

Greece in Autumn

Naturetrek Tour Report

5 - 12 September 2017

Report compiled by George ("Giorgos") Spiridakis



Naturetrek Minglestone Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants: George (“Giorgos”) Spiridakis (local guide) with six Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Tuesday 5th September

The group arrived at Thessaloniki airport at about 11am, and met the local guide. Soon after, we went to a nearby restaurant-cafe for a lunch / coffee stop. There, the group had the opportunity to have a first chat and to meet the other group members. George explained the programme of the day and after the lunch the group departed with destination the small village of Dadia in the Evros district, near the Greek-Turkish border. On the way, the weather was cloudy with occasional showers. It reminded them more of the weather in Britain, rather than the 'typical' Greek weather they were expecting!

On the way to Dadia, the first stop was at Lake Ofryniou, a small lake near the sea. Just before reaching the lake, while on the countryside road the first Crested Larks were seen. Additionally, Collared Doves, Yellow-legged Gulls and a few Red-backed Shrikes were noted. Barn Swallows, House Martins and at least one Red-rumped Swallow were also present. At the lake, 80+ Greater Flamingos, along with couple of Spoonbills, Grey Heron, Little Egrets were present, along with a number of Waders, waiting for identification. Among them were a single Curlew Sandpiper, three Wood Sandpipers, a few Little Stints and a single Little Ringed Plover. Also present was a group of 30+ Teal and 15+ Black-headed Gulls. Just before departing, the rain reminded the group that they still had a longish drive to Dadia and that they had to move. Just then, we were lucky enough to watch an Osprey flying over the lake and stooping for a successful fish catch! That spectacle kept us there a little longer, and the Osprey repeated its dive soon after. We were a bit wet but very excited as we continued our journey.

Our second and last stop was at some saltpans of the Porto Lagos area. It is very interesting place that attracts a significant range of species in good numbers. Here we saw our first two Dalmatian Pelicans plus several Greater Flamingos. Several Black-winged Stilts and Pied Avocets, six Black-tailed Godwits, two Greenshank, one Marsh Sandpiper, one Spotted and several Common Redshanks, a few Wood Sandpipers, Grey Plovers, Curlew Sandpipers, a single Dunlin and (the big surprise!) five Red-necked Phalaropes were some of the waders we managed to identify. Moreover, 10+ Slender-billed Gulls and two Caspian Terns completed the most interesting species that were present! After that birding break, we had a quick coffee and comfort stop at a nearby coffee shop before we drove all the way to Dadia.

We arrived at the hotel by 7pm, where Dimitra was expecting us and helped us with the rooms. Slightly before 8pm, we met at the reception and then drove to the nearby local taverna, where a delicious dinner and beers were awaiting us.

Day 2

Wednesday 6th September

The next day, after a rich and delicious breakfast, we visited the National Park information centre in Dadia, located just 100 metres from our hotel. There, the people had a look at the displays while George was speaking with the staff and arranging the final details for our visit to the raptor hide. Soon, at about 8.20am, we left on the National Park Authority bus, and about 15 minutes later we arrived at the hide. People walked quietly towards the hide, and looked at the opposite hill, at the vulture feeding station. Another group was already at the hide when our group arrived: volunteers of WWF Hellas had a meeting at Dadia and visited the raptors hide as well.

During our nearly 90-minute stay at the hide, we had the opportunity to watch through our scopes and binoculars, at least 33 Cinereous (also known as Monk or Black) Vultures, 39 Griffon, and two Egyptian Vultures, one of the very few remaining pairs in Greece at the moment. Also, for a short while, two White-tailed Eagles appeared at the feeding place area, (an adult flew over the feeding place twice and a juvenile perched on a tree for a short time) while six Northern Ravens were at the site for most of the time.

