

# NORTHERN GREECE

*a spring visit to one of our favourite destinations*



*Black-headed Bunting*

Our visits to the Kerkini region have always been amongst the most popular of our European trips. We base the tour at a single hotel where we stay for seven nights. The hotel is beautifully situated against a backdrop of forested mountains and overlooking Lake Kerkini. The variety of birds, butterflies and wildflowers is simply astonishing - this is a great place to spend a week in the sun enjoying the wildlife.

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Scenically the most impressive wetland in Northern Greece, Lake Kerkini also holds more birds than any of the others. Over 300 species have been recorded in the national park, including 137 that breed. Surrounded by hills and mountains, the birdwatching spectacle is one of the country's best kept secrets.

Greece's geographical position has resulted in a diversity of birdlife which comprises a mixture of species from Europe, the Mediterranean, North Africa and Asia. Lake Kerkini lies on an important migratory flyway between East Africa and Northern Europe. The timing of our visit means we shall experience a taste of this vast migration as well as seeing a multitude of species which make this area their home.

Exciting Balkan species include Dalmatian Pelican, Rock Partridge, Rock Nuthatch, Sombre Tit, Masked Shrike and the localised Olive-tree Warbler, whilst the Mediterranean influence brings Little Bitterns, Purple and Squacco Herons, Collared Pratincoles and Slender-billed Gulls. Other birds include Lesser Grey Shrikes, Penduline Tits and Grey-headed Woodpeckers. Golden, White-tailed, Short-toed, Booted and Lesser Spotted Eagles all breed in the forests surrounding the lake.

## ITINERARY

### LAKE KERKINI

Our base for the seven nights is the excellent Hotel Erodios, overlooking Lake Kerkini. The hotel is beautifully situated, and pelicans, storks, herons and raptors are a regular sight from the restaurant area. A Golden Oriole provided an untimely distraction to breakfast on one occasion!

Our recent visits have yielded no less than 200 pairs of Dalmatian Pelicans. The spectacle is enhanced by hundreds of White Pelicans, Little Egrets, Cormorants, Night Herons, Glossy Ibis, and Spoonbill, plus smaller numbers of Pygmy Cormorants, Purple Herons, Squacco Herons, Great White Egrets and Black Storks. Good numbers of Whiskered Terns are joined by occasional White-winged Black Terns.

Over 200 pairs of White Storks nest on roofs and telegraph poles in the surrounding villages. Many of their nests contain colonies of busy Spanish Sparrows. Several pairs of Black Stork also breed within the national park. Black-necked Grebes breed in small numbers, whilst Whiskered Terns and Black Terns do so in varying numbers each year.

Wildfowl present include Ferruginous Duck and Garganey, whilst, of the raptors hunting the area, the Lesser Spotted Eagle is the most evident. Little Bitterns and various crakes skulk in overgrown ditches whilst Kingfishers flash their brilliant colours. Damp areas attract Black-headed Wagtails and Cetti's Warblers, and in nearby woodland and farmland, Rollers, Golden Orioles, Nightingales, Hoopoes, Masked Shrikes and Lesser Grey Shrikes can be seen. We will look for three special warblers; Olive-tree, Eastern Olivaceous and Eastern Orphean. On recent visits we have been fortunate in

finding flocks of recently arrived Eleonora's Falcons and Rose-coloured Starlings. On an evening excursion we may see Little Owl, Scops Owl, Eagle Owl and European Nightjar.

### SIDIROKASTRO

Surrounded on three sides by rocky hills and a gorge, the town of Sidirokastro nestles unobtrusively into the Greek countryside. Behind the town a road leads up through maquis-covered hills to a ruined Byzantine castle where Red-rumped Swallows are common and Sardinian Warblers chatter. On the rocky slopes Black-headed Buntings, Black-eared Wheatears and Rock Sparrows can be seen, and both Woodchat and Red-backed Shrikes are common. Nearby woodland holds Syrian Woodpecker and Hawfinch. Impressive rocky cliffs are attractive to Crag Martins and Alpine Swifts, and we can also expect to find Eastern Subalpine Warbler, Rock Nuthatch and Blue Rock Thrush.

