

A GREEK BIRDING ODYSSEY, MARCH - JULY 2015

Gary Jones

Introduction

Why Greece?

Apart from a two week holiday on Crete in 1986, when I had only just taken up birding, I had never visited Greece and so my wife, Ann Shaw, and I chose the country for our first long trip away in our campervan following Ann's retirement in 2014. Greece was chosen for its birding and hill-walking potential as these are our two chief hobbies and, together, determine the destination of all our holidays.

I could just as easily be writing this report about the magnificent, and largely undiscovered, hill-walking in Greece as about the birds although people's thirst for up to date information on birding abroad has led me to produce this tale of our trip. Appendices on hill-walking and campervanning in Greece are attached should anyone be interested.

The attraction of birding abroad is to be in a different environment, with different weather and culture, searching for birds either rare or unknown in Britain. Although I do keep lists, I dislike twitching in Britain because of the crowds and the often manic atmosphere and much prefer to look for birds abroad, alone or with Ann, at my own pace in my own time. The reward of making our own discoveries is also a considerable attraction.

Preparation

Planning for the trip began at least six months prior to departure with the purchase of maps, primarily for hill-walking, the purchase of the guidebook 'Birdwatching in Northern Greece' by Steve Mills (of which more anon.), and the perusal of past trip reports to the area. A decision was made to stick entirely to the mainland mainly for financial reasons, although the lure of Lesbos was hard to resist. In the end we visited only one island, Thasos, and then just on a day trip. We envisaged staying for up to seven months, and cleared our diaries until November, but always knew that the summer heat might lead to us coming home before this. In fact we lasted until late July when the aforementioned heat coupled with our getting the campervan infested with fleas, which I inadvertently picked up on the hills, led to our return. This meant that we missed the autumn migration period and failed to visit some good birding areas, such as the Prespa Lakes, and also failed to properly explore the Pindos Mountains for their hill-walking and birding potential. Other than this we feel we covered the Greek mainland pretty comprehensively.

Seven months in Greece would have given ample opportunity to build a big list as we hoped to experience both spring and autumn migration, see plenty of summer visitors and, perhaps, catch a few late-leaving or early-arriving winter visitors. 250 species felt possible and 240 achievable; in fact we totalled 242 before our return home. In addition to visiting well known sites in the north-east of the country, we hoped to make some discoveries of our own elsewhere, especially whilst hill-walking, as I had hopes of finding our own Wallcreeper or Bonelli's Eagle in the remoter parts of the Pindos Mountains. In the event neither was seen.

The birding priorities of the trip, in descending order, were as follows

- a) To experience the full wealth of Greece's birdlife in their natural habitats in what we hoped would be stunning scenery.
- b) To lengthen my European list by seeing as many birds as possible available only in this part of Europe - I had previously not been further south-east than northern Croatia apart from a brief trip to Crete thirty years previously.
- c) To see other species found here which are available elsewhere in Europe but missing from my list.
- d) To build a big holiday list.

Objective a) was achieved, Greece is a stunningly beautiful country where memorable wildlife spectacles are almost the norm. We were reasonably successful with objective b) but for the frustrating lack of Levant Sparrowhawk, a common enough species which other people seem to have seen as a matter of course. We made no special plans for Levant Sparrowhawk assuming one would turn up: it didn't. I was happy to add a few other species to my European list and I will leave it to others to decide if 242 species is a good holiday total for four months. In addition to Levant Sparrowhawk, we failed to see Red-footed Falcon, Red-crested Pochard, White-tailed Eagle and Rock Sparrow, amongst a handful of other less exciting bids (to a British visitor) such as Grey Partridge.

Resources

The field guides we used were as follows:

Collins Bird Guide (2nd edition), Svensson *et al*, 2009: Collins

Collins Butterfly Guide, Tolman & Lewington, 2008: Collins

Field Guide to the Dragonflies of Britain and Europe, Dijkstra, 2006: BWP

All of these, we feel, are excellent publications, as good or better than anything else in the field. I regret not having obtained identification guides to Mammals and, especially, Reptiles and Amphibians prior to travelling.

We used two site guides:

Where to watch birds in Turkey, Greece and Cyprus, Welch *et al*, 1996: Hamlyn

Birdwatching in Northern Greece, Mills, 2011, Birdwing

The first of these is nearly twenty years old but we hoped it would be of help in areas away from northern Greece. In fact it was of little use and we decided not to rely on it. The latter, the book by Steve Mills, was indispensable. There are two good reasons why you need to buy this book. Firstly it is written with great knowledge of the northern Greek birdlife by someone who spends several months each year in the area. The directions are clear and the species lists for each site were of great help in planning our own itinerary; generally we found what we were led to expect. Secondly Steve and his partner, Hilary Koll, together run Birdwing (www.birdwing.eu), an organisation dedicated to raising money for, and formulating and implementing action plans to help, bird populations in northern Greece. Profits from the sale of the book go to further this work.