After 10am, our group walked through the forest trail towards the hotel; a 3.5-kilometre walk through the beautiful, rather quiet forest, was pleasant with a few birds recorded on the way. Some raptors were flying over: three Cinereous Vultures, two Griffons, a Eurasian Sparrowhawk, and a pale-phase Booted Eagle which was mobbing a Cinereous Vulture! Passerines were few, and included European Robin, a few Willow Warblers (seen and heard), a few Short-toed Treecreepers (heard) and we also recorded two Eurasian Jays. Just before we reached the cafe next to the hotel, two Black Storks (our first) flew over! There were plenty of '*Hipparchia*' (Grayling-type) species of butterflies along the way, which showed their amazing camouflage once perched on the pine tree trunks! A quick coffee stop followed the nice forest walk, prior to our visit to a nearby stream (Diavolorema), where we had our lunch at a picnic site. While we were there, we recorded two Cinereous Vultures flying over, a Goshawk, Lesser Whitethroat, two Spotted Flycatchers, a female Common Redstart, a Great Spotted Woodpecker and Great Tit.

Next, we drove to the western hills of Dadia, with a quick stop at a top of a hill, where we had our first two Northern Wheatears and then a stop and walk in an Oak forest patch with some Elder trees. Surprisingly, it was very quiet. Only Great Tit, Spotted Flycatcher and Short-toed Treecreeper were seen and / or heard here. As a last stop, we visited another area by the dry Diavolorema stream. A short walk there gave us our first four Woodpigeons, a Black Stork, two more Cinereous Vultures, a Lesser Spotted Eagle, two Common Buzzards, several European Bee-eaters, five-plus Alpine Swifts, a few Red-backed Shrikes, several Barn Swallows and House Martins, and a single Lesser Spotted Woodpecker for the lucky few who managed to see it.

The birdwatching day was over and (almost) everybody was looking for a cold beer prior to dinner, because it had been a warm and sunny day!

Day 3

Thursday 7th September

After a brilliant breakfast once again, our luggage was packed in the boot, people boarded the minibus and we headed to the hills of south Evros, close to the delta area. Just before saying goodbye to the Dadia area, we noticed a bird perched on the wires, which proved to be our first Roller! Soon a second one made us stop at the side of the road try for a scope view but, unfortunately, the bird did not like the publicity and moved away. A third bird was then spotted on a low tree in a field, but again moved out of sight quickly. While waiting for one of them to appear again, a raptor was calling nearby, but out of sight. The waiting was worth it, as finally a Lesser Spotted Eagle glided in front of us at close range, moving quickly to the field where we spotted the Roller earlier. Some time later, a second (adult) flew over, going in the same direction as the previous one! The Roller appeared again, finally allowing us to have a scope view.

Afterwards we moved to the southern hills of the Evros district, not far from our next hotel. A walk towards the top of the hill rewarded us with four flying Black Storks, Lesser Spotted Eagle, three migrating Levant Sparrowhawks, Ortolan Bunting, Blue Rock Thrush, Northern Wheatear and few other passerines.

It was already midday, with temperatures quite high, and almost lunch time. We decided to go to the hotel, unload the minibus and have lunch in the yard, in the shade. After having lunch and some time to relax, we visited an area in the west of the delta area and the coastline near that area. Here, there were plenty of Bee-eaters again, plus Hoopoe, Marsh Harriers, Red-backed Shrikes (of course!), Whinchat, Northern Wheatears, Spotted Flycatchers, and a few Corn Buntings and Crested Larks. At the coast and a nearby lagoon, we counted over 200 Greater Flamingos, a few Kentish Plovers, two Turnstones, Grey Plovers, Curlews, two Dalmatian Pelicans and a Slender-billed Gull. Our last stop was on the coastline, further west from our previous location. Here, a few more Slender-billed Gulls were present, plus Sandwich Terns, a Caspian Tern, a Mediterranean (*desmarestii* subspecies of European) Shag, hundreds of Black-headed and many Yellow-legged Gulls, a few Great Cormorants, Kentish Plovers, two Hoopoes, Crested Larks and three Tawny Pipits (two of them being juveniles).

After that last stop, we headed to the hotel for our daily cold beer! Before dinner, George, Martin and Jill went to a nearby area to search for Nightjars and other night creatures. At least two Blue Rock Thrushes were flying by some rocky outcrops, giving us good scope views. It was already 8pm when we decided to go back to the hotel for dinner (instead of persisting with the Nightjars). The SMS George sent to Brian to inform the group of their short delay, reached Brian's phone one or two days later, so that method of communicating was never used again! On the way down to the hotel, a brief look at some of the rocks had a nice surprise of an adult Eagle-Owl being perched there!

