

Environment

Flocking together

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Bird fans are invited to participate in a dozen events around Greece to mark migration

By **Damian Mac Con Uladh**
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BIRD FANS, young and old, are expected to flock this weekend to a range of events across Greece as part of the country's contribution to the annual EuroBirdwatch.

The focus of this year's event is the protection of migratory birds, numbers of which are declining rapidly.

At the events, taking place at a dozen locations across the

country, all sights will be on magic and the miracle of the migration of wild birds, currently taking place in the skies.

The weekend is being coordinated by the Hellenic Ornithological Society. In cooperation with municipalities, local bodies and organisations, the NGO is staging a number of bird-watching excursions, environmental games and other activities that it says will allow children and adults the opportunity to spend an exciting day in the wild and at the same time learn more about the nature and the birds of Greece.

One of the groups participating in the weekend's activities is the Association of Protection and Care Wildlife (Anima), which will release a number of wild birds back into the wild in Vravrona wetlands.

Billed as the biggest bird-watching event in Europe, the annual EuroBirdwatch is coordinated by BirdLife International. Last year the event drew 30,000 adults and children from over 30 countries, and a total of 2.2 million birds were counted, according to organisers. *✓Participation is free and the programme of events can be found at www.ornithologiki.gr*



Volunteers release wild birds in Crete

A selection of events

ATTICA

Tritsis Environmental Education & Sensitisation Park Sunday 11 October 11am-2pm

Vravrona Wetland Sunday 11 October 11am-2pm

MACEDONIA

Epanomi lagoon Sunday 10 October 10am-1.30pm

Lake Volvi Sunday 10 October 10am-1.30pm

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Countdown to Copenhagen

Maldives to hold cabinet meeting underwater

COLOMBO, SRI LANKA **MALDIVES** government ministers are taking scuba lessons and learning underwater signs in preparation for an unprecedented cabinet meeting at the bottom of the ocean intended to highlight the threat global warming poses to the low-lying nation.

Since taking office last year, President Mohammed Nasheed has emerged as an important international voice on the impact of climate change amid fears that rising ocean levels could swamp this Indian Ocean archipelago within a century.

He has announced plans for a fund to buy a new homeland for his people if the Maldives' 1,192 low-lying coral islands are submerged. He also has promised to make the Maldives, with a population of 350,000, the world's first carbon-neutral nation within a decade.

Nasheed will chair a meeting of his 14 cabinet ministers about six meters underwater on October 17, said Aminath Shauna, an official from the president's office. "The intention is to draw the

attention of the world leaders to the issue of global warming and highlight how serious are the threats faced by Maldives as a result," she said.

The ministers will wear scuba gear for the gathering off the island of Girifushi - about 20 minutes' journey by speedboat from the capital, Male, she said. The ministers will communicate using hand gestures and are now receiving diving lessons, she said, adding that Nasheed is a certified diver.

At the meeting, the cabinet plans to sign a document calling on all countries to cut their carbon emissions ahead of the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in December, where the countries will negotiate a successor to the Kyoto Protocol, Shauna said.

Wealthy nations want broad cuts in emissions from all countries, while poorer ones say industrialised countries should carry most of the burden.

The islands average 2.13 metres above sea level, making the Maldives the lowest-lying nation on Earth. (AP)

59 days to go

Birdwatch

By **Steve Mills**
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A tale of two ospreys

THE EVROS DELTA, tucked up against the Turkish border in the northeast of the country, is a huge mosaic of fields, scrub, pools, lakes and shoreline offering good feeding to thousands of birds passing through at this time of year. It's one of the best places to go in Greece during migration.

We emerged from our tent on the Alexandroupoli campsite before sunrise and drove out through the flat landscape of the delta. It was cool and my choice of shorts and T-shirt seemed a little optimistic this early.

As we crossed a dyke, the first glimpse of the sun became visible. Birds are active at this time of day, busy refuelling for the day ahead, and we were not disappointed.

Small birds were everywhere, particularly along the insect-rich ditches and dykes. Hundreds of wading birds - dunlins, stints, spotted redshanks, marsh sandpipers and greenshanks - probed the mud around the lake edges while egrets and herons squabbled over fishing rights.

The sun was higher now and, above a lake to our left, we witnessed a majestic sight. An osprey was fishing.

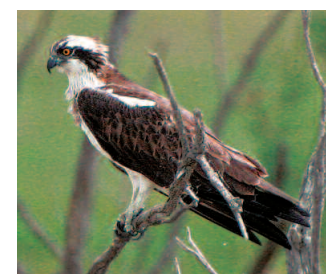
A large eagle-type bird with a 175cm wingspan, the osprey lives dangerously. It circled and then spotted a fish from a height of perhaps 30m, plunging down, talons outstretched, hitting the water so hard it was momentarily submerged.

The splash was enormous. Then it was on the surface, shaking itself vigorously, before launching itself back upwards to reveal a good-sized fish in its talons.

As it flapped heavily skywards, pearls of water dripping from its wings, it skilfully manoeuvred the fish into a head first position to reduce drag and landed on a nearby tree to eat breakfast. It was a moment of pure magic.

Watching this fantastic bird with a wonderful golden-yellow and black-and-white plumage made me aware of why I'm so passionate about birds. The spectacle can be wonderful. But more than that, an appreciation of how this bird has nested far north of here, maybe in Poland or Russia, and finds its way to Africa and back, year after year, is fantastic.

Then we saw another osprey,



Steve Mills

this time a young bird born only this summer. Again with beautiful black-and-white plumage. It was close. In the water. Dead.

It had been shot to pieces.

This youngster, barely four months old, had left its nest in northern Europe with huge obstacles to overcome. First it had to quickly learn the art of hitting the water from 30m and catching a fish. Then it had to set off southwards, calculating a course to reach Africa where the lakes won't freeze in the coming months. It still had the Mediterranean and the Sahara to face but they weren't its biggest obstacle.

The biggest obstacle was Greece.

In the 21st century, it seems that a bird as magnificent as the osprey can't rely on getting across this country unscathed. Bang. Its short life is brought to an end by some gun-toting moron.

We waded in and pulled the bird out of the water. Its eye was still golden-yellow but the wing had almost been severed from the body and was peppered with shotgun holes. It was freshly dead. No trip across the Med and no return next year to light up some lake in northern Europe.

Make no mistake. It is illegal to shoot birds of prey. It is also illegal to shoot anything in the wildlife refuge area in which we found this bird.

Why does this continue to happen? Apart from the killer, who else is to blame? In all our visits to the Evros Delta, we have never seen any monitoring of hunting activity by the Forestry Service, the body responsible for this.

Is this through lack of interest or lack of money? If the latter is the case, then perhaps it's time the whole of the Evros Delta became a no-hunting area. That should make things easier to police and help push Greece towards the 21st century in terms of its environmental thinking.



Steve Mills