There is a book by the Hellenic Ornithological Society covering sites throughout Greece which we thought about buying but it was, at the time, only available from the organisation itself and the logistics were too complicated. We also discovered whilst away that a new Dave Gosney guide to northern Greece had recently been released.

Internet trip reports were also of value and we printed and took with us the following four:

North-east Greece, 25th April - 9th May 2010, Ian Kinley, Birdtours.

Birding Trip to Greece, 27th April - 10th May 2012, Staefan Schleck & Muriel Neddermeyer, Google docs.

Classical Greece 2014, 25th April - 9th May 2014, Megan Edwards Crewe, Field Guides

Northern Greece (Lake Kerkini & Bulgaria, Kath & Mick Claydon, 27th May - 9th June 2014. Note this report covers Kerkini area only within Greece.

The latter two were the most recent yet we found the first two to be the most useful.

www.cloudbirders.com is the best place to look for any other options.

We had no means of accessing the internet whilst away so perhaps it is a good thing that we didn't find a Slender-billed Curlew as getting the news out would have been problematic.

Travel

There are a number of overland travel options to get to Greece. Three routes stand out and each has its own advantages. We travelled down through Italy to Brindisi and did the fairly short crossing from there to Igoumenitsa which did not require a night on board. Coming back we planned to go via Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Austria but ended up returning via the Igoumenitsa - Ancona ferry which did require a cabin although there was a special offer available at the time and it was only slightly more expensive than our outward journey. We chickened out of the all-driving route back to Calais due to the flea infestation which was, by now, making time in the campervan a misery. An alternative, and shorter, route overland is via Slovenia, Croatia, Montenegro and Albania or Macedonia, but this involves travel outside the EU which our insurance would not cover. Insurance can be obtained for the non-EU countries at the borders, but this can be costly and we anticipated a lot of hassle here so ruled this route option out.

Weather

Perhaps not surprisingly for a four month trip, we had varied weather although the spring as a whole was seen as a wet one according to locals. We had some days of torrential rain in April which caused flooding and led to a productive breeding season for mosquitoes as much stagnant water remained. There seemed to be little exposed mud around and flocks of small waders were hard to find, especially in the Evros delta and at Kerkini, brackish coastal areas were best. May was fine and warm but June cool and moist with frequent thunderstorms which affected our hill-walking. By July things had warmed up and became seriously hot as the month wore on.

Three things we liked about Greece

a) The people.

I have a dislike of national stereotyping as there are always plenty of exceptions to the rule but, on the basis that a positive stereotype is better than a negative one, it is fair to say that we found being with the Greek people to be a wonderful experience. Most had an initial polite reserve which was easily overcome after which they were immensely helpful and friendly. Most of the younger people, and a good number of the older ones, speak good English but they appreciated our attempts to communicate in Greek. They were especially keen to help with advice about route-finding which was not always as useful as it may seem, as we usually knew exactly where we wanted to go. We also found them to be extremely courteous drivers and the contrast between the driving either side of the Italy - Greece ferries was stark. Even when faced with occasional bad driving by us, sometimes caused by stopping suddenly to look at a bird, they didn't bat an eyelid. The horn only seems to be used to greet friends, except in Athens, something unique in Mediterranean countries in our experience. In the evening the country roads are virtually deserted.

b) The scenery.

Greece is stunningly beautiful. The coastline is rightly celebrated but inland the country has an enormous amount to offer too. It is largely mountainous and the quiet country roads are a joy to drive if not in a hurry. Being in a hurry is likely to damage your vehicle as there are cavernous pot-holes on most roads, including some major ones. The farming is low-intensity with weedy fields and olive-groves everywhere which, of course, are excellent for wildlife. There seems to be little emphasis on private property in Greece and we encountered no problems walking along paths or tracks so long as sensible decisions were taken and we kept out of peoples' gardens and business premises; in any case these are usually patrolled by guard dogs. Greece has an almost overwhelming wealth of ancient sites and its cultural heritage may

be unique. It was fascinating to come across evidence of this by accident on several occasions as we stumbled upon bits of mosaic or ruins of indeterminate age at various places.

c) The wildlife.

The birdlife is described in detail later but we also very much enjoyed the other wildlife spectacles. Greece is famous for its wild flowers which we enjoyed as a spectacle rather than for the identification challenge though we did occasionally try. In March, April and May the hillsides and roadsides were a riot of colour although the spectacle fades from that point as the year wears on. Where there are so many flowers, there have to be pollinating insects and these are many and varied. We recorded 89 species of butterfly and there were a myriad of other insects also around the flowers including honey bees from the ubiquitous colourful bee-hives.

We had not realised, also, just what a wealth of reptile and amphibian life Greece supports and wished we had a field guide to these groups with us. Generally the areas in the north-east seemed to be best for lizards, snakes and tortoises. Frogs were present in their thousands wherever there was water and Fire Salamanders in damp woodland. Also present in large numbers in wetland areas are large numbers of dragonflies and damselflies.

Greece has a number of large mammal species, including rarely seen Brown Bear, Lynx and Wolf. We saw Wild Boar on a few occasions and Chamois several times in the mountains. Wildcat was also seen on at least one occasion and are certainly easier to see here than in Scotland!