Day 4

Friday 8th September

After breakfast, we visited the nearby building of the Evros Delta National Park Authority. People had a look around while George was checking the final details with the Park staff. After that, we visited the main part of the Evros Delta, accompanied by one of the wardens of the Park. While driving towards the lagoon, we stopped to look at a bird sitting in one of the fields to the left. It was a Whinchat, and was followed by a second one nearby. An adult male Red-backed Shrike was showing very well too at the other side of the road. We set off again, but made another stop just a few hundred metres away. A flying Woodpecker was the reason this time. George followed it while flying, being able to see where it landed on a small bush-like tree. Another one was also spotted on the same tree! The scope was immediately out and then everybody had the chance to watch a couple of Syrian Woodpeckers in the same place.

The big Drana lagoon was generally poor for birds, bearing in mind what can be expected during this period. But that is typical though during migration at this time of year: some days and areas can be crowded and others rather quiet. Still, a few Dalmatian Pelicans were present, waders (mainly Redshank, Greenshank, Curlew and Wood Sandpipers) were seen on the way, plus a number of passerines (Tawny Pipits, Greater Short-toed Larks, Willow Warblers, Red-backed Shrikes, Corn Buntings etc.). Nearly at the end of the route, but still in the core of the delta, a huge flock (1500+) of Great Cormorants was flying towards the second-biggest lagoon. There were many hundreds of White Pelicans, many Dalmatian Pelicans, and Greater Flamingos. Also present were a few waders and herons (Little Egrets, Great Egrets, and Grey Herons) and plenty of Gulls. After a longish stop enjoying the crowds of birds there, we moved towards the very end of our route. There we had probably the best gathering of birds, which importantly, were within a good range for watching with binoculars and scope. The heat haze had not been helping for looking at and identifying moderately distant waders earlier. At this particular spot, we had brilliant views of two Spur-winged Lapwings (some of the last prior to migrating), several Kentish

and Common Ringed Plovers, at least seven Broad-billed Sandpipers, three Marsh Sandpipers, a Spotted Redshank, Wood Sandpipers, Common Sandpiper, Common Snipe, Curlew Sandpipers, a Dunlin and Little Stints. Sixteen Spoonbills, at least six Little Terns, three Slender-billed Gulls and a Kingfisher were also present. A few hundred more birds were further away in the lagoon, but it was impossible to identify them. The spot was so interesting that we decided to spend some more time there while having our lunch break.

Later in the afternoon, we visited some agricultural and uncultivated land around the delta area. Apart of the many Red-backed Shrikes, we were excited to see three Rollers in a very good range, perched on the wires and stooping down in the fields to hunt for beetles and other creatures. In the same area, two juvenile Montagu's Harriers were flying over the fields and the hill opposite us. An adult female also flew over, higher up and kept circling higher until out of sight. On the small hill opposite, where the two young Harriers were flying for a prolonged period, at least two Common Kestrels were harassing them every now and then, which the Harriers seemed to find quite entertaining. It reminded us of an air show! Later, when the Kestrels got bored with this game, they perched on a tree. That was not a good idea at all, as the Magpie gang mobbed them repeatedly until they decided to move away.

Moving on to another spot nearby, we spotted some flocks of Yellow Wagtails, a few Whinchats, Northern Wheatears and finally, another Shrike species, Lesser Grey Shrike. Two of this species were around in an open, uncultivated area, giving us brilliant views both through binoculars and telescope. Just before we went back to the hotel for the typical beer break, we had a short stop at the place we had seen the Rollers before, watching one of them again, in close range, perched on the wires and then stooping down in the field for another successful 'bug' catch.

After the refreshing cold beers, George, Martin and Alan went to yesterday's hill in a second attempt to observe Nightjars and Eagle-Owl. George kept looking without success, but, just before it got dark, something flew in front of the rocks and then disappeared again. Trying to find it with binos was impossible, so he looked through the scope. Finally, the Owl was sitting on top of one of the rocks, very well camouflaged though! The bird had the perfect camouflage, with the forest in the background; one had to look very carefully, even when using the scope! Even then, you needed the bird to turn its head towards us, to see the glint in those beautiful big eyes. Mosquitos and hunger pangs forced us to quit birding, so we drove to the restaurant for a delicious dinner!