A road winds up a nearby valley, through a rocky gorge and wooded hillsides, leading to a high plain where Golden Eagles and Long-legged Buzzards hunt. Juniper-clad slopes carpeted in wildflowers are home to Ortolan Buntings and Eastern Orphean Warblers. Calandra Larks sing over the plain, Rock Sparrows call from rocky outcrops and Eastern Bonelli's Warblers are busy establishing territories.

### KERKINI MOUNTAINS

High mountains to the north and east dominate the landscape. We are fortunate in that good roads cut into them, allowing access to both mid- and high-elevation habitats.

Birds of prey will be uppermost in our minds. At lower levels Levant Sparrowhawks and Short-toed and Booted Eagles can be seen, giving way to Eurasian Sparrowhawks and Goshawks higher up. In the mid-elevation mixed woodland Sombre Tits are amongst the highlights. We also know of a beautiful Alder carr that is frequented by the rare Balkan form of White-backed Woodpecker.

In recent years, our drive to 5000 feet has provided some of the best and most unexpected sightings. An excellent road winds its way through old-growth pine forest to the rocky alpine zone. In the former we have seen Black Woodpecker, Crested Tit, Crossbill and Nutcracker. On reaching the bare scree slopes we will search for the localized Rock Partridge, Rock Thrush and Rock Bunting.

### KALOCHORI

The diversity of birdlife around Lake Kerkini is outstanding for an inland site. Nevertheless, there are some species which can only be found on the coast, so our visit to Kalochori should be very productive.

We can expect large numbers of Mediterranean Gulls, plus smaller numbers of Slender-billed Gulls. Kentish Plover nest in large numbers, and there is normally a large non-breeding flock of Greater Flamingos. Passage waders use this site, including Black-tailed Godwit, Avocet, Ruff, Wood Sandpiper, Temminck's Stint, Spotted Redshank, Curlew Sandpiper and Little Stint. The site is excellent for rarities: Red-necked Phalarope, Broad-billed Sandpiper and Terek Sandpiper have all featured on our previous visits!

### CLIMATE AND PACE

Warm, sunny weather is the norm, although we have had rain on occasions. It is usually cooler in the mountains. Breakfast will be taken at about 7.30am most mornings. Basic fitness is all that is required. Day-long birdwatching excursions will be made with short/medium length walks on the flat. Visits to the mountains will involve a little uphill walking, done at a sensible pace.

### ACCOMMODATION AND FOOD

Full-board accommodation is provided with seven nights in the wonderfully situated Hotel Erodios by Lake Kerkini. The rooms are very comfortable and all have en suite bathrooms.

### PRICE INCLUDES .....

All birdwatching excursions with Bird Holidays leader, full-board accommodation (starting with dinner on 21<sup>st</sup>, ending with breakfast on 28<sup>th</sup>), soft drinks at meal times, bottled water throughout, local transport by minibus, boat trip and international flights.

### WHAT IS NOT INCLUDED

Travel insurance. Personal items, alcoholic drinks, laundry.

### INTERNATIONAL FLIGHTS

Return flights from both London Gatwick and Manchester to Thessaloniki using the scheduled services of Easyjet. Outbound flight departs early morning; return flight arrives back early afternoon.

<b>7 nights:</b>	<b>21<sup>st</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> May 2018</b>
<b>Principal leader:</b>	<b>John McLoughlin</b>
<b>Maximum group size:</b>	<b>7 clients with one leader or 12 clients with two leaders</b>
<b>Cost with discount (if you book before 5<sup>th</sup> February 2018):</b>	<b>£1690 per person sharing (£170 single supplement)</b>
<b>Full Cost:</b>	<b>£1790 per person sharing</b>
<b>Deposit:</b>	<b>£300 per person</b>



*Eleonora's Falcon and Barn Swallow*