, we headed back south. Motorway-resurfacing lane closures necessitated a rather lengthy detour further south. To make best use of our enforced location, we next visited the town of Sidirokastro, and after a little confusion, managed to find our way to the ruined Byzantine Castle that sits on the high rocky promontory behind the town. The views obtained were fantastic with a number of good bird sightings included, such as Firecrest, Common and Black Redstarts and a probable Syrian Woodpecker.

After a rather meandering route, we eventually found our way back to the hotel in good time to freshen up before dinner.

Day 4

Thursday 3rd November

Still in search of geese, we returned to Mandraki harbour to see if there had been any new arrivals or movements of birds visible from the stone jetty. We succeeded only in finding a small group of Eastern Greylag Geese. A full adult White-tailed Eagle was moving low across the marshes, causing minor pandemonium as it went, before it was lost to sight passing inland towards the forested mountain slopes. An unexpected Coypu was picked out, seemingly in a very vulnerable position feeding out on the open expanse of marsh, in light of the heavy eagle presence on the lake. The idyllic quiet and peaceful surroundings encouraged a temptation to relax and spend much time enjoying the spectacle, but we moved on nevertheless with a journey to the western side of the lake.

Passing through the village of Kerkini, we then turned off the tarmac road onto the earthen embankment road. We connected with the Black Stork once more, standing out on the exposed mud of a river creek before it took to the wing to drift away. With the deeper water levels on this side of the lake we were actively seeking out grebes, successfully finding a small number of Black-necked Grebes among the Great Crested and Little Grebes spread throughout the area. Large numbers of resting Pygmy Cormorants were a feature here, as the whole length of the rocky shore held an uncounted mass of birds. A brief spell scanning from Kerkini Harbour was followed by a further drive along the embankment in order to try to obtain a closer view of the large number of Greater Flamingos wading further ahead. This paid off with some fine views obtained of these noisy lake inhabitants. The familiar array of ducks was also present, with more grebes. At this point, whilst casually scanning the distant exposed mud on the far side of the lake, we rather unexpectedly picked out the unmistakable presence of the flock of Lesser White-fronted Geese! It was clear that this year the geese were favouring an area of feeding grounds well away from the shoreline and, correspondingly, were rather difficult to observe. Even with a telescope it was a bit of a stretch of one's powers of observation. A similarly distant, beautifully flashing, tight flock of waders were presumably Dunlin, a species we had not seen until now in any observable position.

We returned to the harbour's benches for our lunch, where we were once more temptingly lulled by the peace and quiet to spend several hours in contemplation. A move was made as we continued around the western shoreline. A stop opposite a dry roadside marsh held an interesting flock of more than 30 of the usually solitary Mistle Thrushes, here doubtless a passage flock moving out of the approaching cold eastern European winter.

A further stop was taken to walk out on the dry mud to slowly approach an exposed island used by the Dalmatian Pelicans to roost and preen. After a number of short approach movements, taking care not to disturb the birds, we were able to get within a reasonable distance to enjoy some cracking views of these huge emblematic birds. We were joined on the mudflats by large numbers of White Wagtails, full of character and energy as they scampered about catching insects. The pelicans were joined on their island by good numbers of roosting Black-headed Gulls casually loafing alongside their oversize neighbours; a little too casually and unconcerned it turned out, as we were next shocked to witness a gull being scooped up and swallowed by a Dalmatian Pelican! After some fluttering and struggle this unfortunate bird was engulfed within the capacious bill of its nemesis. Having got over this distressing sight, things returned to the calm and placid scene of earlier, allowing us to pick out a couple of rosy-flushed Great White Pelicans among the numerous Dalmatians. This pair was then joined by another two that flew in, allowing us to compare the flight characteristics of the two species.

Returning to shore, we drove a little further before taking a dirt track leading into the forested hills. We travelled a short distance before we disembarked to walk along the track in a pleasant valley. The trackside shrubs were alive with uncountable Chiffchaffs, joined by good numbers of Black Redstarts feeding on the open grassy meadows alongside. A wonderful botanical discovery in a narrow gulley was a large population of the autumn flowering *Crocus pulchellus* and Ivy-leaved Cyclamen (*Cyclamenhederifolium*), all in full bloom.

Our final stop of the day was a visit to a quarry to the south of Lithotopus, in the hope of seeing an Eagle Owl leave its daytime roost. As we waited, a Peregrine passed over and a small party of Siskins passed through the treetops, but we were out of luck with the owl.

Day 5

Friday 4th November

We still had a full morning birding at our disposal before we needed to make our way to the airport. This we spent on the Eastern Embankment, making the most of the spectacle of birds present. Viewing out over the flat expanse, we were able to pick up several Spotted Eagles gathered around a carcass of what appeared, at this huge distance, to be a pelican. These birds were pushed off by the arrival of a larger and dominant White-tailed Eagle. As if from thin air a small party of seven Spoonbill flew in to land beneath us and begin actively feeding in their characteristic manner. The Eastern Imperial Eagle seen earlier in the trip was re-found, unfortunately no closer to our viewing position. After some careful and patient scanning of the ditches behind us, we were able to obtain good sightings of some of the many Water Rails that could be heard on several occasions during our stay. With time beginning to run out, we moved on around in our circuit, pausing at the large pool that still held the family of Bewick's Swans and mix of wildfowl.