Day 5

Saturday 9th September

After breakfast, we stowed the luggage in our minibus and drove west towards our final destination: the famous Lake Kerkini.

While on the road, the first bird of the day was a young Roller, sitting on a wire. We had a first stop on the outskirts of the city of Komotini. A few Kestrel-type birds were flying in the distance, (none of them was an adult male), making it impossible to tell if they were Common or Lesser Kestrels. We kept moving while watching for more of those at a closer range. Soon later, one was perched on a telegraph pole and we stopped to take a closer look. It was a male Lesser Kestrel, quite close, although the light was not very good. We moved slightly forward, in an effort to keep the sun behind us, but by the time George had the scope on it, the bird left its pole and kept going further away.

Our next stop was at a nearby village (Neo Sidirohori), at a small pond. The water had almost disappeared, but two small pools remained. One was located very close to the road and the other some hundred metres further afield. At the first one, Green Sandpiper, Little Egret and Crested Larks were present. At the more distant pool we observed four Wood and one Common Sandpiper and a Common Buzzard. In between the ponds, there were plenty of Crested Larks plus a few Northern Wheatears.

Then we headed towards the Lake Ismarida, where we detected more flying Lesser Kestrels, 13 Black Storks, a few Tawny Pipits, many Sand Martins and other birds. At lunchtime, George decided to drive to a nearby river, with some shade provided by the trees. We stopped on a bridge. Soon, we spotted the first Golden Orioles in flight! The initial excitement was followed by great views through the scope of an adult male and female sitting on a big tree. During and after lunch at that particular place, we located more Orioles, Blackcaps, Spotted Flycatchers, Grey Heron, Common Buzzards, several Bee-eaters and our first Pygmy Cormorant! After that, we drove to a hill overlooking Lake Ismarida. Apart from two Dalmatian Pelicans, there was not much to be seen, although Sand Martins were everywhere, and Marsh Harriers were flying around the extensive reed beds of the lake.

When people started to demand a coffee stop at a cooler place, George had to find a proper solution. We drove to Fanari, a coastal, touristic town and we sat at a cafe by the sea. Just below us and along the coast were many Yellow-legged Gulls of all age stages. Among them was an immature Mediterranean Gull. Also, in the sea, two Mediterranean Shags and another five sitting on the rocks further away. Then we drove towards the salt pans of Porto Lagos, our final birding stop, before heading to Lake Kerkini. Here, we spotted several Greater Flamingos, 34 Pied Avocets, 30+ Common and at least three Spotted Redshanks, a Marsh Sandpiper, Greenshanks, Wood Sandpipers, Ruffs, Grey Plovers, Little Ringed Plover and two Sandwich Terns. We continued our drive towards Lake Kerkini, enjoying the interesting and changing landscape on the way, from open cultivated and uncultivated land, to forested and agricultural hills, surrounded by high mountains, until we reached our destination in the late afternoon.

Nikos (the hotelier) was expecting us at the guesthouse, and helped us with the room arrangement. Dinner followed at a local tavern at the village square, located less than 100 metres from the guesthouse.

Day 6

Sunday 10th September

The next morning, we ate another delicious breakfast with coffee, and by 8.30am we were ready to depart for the lake. We first visited a canal close to the lake. Flocks of Herons and Egrets were present (70+ Squacco Herons, with dozens of Little Egrets and Grey Herons) and a single young Little Bittern. That kept us watching for a prolonged period, as it was hard to spot among the reeds, but it was moving slowly in its characteristic way when it realized we were not a threat. More than 100 Black-headed Gulls were flying and feeding along the canal, making a lot of noise, accompanied by at least 20 equally noisy but more delicate Whiskered Terns. Other interesting species we saw there included three Ferruginous Ducks, a few Pygmy Cormorants, Kingfisher, Marsh Harrier, Lesser Spotted Eagle, Sedge Warbler, Common Reed Warbler, Tree Pipit, a few Bee-eaters, Red-backed Shrike, Great Spotted Woodpeckers and a single juvenile Turtle Dove. We continued along the eastern dyke, with stops every now and then. Our first 'proper' stop (where we used our scopes too) was at a place with numerous Pygmy Cormorants and Night Herons.