Scarlet Darter, Stinfalia Lake



Swallowtail, Thasos

Three things we disliked about Greece

a) Litter

Greece is amply provided with litter bins throughout the town and countryside yet, for some reason, it seems that the majority of the local population, of all ages, do not see fit to use them. The countryside, therefore is strewn with litter pretty much everywhere, only the remotest mountain areas, away even from shepherds, being free of this curse. Plastic litter is found throughout wetland areas and is all over beaches and presumably provides a health hazard for wildlife as well as being unsightly. All Greek villages seem to have their own unofficial rubbish dump where locals dispose of sacks of litter as well as fridges, old cars, etc., usually in the middle of attractive wildlife habitat. Just two examples witnessed by ourselves should suffice to illustrate the litter problem. Firstly we saw a couple emptying a large sack of rubbish down a beautiful flowery bank in Dadia Forest in front of their two young children with a litter bin in the lay-by within fifty yards. Secondly we spent the night by Dhoxas Lake in the Peloponnese a short distance away from two people camping down by the lake-shore. They left in the morning

and we wandered down to discover the whole area where their tent had been was covered in plastic bags, tins and other rubbish even including the remains of the previous evening's meal on plastic plates. Two carrier bags were swinging in a nearby tree. A major re-education programme seems to be required here, starting in schools, when hopefully the children can shame their parents into cleaning up their act.

b) Biting Insects.

Specifically mosquitoes; which initially drove us away from the Porto Lagos area and later made all wetland areas a trial to visit. Woodland areas were badly affected too. In addition to the mosquitoes, fleas - picked up by sitting around on a hill-top in an area where it was clear that sheep and goats had previously likewise sat around - were inadvertently introduced to the campervan where they caused huge problems and eventually brought about our return home. I think we were unlucky with the fleas and these should not be a problem on a birding trip. The mosquitoes potentially will be though; be prepared.

c) Dogs.

Dogs were a problem for us on two levels. Firstly, as animal lovers, we were dismayed by the huge number of feral and stray dogs living on the margins of human society around rubbish-dumps, harbours, supermarket car-parks, etc. These usually timid creatures were often desperately thin and, presumably beset by internal and external parasites. We have seen this problem elsewhere in southern Europe, but not on the scale we saw in Greece. These comments presumably apply to cats too, but they are far less visible.

The second canine problem from our point of view was the ferocity of the sheepdogs which guard the sheep on the mountains and are there to deter potential predators. Generally they are only a problem if the sheep are approached and are in any case supervised by a shepherd. Note, however, the entry for July 6th detailing our being attacked by packs of dogs whilst well away from sheep. These incidents were so frightening that Ann subsequently felt unable to go on the hills when flocks of sheep or goats were visible. This type of problem is unlikely to be an issue whilst out birding away from mountain areas.

Daily Log

Saturday March 28th

This was our first day in Greece following an evening ferry from Brindisi to Igoumenitsa which arrived early on Saturday morning. I woke early and explored an area of scrub and waste ground a mile or so north-west of Igoumenitsa along the coast where we parked the van for the night. I was surprised to find the area covered in beehives, not realising at the time that in Greece most such areas are similarly covered. A group of 6 **Hawfinches** sat in a tree and I was over-flown at low level by a grey male harrier which I was unable to identify as I only spotted it flying away. Probably it was a **Hen Harrier** but I was unable to rule out **Pallid**. Both species are moving north through Greece at this time of year but neither species was seen subsequently on the trip.

We had originally intended to travel quickly across northern Greece to get to Lake Kerkini and beyond, hopefully before some of the winter visitors (such as Spotted Eagle) had departed but decided instead to spend this day exploring the marshy coastal areas between Igoumenitsa and the Albanian border. This turned out to be a good decision as we quickly began to find interesting birds including a scatter of common migrants. The Kestrini area (page 16 in Steve Mills' book) held **Avocet**, **Greenshank**, 12 **Wood Sandpipers**, **Eastern Subalpine warbler**, 15 **Flamingos**, 3 or 4 **Alpine Swifts** overhead and two very distant white blobs on the Kestrini River which turned out to be our first **Pelicans**; careful scope study revealing them to be immature **Dalmatian**. There were also around 30 **Cattle Egrets** here in one of their few Greek

strongholds.

From here we moved a few miles further north to the Sagiada area (Mills p.17) which yielded a sub-adult **Egyptian Vulture**, **Great White Egret**, **Squacco** and **Purple Herons**, 3 **Garganey**, a mixed flock of *flava* **Wagtails** containing **Black**, **Blue** and **Grey-headed**, a pair of **Subalpine Warblers**, a male **Black-eared Wheatear**, several **Penduline Tits** in the bushes by a ditch and our only **Wryneck** of the trip on a rocky hillside just above the marshes. A **Grasshopper Warbler** reeled in dense vegetation.

All in all this was a relaxing and quite productive way to start the holiday.