Entering Hrisohorafa a fortunate, but all too brief, sighting of a Grey-headed Woodpecker was obtained when it flew onto a roadside telegraph pole before our passage almost immediately disturbed it, leaving us little time to register where it flew before we could bring the vehicle to a stop! Back at the hotel we loaded the luggage and set out for the airport. Our birding was still not at an end, with a rapid stop taken to the south of Lithotopus when a Great Grey Shrike was spotted as we passed on a prominent telephone wire. With this excellent final sighting our return journey was then completed to Thessaloniki and onward from there to Gatwick and home.

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Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	October/November				
			31	1	2	3	4
1	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		3			3
2	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>			4	10	6
3	Bewick's Swan	<i>Cygnus columbianus</i>		9			4
4	White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>				?	
5	Lesser White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser erythropus</i>				113	
6	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i> subsp. <i>rubrirostris</i>				7	
7	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		10	✓		30
8	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	20	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>		30	20	30	50
10	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>		6			8
11	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>		6	20	✓	30
12	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>		3	50	✓	40
13	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		20	✓	✓	✓
14	Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		100	✓	✓	300
15	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	4	12	10	40	12
16	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	12	10	2	50	25
17	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>		1		4	1
18	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>		300	✓	500	✓
19	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>		1	1	1	
20	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>					7
21	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	4	6	12	8	10
22	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	3	25	12	10	12
23	Great White Pelican	<i>Pelecanus onocrotalus</i>				4	
24	Dalmatian Pelican	<i>Pelecanus crispus</i>	40	100	✓	100	25
25	Pygmy Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax pygmeus</i>	12	50	10	✓	100
26	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	50
27	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>			1	1	2
28	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		1	1		
29	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		1	2	1	
30	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		10	✓	✓	6
31	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	12	✓	✓	✓	✓
32	Spotted Eagle	<i>Clanga clanga</i>		6	6	3	6
33	Eastern Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila heliaca</i>		1			1
34	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>		2			
35	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	2	6	1		
36	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>				1	
37	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>		H	H	1	3
38	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
39	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		12	60	✓	✓
40	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>		3	3		
41	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		30	✓	6	100
42	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		20	✓	✓	✓
43	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	2	6	20	✓	25
44	Jack Snipe	<i>Lymnocyptes minimus</i>		2			
45	Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>		2		4	2
46	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		1			
47	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		1			

	Common name	Scientific name	October/November				
			31	1	2	3	4
48	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>	1	8	6	4	3
49	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>				100+?	
50	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
51	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	10	20		✓	✓
52	Caspian Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>					1
53	Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>	1	1			
54	Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
55	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
56	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
57	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>		4	2	2	1
58	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	2	10	1	2	3
59	Middle Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocoptes medius</i>			3		
60	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates minor</i>			5		
61	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		2	5		
62	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>		3	2		
63	Grey-headed Woodpecker	<i>Picus canus</i>					1
64	Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>					1
65	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	6	12	✓	✓	✓
66	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
67	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
68	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>		16		2	
69	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		3	2	2	
70	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓	
71	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
72	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
73	Eurasian Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>				H	
74	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	3	20	✓	2	
75	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		H	✓	✓	✓
76	Duncock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		1			
77	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>			1		
78	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	2	4	2	2	6
79	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	8	50	✓	✓	✓
80	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>			1		
81	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>			2		
82	Winter Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		1	3		
83	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>			4		
84	Western Rock Nuthatch	<i>Sitta neumayer</i>		1			
85	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>			3		
86	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
87	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	6	✓	✓	✓	✓
88	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	1	1	30	✓	
89	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>			3		
90	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		2	1	30	
91	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	8	✓	✓	✓	✓
92	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	2	6	8	✓	8
93	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>			2		
94	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>			1		1
95	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
96	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>		12	10	20	30
97	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>	✓				
98	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	2	6	3	2	1

	Common name	Scientific name	October/November				
			31	1	2	3	4
99	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	6	50	✓	✓	✓
100	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>				1	
101	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>		4	10	10	20
102	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
103	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		2			
104	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		1	10	✓	✓
105	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		6		6	
106	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
107	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>			1	1	
108	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>	2	2	25		
109	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	60	✓	✓	✓	✓

Butterflies

Large White, *Pieris brassicae*
 Eastern Bath White, *Pontia edusa*
 Berger's Clouded Yellow, *Colias alfacariensis*
 Lang's Short-tailed Blue, *Leptotes pirithous*
 Nettle-tree Butterfly, *Libythea celtis*
 Red Admiral, *Vanessa atalanta*
 Queen of Spain Fritillary, *Issoria lathonia*
 Small Heath, *Coenonympha pamphilus*

Small White, *Pieris rapae*
 Clouded Yellow, *Colias crocea*
 Small Copper, *Lycaena phlaeas*
 Common Blue, *Polyommatus icarus*
 Peacock Butterfly, *Inachis io*
 Painted Lady, *Vanessa cardui*
 Speckled Wood, *Pararge aegeria*
 Wall Brown, *Lasiommata megera*

Amphibians & Reptiles

Greek Marsh Frog, *Rana balcanica*
 Tree Frog, *Hyla arborea* (heard)
 Dice Snake, *Natrix tessellata* (dead)

Agile Frog, *Rana dalmatina*
 Erhard's Wall Lizard, *Podarcis erhardii*

Mammals

Coypu, *Myocastor coypus*