Later we stopped at a place where we observed numerous birds in the lake: thousands of Mallards and other duck species in much lower numbers, including Shovelers, Teals, 13 Garganey and Common Pochards. There were many waders as well, which included Black-tailed Godwits, Spotted Redshanks and Wood Sandpipers. Great Egrets, Grey, Night and Squacco Herons, Spoonbills, Pygmy Cormorants and Dalmatian Pelicans were part of the crowds too. In the far distance, along a shoreline, a few thousand(!) White Pelicans, Greater Flamingos and Great Cormorants were forming an impressive long line. Sand Martins in their thousands were flying over the lake as well. Passerines included many Spotted Flycatchers and Willow Warblers, Yellow Wagtails, plenty of Red-backed Shrikes, Golden Oriole, Common Whitethroat and Wood Warbler, amongst others.

It was already passed noon and was approaching lunch time, so we crossed the dyke without many stops, drove to the foothills of Belles Mountain and had our lunch at a picnic site, with views of the lake and the mountain. While having the lunch and afterwards, three Ravens, Hobby and Sparrowhawk flew over, while 10+ Red-rumped Swallows and dozens of Bee-eaters were flying and feeding in the air. A Blue Rock Thrush appeared a few times in front of the rocks. After lunch, the daily coffee stop was at Neo Petritsi village square.

The last area we visited was the valley of the River Strimonas. Here we recorded several Crested Larks, Spotted Flycatchers, Northern Wheatears, Red-backed Shrikes, Bee-eaters, Common Kestrels and Common Buzzards. We also had a spectacular, perched, Short-toed Eagle which allowed us to have brilliant views before it flew away. Three Tawny Pipits, Common Whitethroat, Olivaceous Warbler, Great Spotted and two Syrian Woodpeckers were among the other species we had, before our drive back to the hotel.

Day 7

Monday 11th September

This was the last full birding day of our trip, and we again started with observations from the eastern dyke of the lake. The heat haze made the moderate-distance views extremely difficult at some points and we were not able to scan all of those interesting places. Just before we reached the dyke, we had the first quick stop at another canal that was surrounded with reeds and other dense vegetation. A harsh sound, like a contact call of a warbler, kept us focused looking in the reeds, trying to spot it. A few of us had very brief views (although not of the whole bird), while it was in the dense parts of the reeds. At some points, two were calling and then one climbed high up on a reed for a very short time, and some people managed to see it before it flew to the other side: a Great Reed Warbler, another new species for our trip list! Along the dyke, we spotted several species, some of them in big numbers. These included Dalmatian and White Pelicans, Pygmy Cormorants, Great Crested Grebes and few Little Grebes, Coots, hundreds of Pochards and Teals, some Pintail, 11 Ferruginous Ducks, five-plus Caspian and many Whiskered Terns, Black-tailed Godwits, 80+ Spotted Redshanks, 50+ Wood Sandpipers, Ruffs, a few Common Snipe, a single Lapwing, Green Sandpiper and Pied Avocet, two Curlew Sandpipers and a few Little Stints. Amongst the raptors were at least three Marsh Harriers, a distant Black Kite, a Lesser Spotted Eagle and two Hobbies. Hundreds or even thousands of Sand Martins were flying everywhere, and we recorded Red-backed Shrikes, Willow Warblers, Chiffchaff (heard), Spotted Flycatchers, Blackcap, Lesser Whitethroat, Olivaceous Warbler, Green Woodpeckers (heard) and a male Lesser Spotted Woodpecker. At the last stop on the dyke, two female or juvenile Little Bitterns gave us fantastic views again, while two young Little Crakes with a Water Rail were also unusually brave and out in the open. A Kingfisher perched nicely for a long time on one reed, while Moorhens were moving around the area, both in the reeds and out in the open.

It was already 11.30am and we had to go to the harbour of Kerkini village for our planned boat trip!

