

Lake Kerkini, Greece

18th to the 24th November 2013

This six-night break at Kerkini was notable for predominately mild and dry weather throughout our stay. The water level of Kerkini was, as expected, extremely low, while the numbers of birds using the lake were hugely impressive. Our species tally of 130 included half a dozen birds only recorded on the coast. We saw almost all of the birds we were hoping to find, with the most notable species including golden, white-tailed and spotted eagles, and lesser white-fronted geese.

We flew to and from Thessaloniki with easyJet (full flights in both directions), hired our car from SIXT, and stayed, as usual, at the hotel Viglatoras in Ano Poroia, where we much enjoyed Stelios's usual warm hospitality, along with the roaring log fires and the local wines.



Monday 18 November

We swapped the dullness of England in November for the sunshine of Mediterranean Greece, a delightful shock to the system. After picking up our slightly tatty Skoda Octavia estate car from SIXT we drove to Angelohori Lagoon on the coast, a mere 19kms from the airport. We ate our lunch enjoying the

The harbour at Angelohori and (right) a Dalmatian pelican

unexpected warmth of the sun, admiring the blue sea with hardly a ripple in sight. There were plenty of birds, too. We soon saw Mediterranean gull, Sandwich tern and Dalmatian pelican: after eating we drove the short distance to the harbour, where the four pelicans present were tame and approachable. There was a small cliff behind the harbour, and this was clearly a suntrap, enjoyed by a number of small birds. Black redstarts were most numerous, while we also saw robin, blackcap, Sardinian warbler and serin. The last three we were not to see again during our trip.



Next we explored the saltpans. There were plenty of flamingoes, as expected, along with numerous avocets. We eventually saw a good selection of waders, with half a dozen spotted redshanks, one greenshank, one grey plover, plus small flocks of Dublin and little stint. Also worthy of note was a flock of at least 60



The salt pans and Angelhori lagoon with (below) little stints and dunlin

black-necked grebes, a pair of shelduck plus reed buntings, meadow pipits and a couple of pairs of stonechats. It was an excellent start to our holiday, with a number of species we were unlikely to see again..

The drive to Kerkini was easy, with the only birds of note a large flock of rooks in the usual site, seen from the motorway a short distance after leaving Thessaloniki.

Tuesday 19 November

Yesterday's sunshine was soon forgotten, as today was dull, grey and sunless, with no wind, either. The temperature struggled to get above 10degC. We started at Mandraki, where there were terrific numbers of birds to see, but all at great range. Mallard were by far the most numerous of the ducks, but there were also good numbers of pintail, shoveler, wigeon, teal and shelduck. There were several hundred avocets, perhaps 30 golden plover, many lapwings, two curlews and

two redshank. A green sandpiper landed in the lagoon next to us. In the reed beds we saw many chiffchaffs, plus blue tits and both wren and dunnock. Two or three sparrowhawks hunted the lake edges, and a distant spotted eagle perched in a tree. We even saw another birdwatcher (or perhaps a bird counter), driving a 4x4 with www.hunters.gr on the tailgate.



Looking east from Mandraki

A sign of the economic times was the marked reduction in stock in the small supermarket in Veronia. We did walk along the Strymonas, but saw few birds of note here, though there were young flamingoes feeding in the river.

At Megalohori we walked along the north embankment, going as far as the river. No surprises, but all the expected birds, ranging from pygmy cormorants and



Where the Strymonas has broken through the embankment

little grebes to tree sparrows and a single yellowhammer. We did see another spotted eagle (one of four or five seen during the day), and a very distant perched sea eagle with white tail.

We drove round to the opposite embankment for lunch, and here we spent the rest of the afternoon. There were huge numbers of birds spread out across the

mud flats. The many thousands of ducks included good numbers of pintail and our first gadwall. A flock of perhaps 3000 waders was really too far away to check through, but was predominantly dunlin, with little stints. Pelicans were few in number, while spoonbill numbers were also low, but there were 60 or 70



wild swans. Bewick's were in the majority. Many thousands of pochard were farther out on the lake, and every now and again they all took off, circling in packs high above the lake. Flamingo numbers were also impressive, with many thousands of birds present.