Sunday March 29th

We spent this morning at Ioannina Lake an hour east of Igoumenitsa. The road on the north-east side of the lake gave good views over the reed-beds and open water where a large **Pygmy Cormorant** colony and a pair of **Ferruginous Ducks** were found. At the south-eastern end of the lake were a network of dirt tracks of varying condition which were hard to navigate and to drive in the van. The area had few birds of interest other than a **Woodchat Shrike** and, upsettingly, a dying **Black Kite** in the road crouched over a puddle; a victim, presumably, of poisoning.

Monday March 30th

Much further east, on a long drive to Lake Kerkini, we stopped at the high point of the A4 road between Kozani and Veria, near the village of Kastania. A track leads north from here into open beech woods and we had frustratingly brief views of a pair of **Sombre Tits** a few minutes walk along this track. Later in the day, in the village of Efkarpiia, north of Kilkis, we saw our first **White Storks** of the trip.



White Stork, near Chryssohoraia, Kerkini



Tortoise sp., Litholopos, Kerkini

Tuesday March 31st

This was a memorable day as we finally reached Lake Kerkini, a site we had dreamed about for a long time. We started by exploring the 'Vironia Tracks' (Mills p.51) and it was immediately apparent that there were hundreds of migrants about as there were **Robins**, **Blackcaps** and **Song Thrushes** in every bush. Try as we might we could not find anything more interesting although another group of birders had Collared Flycatcher. The best area was 'Track C'. Song Thrush is an uncommon breeding bird in Greece and we never saw them in anything like these numbers again. Also from here we could see groups of **Pelicans** in flight to the West and were able to pick out both **White** and **Dalmatian** as well as an adult **Spoonbill**. **Hoopoes** fed on the track in front of us. Our first **Long-legged Buzzard**, fortunately a classically plumaged adult with a pale rump and bright orange tail, soared over the fields between the tracks and Vironia

village. These birds become easier to tell from Common Buzzards with practice.

After lunch we drove along the eastern embankment all the way from Megalohori to Lithotopos. Water levels were high and there was no exposed mud so most of the bird interest was in the scrub and trees to the east of the track. A **Grey-headed Woodpecker** was briefly seen along with **Kingfisher** and 2 **Common Sandpipers**. The track along the 'Glossy Ibis Strip' (Mills p.53) was too wet for us to drive, but we did see **Flamingos** and **Night Heron** here. Near the pumping station on the eastern embankment a large flock of at least 100 *flava* **Wagtails** were feeding on an area of muddy grass and we were able to pick out a minimum of 3 different races, **Blue**, **Grey** and **Black-headed** as well as one or two with dark lores and ear-coverts which may have been 'Dombrowskii' which breeds in Romania.

After tea we drove up the track by the village of Himarros, south of Lithotopos where an **Eagle Owl** showed superbly in the last light of the setting sun at the top of the quarry by the track. This was only seen by Ann as I had gone on a futile excursion up the track on foot and missed it.

Wednesday April 1st

This day was also spent around Lake Kerkini exploring some new sites but first we re-visited the Vironia Tracks where yesterdays fall of migrants had largely moved on during the clear night. We did, though, have a view of a male **Lesser-spotted Woodpecker** on Track C and **Green Woodpecker** and **Whitethroat** on Track A. Mandraki Harbour (Mills p.51) gave very close views of 2 **Dalmatian Pelicans** and 2 **Squacco Herons**. On the south-west side of the Lake at Korifoudi Marshes there were small numbers of **Garganey**, **Wigeon**, **Pintail**, **Teal** and **Mallard** with staggeringly huge numbers of **Cormorants** stretching as far as the eye could see on the lake itself. A walk up a track south of here produced no birds of note but the first of many tortoises seen during the holiday. We headed for the quarry at Himarros at dusk for the Eagle Owl but, typically, it failed to show though a churring **Nightjar** had not been there the night before.



Squacco Heron, Mandraki Harbour



Dalmatian Pelican, Mandraki Harbour

Thursday April 2nd

Today we explored the fields above Vironia (Mills p.59). The fields themselves were quiet but continuing up the road a track leads from a wooded area below a rock face and along to a disused quarry which was good for birds. Very quickly we heard a beautiful, throaty, warbling song which was eventually tracked down to an **Eastern Orphean Warbler** which gave brief but good views. In my opinion this is a candidate for finest songster found in Europe and puts the Nightingale to shame. Also here was a male **Black-eared Wheatear** and a **Red-rumped**

Swallow above. From here we moved west along the north shore of Lake Kerkini to the picnic site north of Akritochori where a **Crag Martin** flew overhead.

Friday April 3rd

A brief early morning bird-watch on Vironia Tack C gave a **Lesser-spotted Woodpecker** drumming as well as **Green Sandpiper** and **Snipe** before we headed east towards Dadia Forest promising to return to Lake Kerkini in a week or two when we hoped more of the summer visitors would be in. In the early evening, shortly after arriving in Dadia Forest, a large cat with a strikingly ringed and bushy tail ran across the road in front of us, clearly a **Wildcat** and presumably a male given its size.

