



Swans stop off at Axios Delta, located just north of the Alykes Kitrous, near Thessaloniki.



Pelican, gull and man are in harmony on man-made Kerkini Lake, a major magnet for birds.

On a BirdWING and a Prayer: Watching Out for Birds in Greece’s North

By Angelike Contis
TNH Staff Writer

NEW YORK - Don't forget to pack binoculars and a camera if visiting Northern Greece in spring. "Spring migration is the very best time for watching birds in Greece," explained the founders of nonprofit BirdWING (Bird Watching In Northern Greece,) Steve Mills and Hilary Koll. They added that, "Millions of small birds head north from Africa where they have spent the winter. They fly across the Mediterranean and, for many, the first land they see is Greece. Here they land and rest. Some will stay and nest in Greece. Others will refuel and head further north into the rest of Europe."

Ecotourism of an ornithological variety is increasing, albeit slowly, say Mills and Koll, in an e-mail reply to The National Herald. In their view, there's a good reason for bird lovers to visit Greece each spring: "Each day the lagoons and bushes hold different birds as new ones arrive and refreshed ones move on. To be bird watching in Greece in April and May is to witness first-hand probably the greatest migration event on our planet."

BirdWING's recent photo competition provides a visual hint of Northern Greece's bird watching treasures. For the winning shot, Thessaloniki chemical engineer Konstantinos Stafylidis snapped a photo of a Wryneck (Jynx torquilla) proudly standing amidst wildflowers, which was taken in Alyki Kitros lagoon (Alykes Kitrous), a coastal, dune-filled location north of Katerini. The runner-up prize went to Austrian Peter Giay for his autumnal photograph of a Kingfisher (Alcedo atthis) with a small fish in its beak at biodiverse Lake Kerkini, a man-made bird mecca located an hour's drive from Thessaloniki.

ALYKI KITROS LAGOON
Stafylidis, 32, who has only been studying and photographing birds for the past two years, told TNH that he didn't have to wait long for the Wryneck to come along for a photo lauded by the judges for its sharpness and composition. "It came close to me suddenly and I didn't lose the chance to immortalize it," he said of the bird, whose gender is hard to discern, even at close range.

Mills and Koll told TNH that Wrynecks, who are members of the woodpecker family and visit Greece in the summer, are not an easy subject. "They are secretive birds and very difficult to photograph well." Stafylidis was lucky. As he says of his subject, in an e-mail communication with TNH: "When I encountered it, it was very calm, as it was there for the spring migration and was mostly concerned with the search for food, without being bothered by my presence." He noted that the bird is also called "Mirmigofagos" in Greek, because it enjoys snacking on ants (mirmigia.) Each spring, he adds, the Wryneck becomes common in Greece as it likes to nest there (if not in Alyki Kitros lagoon).



PETER GIAY

Left: Austria's Peter Giay used his understanding of bird psychology in order to make this shot happen of a Kingfisher (Alcedo atthis) devouring a small fish on Lake Kerkini. The photo was the runner-up winner of BirdWING's 2010 photo competition. Right: BirdWING 2010 photo competition winner Konstantinos Stafylidis, a chemical engineer from Thessaloniki, snapped a photo of the elusive Wryneck (Jynx torquilla) at Alyki Kitros lagoon (Alykes Kitrous).



KONSTANTINOS STAFYLIDIS

through in only a 30-minutes' drive.

LAKE KERKINI
"Kerkini is one of the most special locations in Greece," said Mills and Koll of the man-made lake, which was created in 1932. They added: "It is a large lake with a 'drowned forest' in the middle and is home to thousands of nesting water birds." The BirdWING site offers regular, detailed reports of what's happening at Lake Kerkini. A February 2010 entry reports the appearance of the first White Stork and gives a colorful description of a chorus of bird sights and sounds: "Moustached Warblers are singing, White-tailed and Spotted Eagles are in the air, over 150 Great Crested Grebe are displaying from the eastern embankment, Great Grey Shrikes are still around." Other entries between May and December 2009 cite birds ranging from 10 Black Storks and 2,000 Flamingos to 500 White Pelicans. (The funds raised from

the photo competition are going towards building rafts for nesting Terns in Lake Kerkini.)