One good find was a grey-headed woodpecker (*left*): it landed in a tree within a few feet of a green woodpecker, allowing a great comparison. Chaffinches were abundant, and I managed to find a single brambling.

Wednesday 20 November

It was raining at 7.30, so we didn't venture out until after breakfast. Our first stop on a grey and miserable morning produced both dipper and grey wagtail on the stream above the village, so a good start. The vantage point at the old church drew a complete blank, not surprising in the rain, so we dropped down from the mountain and went to Mandraki instead. It was very gloomy here, too, but I managed to find a group of grey geese, grazing on a bank within the lake, we'll beyond the pelican nesting platforms. There were at least 50, probably more, and it was highly likely that they were white-fronts, but were they lessers? The visibility was poor, as the level of light was so low, and the geese were at the extreme limit of telescope range. We saw all the usual birds, added both water pipit and Cetti's warbler to the list, and then moved on to the old quarry beyond Veronia. Here birds were few, but we saw rock buntings, even though our views were brief. Black redstarts and great tits were about the only other birds here. Back at the car we got good views of a male great spotted woodpecker, joined by pair of nuthatches.

It was nearly noon when we reached the Woodpecker Wood, and now much milder than yesterday. We struck gold as soon as we entered the wood, finding a



large mixed flock of small birds. We enjoyed fine views of both goldcrest and firecrest, plus short-tree creeper, along with blue, great, marsh and long-tailed tits. There was a brief moment of intense excitement when a goshawk made an attack. Our view was fleeting, but there was no doubt of the hawk's identity.

However, our target birds were woodpeckers, and we failed to find anything other than great spotted, though I did hear a lesser call from across the river. So instead of birds we simply had to enjoy the beauty of the autumn wood, with its giant black poplars, now almost bare of leaves.

We drove a mile up the road for lunch, and had no sooner parked the car before we started seeing hawfinches. A small copse with reed-fringed pool was attracting them, and at times as many as 40 could be seen perched in the tops of the bare trees. Here we also found a flock of perhaps 20 curlew buntings. I have never found these buntings in flocks before. They were shy and difficult to see. Lunch was very simple: the bread I had bought hot in the morning, with slightly salty feta cheese and a tomato. It was delicious, while the sun had also appeared, bringing with it butterflies: red admiral, small tortoiseshell, small white, clouded yellow and common blue. A rough-looking shepherd came past with his mixed flock of sheep and goats, plus an assortment of wary dogs. He asked for a fag, so went away disappointed.



Sheep, goats and sheepdog and (below) looking north from the castle at Sidirokastro

After eating we went across the road to look for sombre tits. It didn't take long to find one, feeding in company with great tits and chaffinches at the field's edge. We had excellent views through the scope. As we looked our first ravens



appeared overhead, their deep calls carrying far on the still air. We had one more unsuccessful look for woodpeckers, then drove south via the huge and well provided supermarket (empty as usual) on to Sidirokastro. The rock looked wonderful in the sunshine, but there was no sign of our quarry, the rock nuthatch, other than last summer's nests. However, a fine cock blue rock thrush was compensation. We finished the day by driving

then walking to the ruined castle. Here we saw the rock thrush again, but a bonus was a small flock of rock sparrows, their curious nasal calls alerting me to their presence. It took just half an hour to drive home - the Skoda is a pleasure to drive compared to the minibuses I am used to here.