Saturday April 4th

In the morning we drove to the Dadia Forest visitor centre and watched their film about the raptors of the area. A **Black Stork** circled nearby. We elected not to walk to the Vulture-watching viewpoint as there were a number of people about and instead drove south to Kapsalo mast (Mills p.106). Two **Short-toed Eagles** were seen together by the road west of Lefkimi. A brief late afternoon session at the mast gave a **Black Vulture** and a pair of **Egyptian Vultures** and we settled in for a night high up on the road for a proper look in the morning.

Sunday April 5th

Two hours were spent at Kapsalo mast this morning and a few more birds were seen as well as yesterday's pair of **Egyptian Vultures**. These comprised a **Black Vulture**, **Peregrine**, 2 **Short-toed Eagles**, 2 **Ravens** and a distant **White Stork**. Driving back down to Lefkimi we saw a **Black Stork** and a pair of **Woodchat Shrikes** and again saw a large cat on the road with a ringed bushy tail giving every sign of being a **Wildcat** although the way it sauntered off the road as we approached did not seem to us suggestive of a truly wild beast. This one was smaller than the first one seen and, if a Wildcat, was presumably a female. A **Hawfinch** was in the churchyard at Lefkimi.

After lunch we drove back to Dadia village and the staff there confirmed that wildcats are relatively common in the forest and sometimes seen as well as occasionally being found dead on the road. This time we did walk up to the Vulture watch-point, a pleasant stroll through pine forest that reminded me of the forests on Speyside. The carcass is very distant from the hide and a telescope therefore essential here. Whilst we were there we recorded maximum counts of 10 **Griffon Vultures**, 6 **Black**, 1 **Raven** and 5 **Hooded Crows** at the carcass and a **Black Stork** flew over whilst a **Great-spotted Woodpecker** showed well in front of the hide. Coming down we followed the longer alternative route back to the visitor centre and inadvertently flushed a group of vultures from trees along the way giving very close views through the foliage as they struggled to gain height. There were a pair of **Black-eared Wheatears** at the car park.

Tuesday April 7th

Yesterday had seen a deluge of biblical proportions which caused flooding all over the place and rocks and stones to be washed onto the roads. The Evros River remained very high for days, washing into gardens on the edge of the flood-plain. Today was better but still wet and cold and our only outdoor activity in the forest was a short stroll from Treis Vrysses (Mills p.109). We saw **Great-spotted** and **Green Woodpeckers**, **Siskin**, and I had good close views of a **Firecrest**

From here we headed south towards the Evros Delta and soon began to notice migrants in the hedgerows. Just north of Loutros village we stopped at a particularly good spot where we found 10 **Collared Flycatchers** and a number of **Whinchats** in the bushes. Arriving at the Evros Delta we decided on a walk along the western embankment of Drana Lagoon and, after seeing a male **Montagu's Harrier** heading purposefully north *en route*, immediately began

noticing evidence of a fall of migrants following yesterday's poor weather. Best of all was a **Great-spotted Cuckoo** followed by a **Wood Warbler** but there were **Lesser Whitethroats**, **Whitethroats** and **Blackcaps** as well as two female **Wheatears** and a male **Black-eared Wheatear**. A few **Red-rumped Swallows** headed north above and a **Kingfisher** showed well by the toilet block. **Marsh Harriers** were everywhere and there were always several in view at once above the reed-beds. A very large raptor was also seen at very long distance flying up the line of the Evros River and being mobbed by gulls. From the size of the bird, and something about the jizz, I suspect it was a **White-tailed Eagle**, although the extreme range and dull conditions made it impossible to confirm. The lagoon itself held 6 **Teal**, 4 **Grey Plover**, 6 **Whimbrel**, around 20 **Marsh Sandpipers**, 3 **Spotted Redshanks** and 2 **Common sandpipers** as well as many **Greenshanks** and **Redshanks**. After this we explored part of the public reserve further east and found 10+ **Calandra Larks** in the Calandra Fields (Mills p.95) as well as our only **Sedge Warbler** of the trip in a nearby reedbed. The tracks on the reserve were in places flooded and impassable in our campervan and this unfortunately restricted our movements.

Wednesday April 8th

Because of the flooded tracks on the delta proper we headed to Anthia Marshes (Mills p.96) in the direction of Alexandroupoli but hit the same problem here and were restricted to exploring the inland areas on foot. Anthia Marshes is an attractive area where we saw a number of foreign birders during several visits. On this occasion we saw a flock of 18 **Glossy Ibises**, many **Purple Herons**, around 20 **Black-winged Stilts**, **Ruff**, **Greenshank**, **Spotted Redshank** and a single **Lapwing**. A **Short-toed Eagle** was circling overhead and we saw many **Collared Flycatchers** in the bushes accompanied by a single **Pied Fly**. A **Bittern** was flushed from a ditch by the track.