Nikos, our hotelier, was helmsman and was waiting for us there. Everybody boarded the boat and we set off. The weather was great: the sun was out and there was practically no wind. A few Common Terns were saying 'bon voyage' to us while leaving the harbour, standing on the fence. On the way, we observed plenty of Great Crested Grebes, Black-headed Gulls, Little Egrets, both Grey and Squacco Herons, and Pygmy Cormorants on the shore. Some flying 'Marsh Terns' attracted our attention. We sailed towards them and discovered that they were Whiskered and Black Terns! When we were getting closer to the delta area, large groups of Great Cormorants and mixed Pelican flocks (mostly White) were resting on the shore, while a few thousand Greater Flamingos were feeding close to the shoreline. Smaller flocks of Spoonbills were present too. A single Glossy Ibis was feeding in the shallow water among a number of ducks, adding another new species to the trip list.

While watching those masses of birds all around us, we enjoyed the landscape, both the riparian forest which forms the main breeding place of thousands of Cormorants, Herons and other species, and the Belles mountain on the northern side. We then noted a large number of White Pelicans and Great Cormorants were flying towards the northern shore. We followed them from a distance, as they kept fishing and moving to the west. It was indeed a true spectacle to watch, as several hundreds, probably up to 1,500, White Pelicans with several hundreds of Great Cormorants were fishing together. After a while, the Cormorants were flying away from us and the Pelicans followed them. The sights and the sounds while flying to a new fishing place were astonishing. Eventually, the Cormorants finished their fishing and started to move back towards the delta. The Pelicans remained for some time longer and then some of them started to move as well. We left the remaining, but still huge, flock there and headed back to the harbour. The wind was getting stronger and the waves were getting bigger.

Everybody had really enjoyed the experience but, by now, were also very hungry! Lunch was "al fresco" at a picnic site at the harbour. After lunch was over, we looked for a nice place to have a coffee, and the choice was the railway station of Vironia, to the north-eastern side of the lake: a pleasant, historical place with large plane trees. After the coffee break, we went to another part of the Strimonas valley, in order to have a last chance to get a closer and better view of a Hoopoe, which had been a particular wish of one group member. Unfortunately, we didn't see one but, instead, some Common Buzzards and Kestrels were seen, together with a Hobby, a Black Stork, some Crested Larks and two Whinchats. The highlight was some amazing views of Bee-eaters, both flying by at close range and perched!

We moved to the town of Sidirokastro to find some more birds. The number one target species, the Rock Nuthatch, never showed up, although we looked for it extensively. A male Blue Rock Thrush was there all right, and gave us good views through the scope. Some Crag Martins were flying over the cliff face, along with Red-rumped Swallows and House Martins. At the nearby river, a Dipper was having a bath, two Grey Wagtails and a White Wagtail were moving along the river, and a Kingfisher was present too.

Our last stop of the day was higher up, near the remains of the Byzantine castle of Sidirokastro. Apart from the beautiful scenery to finish the day, we also saw a Short-toed Eagle flying opposite where we were standing, showing its characteristic flight pattern. While driving away from the place, two birds flew from the ground near the road and sat on a small bush. One was visible: a female Cirl Bunting!

We got back to the hotel just before 7pm. Everybody was looking forward to dinner, which was traditional home-cooked moussakas. That last, delicious dinner we had at the hotel was also a chance for everybody to share his or her feelings and memories of the great week spent together.

Day 8

Tuesday 12th September

On our last morning, we had breakfast, packed our bags to drive to the airport of Thessaloniki “Makedonia”. Just after saying goodbye to Nikos of the guesthouse, groups of sparrows in the village made us stop. George noticed two Tree Sparrows, among the many House Sparrows. A last species to add to our bird list! At the airport it was time to say goodbye to George, our fabulous bird guide, and the group caught their flights back home. A wonderful week of birding had ended!

Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk to sign up.

Naturetrek Facebook

We are delighted to launch the Naturetrek Facebook page so that participants of Naturetrek tours can remain in touch after the holiday and share photos, comments and future travel plans.

Setting up a personal profile at www.facebook.com is quick, free and easy. The [Naturetrek Facebook page](#) is now live; do please pay us a visit!