Thursday 21 November

As we still hadn't seen Syrian woodpecker we dropped down to the village of Lividia where it's usually easy to find a Syrian in the gardens of the modest single-storey houses. We had been walking for perhaps eight minutes, listening to the chanting of the priest from the nearby church (was it a recording?), before

we finally found our quarry, and gained convincingly good views. Syrian is so much like a great spotted that it's essential to see the face pattern well, and then identity is easy. Our bird was a male, and as we left another male also appeared. Our next stop was the rather grandly named Lividia Port, but it was such a grey, dull morning that we found we were looking at thousands of monochrome ducks on an equally monochrome lake. There were numerous finches feeding close to the embankment – mainly chaffinches and goldfinches – plus several chiffchaffs, and I did hear a Cetti's warbler. We drove south along the embankment, stopping to watch a huge raft of pochard and being pleased to find three red-breasted mergansers, first a pair and then a single female. At Kerkini Harbour we climbed the tower to watch the Dalmatian pelicans, and as we watched half a dozen diving ducks with flashing wing bars dashed past – ferruginous ducks. They landed not far away, so we also saw them on the water.

We then drove on to Wild Cat Corner, pausing as we did so to look for waders on the exposed mud on the western edge of the lake. This is usually a good site for both little stints and little ringed plovers, but all we managed to find were numerous water pipits, plus a few skylarks. The walk out to the lake from the corner was also surprisingly unproductive, though we did enjoy a fine view of a spotted eagle. The amount of Bulgarian plastic rubbish along the tideline is quite depressing.

We decided to check out the dam, so continued south, eating our bread and cheese (shared with the local dogs, including a very assertive puppy bitch) overlooking the dam. Here we were surprised to find a late whiskered tern feeding over the water, while a common sandpiper was a first for the trip. A considerable volume of water was being released from the lake, so there was a wide, fast-flowing river beneath, providing good fishing for the numerous cormorants, but no islands for waders or herons. We abandoned our plans to check the southern quarry for eagle owls, as the quarry is being heavily worked, presumably to provide aggregate for the nearby road building.

In the afternoon we worked the east bank of the reservoir, going anti-clockwise. We stopped to admire the huge flocks of wildfowl and waders feeding on the exposed mud flats, and pondered how anyone could count so many birds accurately. There must be many thousands of flamingoes, well over 1000 avocets (possibly twice or three times as many), and huge numbers of ducks. We counted around 100 wild swans, including two or three families of whoopers, which are



much scarcer here than Bewick's. Driving on, we were delighted to find a trio of glossy ibises (*left*) that I stopped to photograph. Another scan produced four cranes – two adults and two juveniles. We assumed that this was a family,

but were later told that they had all arrived individually. What we didn't see (presumably because we overlooked them) were the lesser white-fronts, but 10 black storks were a pleasing conclusion to our day.

Friday 22 November

The weather forecast suggested that this was going to be a wet and overcast day, but it proved to be exactly the opposite, with bright sunshine for much of the time, and the temperature peaking at 19degC. I didn't wear my coat once during the entire day.



Sunshine in the Woodpecker Wood

We started at the Woodpecker Wood near Promachonas, which looked magnificent in the sunshine. We walked slowly, working hard for our birds. As before, woodpeckers proved elusive. We soon had great views of great spotted, and then a green, before I eventually found a middle-spotted that showed well. The most obvious identification feature on this species is the rosy underside, something none of the books emphasise. We saw two red squirrels: the second one we watched at close range for some time. It was almost black, and had an impressive bushy tail and wonderful long ear tufts. A flock of siskins also entertained us, and we had good views of marsh tits, nuthatches and siskins. After leaving the wood we drove up the road again, but there wasn't a hawfinch to be seen at the site where two days before we had seen 50 or 60 of them. We saw just one across the road, and it was happy to be digiscoped. No sombre tits this time, either.