In the afternoon we walked up Loutros Hill which gives wonderful views across the Evros Delta to Turkey. From here we saw a **Black Kite**, **Black Stork**, 2 **Short-toed Eagles** (rapidly becoming the default medium-large raptor), a **Long-legged Buzzard** and 6 **Ravens**. Our first **Syrian Woodpecker** perched on a telegraph pole near the visitor centre. We decided to try the tracks on the public area of the reserve again and found that the floods had receded slightly. Judicious choice of tracks enabled us to reach the river where we turned right along the embankment towards the pumping station. Along this stretch we were rewarded with close views of two **Spur-winged Plovers** as well as three **White Pelicans** on the river at the pumping station itself.



Spur-winged Plover, Evros Delta



Corn Bunting, Evros Delta

Thursday April 9th

Because of the flooded and sometimes impassable tracks at the Evros Delta, we decided to head explore further west before returning later as we had permits for the military zone of the delta for May 6th, 7th and 8th. First, though, we walked from the pumping station further south-west along the embankment with a gale force wind in our faces. We soon gave up but not before having extremely good views of a **Pallid Swift** which held station in the wind, a change from the usual views of this species which is normally seen tearing around the sky at high speed. We reached Lake Ismaridia (Mills p.86) in the afternoon and found all of the tracks by the lake flooded and impassable even on foot - we hadn't expected to need wellies in Greece - so had to stick to the tarmac. Even so we did see a nice flock of over 100 **Glossy Ibises** and a group of 20 **Gull-billed Terns** as well as several **Garganey** and 4 **Gadwall**.

Friday April 10th

From Lake Ismaridia we drove the short distance south to the Thracian Lagoons (Mills p.85). We particularly liked the two eastern lagoons, Elos and Ptelea, which were quiet with an air of wildness; further west the area is busier and more built-up. A **Caspian Tern** flew over the beach adjacent to Elos Lagoon, which had large numbers of **Flamingos**. Ptelea Lagoon also held **Flamingos** as well as **Shoveller** and **Pintail** and two **Mediterranean Gulls** offshore. **Kentish Plovers** were on the beach. Lake Vistonida, towards Porto Lagos, was notable for enormous numbers of **Little Gulls**, probably more than 1,000, certainly the most I have ever seen in one place. We also counted 6 **Black-necked Grebes** but the Lake, on the south side at least, was difficult to view. We drove from here through Porto Lagos and further west to Avdira Marshes (Mills p.78) where we spent the night. 25 **Mediterranean Gulls** and 3 **Slender-billed Gulls** were on the beach nearby.

Saturday April 11th

Early in the morning I found the only **Bearded Tit** of the trip in a small area of reeds behind the road at Avdira Marshes and we then drove back to Porto Lagos and walked on the beach adjacent to the closed visitor centre. **Sandwich** and **Common Terns** were on show here and there was a **Stone Curlew** on a stony area behind the beach adjacent to the West Wood (Mills p.83). A number of **Fan-tailed Warblers** were song-flighting here also. Today Lake Vistonida held 30+ **Black-necked Grebes** and 3 **Slender-billed Gulls** mingled with the hundreds of **Little Gulls**. We tried to reach Mandra Marsh (Mills p.78) but failed due to the state of the track and contented ourselves with a short stroll to a pool visible to the north of the road north of Mandra Marsh. This held 30 **Wood Sandpipers** and 6 **Garganey**. We spent the night in the litter-strewn West Wood where we heard and saw **Long-eared Owls**.

Sunday April 12th

Our overnight site at the West Wood proved mosquito infested and this was a problem throughout the Porto Lagos area, a factor in our decision to leave today, but first we found 24 **Tufted Ducks** on Water Tower Lagoon (Mills p.82) and then tried and failed to gain access to the nearby Saltpan Lagoon where the gate was closed and guarded by a dog. Instead we walked along a track opposite Water Tower Lagoon to the beach and this gave 2 **Stone Curlews**, 2 **Penduline Tits** and a **Calandra Lark**.

After lunch we drove west to the Nestos Gorge (Mills p.70) where we saw **Grey Wagtail**, **Common Sandpiper**, **Raven**, **Red-rumped Swallow** and **Crag Martin**, and then up to the viewpoint high above the gorge on its eastern side. Here we had views of a distant immature **Golden Eagle** circling above the mountain to the east, a close encounter with a male **Goshawk** (always a thrilling species in my book), 2 **Long-legged Buzzards** and two other large raptors on passage which unfortunately were only seen in silhouette against the sun but may have been Lesser Spotted Eagles. It was good to see the Golden Eagle as a catastrophic

poisoning incident in this area in 2012 wiped out the entire population of Vultures and Golden Eagles present at that time.

Tuesday April 14th

Today we visited Chrissoupoli Lakes (Mills p.69), a pleasant, quiet, small nature reserve near the town of Chrissoupoli. A **Hobby** hawked over the lakes and we saw the first **Great Reed Warbler** of the trip as well as two distant **Long-legged Buzzards**. In the afternoon we drove in search of the riverine Nestos Forest (Mills p.72), a complete dead loss as the visitor centre was closed, the forest firmly fenced off, and all adjacent tracks flooded and un-driveable.