The Kingfisher, photographed at Lake Kerkini for BirdWING's photo competition, is known in Austria as "a flying diamond," writes amateur photographer and bird lover Peter Giay, 71. In describing the bird, in an e-mail to TNH, the retiree's love for and knowledge of his subject is evident: "It requires clear stretches of water so that it can sight fish, its source of food. When on the lookout, it likes to sit on branches which jut out from the vegetation of the banks and which overhang the water. From such a perch it will dive into the water after little fish, snapping them up in its strong, pointed bill."

Nature has armed the Kingfisher, he wrote, with strong survival techniques. "Mostly it holds its prey at right-angles to its bill. When it gets back to its perch it stuns the fish by hitting it hard onto the branch, gives it a quick throw into the air, so that it can slither down its gullet head-first." This act is captured in his image. Since retiring, Giay says he's "been intensively engaged in nature photography." He added: "My special interest is photography of birds, particularly those in flight." The BirdWING judges cite his photo's "perfect timing."

Giay photographed the feeding Kingfisher last year, when he spent both spring and autumn in Northern Greece photographing migrating birds. He has also photographed migrating birds in Spain, Gibraltar and South Sweden in the past. Understanding the Kingfisher's psychology was key in achieving his winning shot. Giay observed that, due to lower water levels, the kingfisher was using a trunk as "a makeshift perch." Giay decided to help out, in a perfect collaboration between man and bird (at the expense of fish.) "I stuck a few thin branches into the ground at this point, and set up my hide nearby. From his trunk the kingfisher watched my activities. Hardly had I sat down in my tent, when the bird took up position on the "new" perch and began to fish successfully. Subsequently, I was able to take many pictures, whereby one of them shows how the kingfisher changes his sideways hold on the fish to lengthways, so that it can be swallowed more easily."

What Hellenic tourism officials would give for Giay's thoughts on Greece to reach the ears of other potential eco-travellers! He writes: "My stays in North Greece are always a journey back to my youth. In Greece as bird watching visitors to Greece before investing in renovating a home in Thasos (and spending as much time as possible there.) They added: "It is vitally important that local people come to realise the potential economic value to them of the areas, through hotels, tavernas, guides etc. and this can be significantly helped by an increase in foreign visitors."

Education writers and consultants, Mills and Koll, an English couple, launched BirdWING two years ago after observing a "disappointing level of protection given to wildlife-rich habitats." BirdWING, which already counts 400 members around the world, aims to serve as a collective lobby on behalf of birds in Northern Greece, raising awareness - as well as funds - for at-risk birds and their habitats. It is also devoted to offering support to the 11 "Wetlands of International Importance" (regions protected by the Ramsar Convention treaty) in Greece. Six of these are in Northern Greece. The organization gets the word out through its website (www.birdwing.eu), newsletters and Mills' column in the English-language Greek newspaper



GODFREY KOLL

UK-based BirdWING founders and writers Steve Mills and Hilary Koll spend as much time as possible looking out for Northern Greece's rich-yet-imperiled birdlife.

I find again the flowers, butterflies, dragonflies, reptiles and birds etc., which I knew as a child in my home country Austria. In Austria nowadays these creatures find little or no room any more, their habitats have fallen victim to commercial usage of the ground."

ABOUT BIRDWING
"We believe both the birds and their habitats would be better protected if more ecotourists visited these areas," said Mills and Koll, who started out

Athens News. For more about birds and birdwatching in Greece visit the excellent bilingual site of the Hellenic Ornithological Society (www.ornithologiki.gr.) BirdWING can be supported through donations as well as online purchases of its publications, including "Birdwatching in Northern Greece" (an English-language guide by Mills, which has a forthcoming new edition) and "The Children's Guide to Birds of Greece" (in Greek).



MOTIONTEAM/VASILIS VERVERIDIS

Man-made Kerkini Lake attracts all shapes and sizes of migrating birds, especially in the spring and fall.