Hawfinch posing in the sun

Our next location was next to the Strymonos river, and we hadn't been there long before I spotted a young golden eagle, apparently carrying a tortoise. We lost sight of it for a while, so never saw it drop the tortoise, but we later had prolonged views of it, soaring with another eagle with almost identical plumage. Siblings from the same eyrie? Several ravens were also soaring here, while a Long-legged buzzard also put in an appearance, landing for a while on a pylon where it showed its white face and upper chest, contrasting with almost gingery underside. We drove back across the river, and on to a semi-derelict spa hotel, and from here we had slightly closer views of the eagles.

Such success with eagles wasn't repeated at our picnic site near the Vironia quarry. We saw precious few birds here, but did feed a couple of hungry dogs, one of which was in desperate need of worming.



Looking east from the picnic site

After lunch we dropped back down to the bridge across the Strymonas, and decided to drive as far as we could west along the north bank. We managed rather more than 6km on soft sandy tracks, before eventually abandoning the Skoda and continuing on foot. We ended up meandering across the flood plain, as it took some time to work out exactly where we were. We eventually spotted

Mandraki, so knew we were en route to find the geese. There were distractions along the way: a magnificent young spotted eagle that really was spotted, a peregrine perched in a tree, and our first marsh harrier. There was also a flock of at least



1000 skylarks. However, we eventually located our quarry, the geese, at some considerable range, and the great goose hunt was on. We worked closer and closer towards them, at times walking through soft, sticky mud. We twice looked at the flock from tower hides; the second of these gave almost decent views, but we couldn't sort out a lesser from the Russian white-fronts in front of us. So we worked even closer, though never getting sufficiently near to alarm the flock, which numbered around 200 birds. I scrutinised every one as carefully as I



could, but despite my best efforts couldn't honestly say that I had found a lesser among them. I know lessers well, so was forced to conclude that there weren't any there, a real disappointment in view of the effort we had put in. There were compensations, the best of which was the patterns of

sunshine, cloud and mountain across the lake. It took us nearly two hours to stalk the geese, but just 45 minutes to walk back to the car again: we did go at a brisk pace. We arrived back at 5.15, just as it was getting dark. We then beat our retreat along the smooth sandy track, where it was easy to drive at 40km in fourth gear. We eventually reached home at 6pm.

Saturday 23 November

Today was the day we at last cracked the lesser white-front challenge. However, we started the morning by looking for the dipper once again, but without success. The area around the lake looked foggy, but visibility was fine when we dropped down to Kerkini village. We continued south, and then turned right after the bridge, towards Sidirochori. Here there were many rough fields, fringed with poplars. It looked ideal habitat for a great grey shrike, but we failed to find one, though we did see plenty of corn buntings.

Our next stop was the Sombre Tit quarry. The sun broke through as we walked, working hard for our birds. We were rewarded with a goldcrest, good views of both rock and cirl buntings, jays and a Syrian woodpecker. As we walked back a pair of sombre tits did appear, but they disappeared equally quickly.

Our next stop was the northwest corner of the lake, near Livadia. We had now lost the sun, so simply admired the huge number of ducks. While we were watching a young man came along in small 4x4, complete with a lesser white-front logo on the door. After a brief chat we admitted that we hadn't seen the lesser white-fronts, so he told us exactly where to go, and where we were almost certain to see them. We followed his advice and set off at once, back to the southern causeway near to Megalochori. We continued along to the fishermen's hut, where we scoped for them. I found them almost at once, but there was a moment of confusion when John declared that he could 200 or so white-fronts, but I could only see 50. It turned out that the two flocks were quite close together. The range was long, the light poor, but it was possible to identify the birds in the smaller flock as lesser. Success at last! The first view was far from good, and we were later to enjoy much better sightings, though we were never



close enough to see the yellow eye rings.

We saw, too, all the now familiar birds of the mud flats, except for the ibises. A hunting merlin created some panic, but we failed to see it catch anything. We did see several spotted eagles, and three marsh harriers soaring together. The four cranes were still present, as were the black storks.

After lunch we took a short drive into the agricultural land to the southeast. We did gain one new bird - jackdaw, but not the hoped for great grey shrike.