Wednesday April 15th

By way of variety we took the ferry as foot-passangers from Keramoti to the island of Thasos. Two groups of the hoped for **Yelkouan Shearwaters** showed well on the return trip, one of 20-30 birds and the other 30-40. Although superficially similar to Manx Shearwater they have a completely different way of flying and give a wholly different impression.

Thursday April 16th

A lazy day spent walking by Chrissoupoli Lakes highlighted by a splendid male **Little Crake** seen at close range giving prolonged views before it eventually disappeared into the reeds.

Friday April 17th

An ascent of Achlat Tsal (1402m) from the road to the east of Nestos Gorge gave 2 **Rock Partridges** on the track near the summit and a **Nuthatch** in the woods.

Saturday April 18th

A drive to the Rodopi Mountains on the Bulgarian border this morning brought us eventually to Erimanthos Forest Village in the heart of the forest. A walk from here gave **Sombre Tit**, **Treecreeper** (well seen and heard to call), **Crossbill**, **Goldcrest** and **Bullfinch**. The males of the latter seemed redder, less pink, than the ones in the UK. All in all the birds, with one obvious exception, reminded us of home.

Sunday April 19th

An attempt to climb Mount Koula was ended by the arrival of heavy sleet and plummeting temperatures but we did see a pair of **Black Woodpeckers** and more **Bullfinches**. **Fire Salamanders** were very noticeable at various points on the track, they seem to like damp conditions after rain. With regard to the sub-freezing temperatures, we left Rodopi regretfully and headed back to the coast and Thracian Lagoons.



Lesser Kestrel, Kalamokastro



Fire Salamander, Rodopi

Monday April 20th

We spent the night on the beach by Ptelea Lagoon and the morning watching 15 **Collared Pratincoles** hawking insects over the beach and an adjacent small lagoon between Ptelea and Mesi Lagoons. As the tide was in, we walked east along the beach in the afternoon and found a good sized wader roost on a rocky area at the far end of the beach. This included 50 or so **Little Stint** with 3 **Ringed Plover** and plenty of **Dunlin**. Inland from the far end of the beach was a busy area of small lagoons holding many **Spotted Redshank**, **Ruff** and **Black-tailed Godwit** with small numbers of **Marsh Sandpiper**. **Common**, **Sandwich** and **Little Terns** passed overhead between the lagoon and the sea.

Tuesday April 21st

We went back to Anthia Marshes today, just west of the Evros Delta, but first we visited Kalamokastro just to the north of Lake Ismarida where we were delighted to find a number of **Lesser Kestrels** of both sexes perching obligingly on telegraph poles. At Anthia Marshes we saw a **Spur-winged Plover** in flight and our first marsh **Terns** of the trip, a small migrant flock comprising 8 **Whiskered** with 2 **White-winged Black**. We also saw our first **Reed Bunting**, not a common bird here, but there were noticeably fewer **Marsh Harriers** than there had been two weeks previously. A **Bittern** boomed on and off through the night.

Wednesday April 22nd

The tracks on the public area of the Evros Delta were less flooded than last time we were there but still muddy and rutted in places. Nonetheless we spent today walking along the west side of Drana Lagoon where I aroused the suspicion of two policemen who wanted to know why I had binoculars (!) and whether I had a permit - you don't need one for the public area - eventually they bored of me. Stifling security is a feature of this area near the Turkish border and we were spot-checked at road blocks on a number of occasions whilst here. The water level on Drana Lagoon was high and there were virtually no waders here, or anywhere else, for that matter, that we visited over the next two or three days. From here we drove east to the Isabelline and Calandra Flats (Mills p.94-5) and on to the pumping station. We recorded 2 **Red-backed Shrikes**, the first of many over the coming weeks, a **Calandra Lark**, a **Tawny Pipit**, 5 **Spoonbills** together and 4 **Short-toed Larks** on the track beyond the pumping station. A few **Reed** and **Great Reed Warblers** were now in. The day featured regular torrential thundery downpours. In the last evening light I went for a short stroll and distinctly heard a **Savi's Warbler** reeling on the far side of a dyke.

Thursday April 23rd

Early morning at Drana Lagoon featured the unusual double of a **Cetti's Warbler** and a **Nightingale** both simultaneously singing in full view a few yards from the campervan. We returned to the spot where I had heard the Savi's Warbler the night before with no luck but saw the first **Turtle Dove** of the trip. Later we were to see many of these birds, often in quite large flocks, a welcome sight through British eyes but, presumably, numbers are much reduced in Greece also. A **Short-toed Eagle** circled high over the Calandra Flats and we had two very brief glimpses of what looked like a male Red-footed Falcon but were unable to confirm the identification. After lunch we returned to Anthia Marshes and saw a flock of 50 **Glossy Ibis** circling, a female **Little Bittern**, a **Wigeon** with commoner dabbling ducks, **Ferruginous Duck**, **Wood Sandpiper**, 4 **Collared Pratincole** over and the first noticeable emergence of dragonflies with many **Red-veined Darters**. Additionally we had good views of **European Pond Terrapins** and met another tortoise.