We drove back to the causeway, where we met up once again with our friend who had told us where to find the geese. His name was Ioannis Theodoropouly, he was working for an EU LIFE+ project on the geese, and proved to be a useful source of information, so we fired numerous questions at him that he answered well. His English was excellent, as he had studied environmental sciences for three years in the UK. Accompanying him were two girls, one of whom was doing a detailed study of the geese, and their relationship with the other two species of grey geese.

We spent a pleasant hour or more watching the lesser white-fronts, along with the huge numbers of other wildfowl in the area. We were told that the whoopers were new arrivals, and in unusually high numbers. Spotted eagles flew over, along with marsh harriers, periodically causing mass panic among the waders and wildfowl. It was a fine conclusion to our five days birding at Lake Kerkini.

In the evening there was a heavy thunderstorm, and it was still raining the following morning, when we had a wet drive back to the airport.

David Tomlinson

Species recorded

1. Little grebe
2. Great crested grebe
3. Black necked grebe
4. Cormorant
5. Pygmy cormorant
6. Dalmatian pelican
7. Little egret
8. Great white egret
9. Grey heron
10. Spoonbill
11. Black stork
12. Glossy ibis
13. Flamingo
14. Mute swan
15. Whooper swan
16. Berwick swan
17. Greylag goose
18. White-fronted goose
19. Lesser white-fronted goose
20. Egyptian goose
21. Shelduck
22. Mallard
23. Teal
24. Gadwall
25. Pintail
26. Shoveler
27. Wigeon
28. Pochard
29. Ferruginous duck
30. Tufted duck
31. Red-breasted merganser
32. White-tailed eagle
33. Spotted eagle
34. Golden eagle
35. Marsh harrier
36. Hen harrier
37. Sparrowhawk
38. Goshawk
39. Buzzard
40. Long-legged buzzard
41. Peregrine
42. Merlin
43. Kestrel
44. Moorhen
45. Coot
46. *Water rail*
47. Crane
48. Avocet

49. Lapwing
50. Grey plover
51. Golden plover
52. Dunlin
53. Little stint
54. Snipe
55. Curlew
56. Redshank
57. Spotted redshank
58. Greenshank
59. Green sandpiper
60. Common sandpiper
61. Black-headed gull
62. Mediterranean gull
63. Slender-billed gull
64. Yellow-legged gull
65. Whiskered tern
66. Sandwich tern
67. Wood pigeon
68. Rock dove
69. Collared dove
70. Little owl
71. Kingfisher
72. Great spotted woodpecker
73. Syrian woodpecker
74. Middle spotted woodpecker
75. *Lesser spotted woodpecker*
76. Grey-headed woodpecker
77. Green woodpecker
78. Woodlark
79. Crested lark
80. Skylark
81. Meadow pipit
82. Water pipit
83. Grey wagtail
84. White wagtail
85. Wren
86. Dipper
87. Dunnock
88. Stonechat
89. Black redstart
90. Blackbird
91. Robin
92. Blue rock thrush
93. Mistle thrush
94. Song thrush
95. Blackcap
96. Chiffchaff
97. Cetti's warbler

98. Sardinian warbler
99. Firecrest
100. Goldcrest
101. Long-tailed tit
102. Marsh tit
103. Blue tit
104. Sombre tit
105. Great tit
106. Nuthatch
107. Short-toed treecreeper
108. Jay
109. Jackdaw
110. Rook
111. Hooded crow
112. Raven
113. Magpie
114. Starling
115. House sparrow
116. Spanish sparrow
117. Tree sparrow
118. Rock sparrow
119. Serin
120. Siskin
121. Greenfinch
122. Goldfinch
123. Hawfinch
124. Chaffinch
125. Brambling
126. Reed bunting
127. Rock bunting
128. Cirl bunting
129. Yellowhammer
130. Corn bunting

Italics = heard only