In the evening we headed for Loutros Hill in the hope of Eagle Owl on the cliff face. A short stroll here prior to dusk gave sightings of **Sombre Tits**, a pair of **Blue Rock Thrushes** and a large yellow and green snake which I think was **Caspian Whip Snake**. At 8.20pm Ann spotted the **Eagle Owl** on a pinnacle on the left edge of the cliff but instead of concentrating on the adequate binocular views I tried and failed to get it on the scope several times as it flew along the cliff face perching in different spots.

Friday April 24th

A very early stroll at Anthia Marshes, accompanied by the now familiar booming **Bittern**, gave a reeling **Savi's Warbler** and the first 5 **Bee-eaters** of the spring. The bulk of the day was spent in the Evros Hills (Mills p.102) walking along the track between Nipsa and Palia Nipsa which was deep in mud and impassable to our van. We hoped for Chukar here but instead saw **Sombre Tit**, 2 **Black Storks**, **Woodchat Shrike** and **Woodlark**.

In the evening we were back at Loutros Hill hoping that I might at last get a proper look at an **Eagle Owl** but fearing the worst. Happily the owl appeared at the same time at almost the same spot and this time allowed good, prolonged, scope views in adequate light.

Saturday April 25th

We left the Evros Delta again for a final trip north to the Dadia Forest area. A **Bee-eater** saw us off from our overnight stop at Anthia Marshes and we drove as far as Thimaria pools in the Evros floodplain. Here, unusually for this wet spring, there was plenty of exposed mud but, ironically, hardly any birds. A flock of 11 **Collared Pratincoles** being the only thing of note. We spent the late afternoon up at Kapsalo mast again, this time seeing 3 **Black Vultures**, 2 **Egyptian Vultures**, 2 **Peregrines**, 2 **Short-toed Eagles**, **Ortolan**, **Blue Rock Thrush** and **Black-eared Wheatear**.

Sunday April 26th

Back at the Kapsalo mast in the morning we had all three **Vulture** species as well as a pale phase **Booted Eagle** high over heading north and a **Goshawk**. Additional birds were the resident singing **Blue Rock Thrush**, **Black-eared Wheatear** and **Ortolan**, 2 **Short-toed Eagles**, 2 **Ravens** and a **Crag Martin**. In the afternoon we strolled up the flower-strewn hillside to the north of Lefkimi and were lucky enough to see 3 immature **Golden Eagles** in the air together over the hillside as well as 2 **Short-toed Eagles**. We had our first **Eastern Bonell's Warbler** in the pines higher up, a species which we found much easier to hear than to see during this trip. A **Caspian Whip Snake** coiled in a tree near Lefkimi cemetery. In the evening we parked-up by the road to Kapsalo mast a couple of miles west of Lefkimi where I took a stroll along the road in fading light. On the road fifty yards or so away was an **Acletoris** partridge species which, given the geographical location, altitude and habitat (mixed scrub and rough

fields), had to be **Chukar**. It stood in full view for a minute or so but the poor light made it impossible to see the critical field-marks. Not good enough for my life list but enough, perhaps, for the holiday list.

Monday April 27th

We heard a **Golden Oriole** singing in the morning at our over-night spot and then headed north towards the very north-east corner of Greece by the Turkish and Bulgarian borders. Our first **Roller** of the trip eyed us from a lamp-post near Orestiadha. Later, near Mikro Dherio, on the northern edge of Dadia Forest, we saw another **Roller**, 3 **Golden Orioles** flying low northwards over a field and a **Short-toed Eagle** plunging to earth and emerging with a snake.

Tuesday April 28th

A day spent exploring some of the less well known northern parts of Dadia Forest, which was notable for reptiles, amphibians and butterflies, eventually led us to the middle of the forest near some ruined houses which seemed to have once been used by the forest service. This is where the rough dirt road from Treis Vrysses meets the quiet road from Megha Dherio to Esimi. Here a late evening stroll along a forest track through beech woods gave views of a male **White-backed Woodpecker**.

Wednesday April 29th

A further exploration of the beech woods failed to turn up the White-backed Woodpecker again but gave glimpses of an active, singing black and white Flycatcher. After a frustrating hour we finally saw it well enough to confirm it as **Semi-collared Flycatcher**, a first for us. We then walked down the dirt road towards Treis Vrysses and explored from there. Five minutes or so from the track we found a high, bald, hill-top with commanding views in all directions right in the centre of Dadia Forest and settled down to wait. We only had an hour before a thunderstorm drove us down, and these continued on and off all day, but in that hour we saw 2 **Black Vultures**, a pair of adult **Golden Eagles** (which landed on the hill-side nearby), a **Booted Eagle**, 2 **Long-legged Buzzards** and many **Buzzards**. An **Ortolan** serenaded us from a bush.

Thursday April 30th

This morning we returned to the same hill-top as yesterday and saw evidence of raptor migration despite adverse conditions of wind and cold. 3 **Marsh Harriers**, 2 **Hobbies** and a female Montagu's or Pallid **Harrier** all flew low overhead heading north. An *accipiter* species also headed north much higher up, probably Levant Sparrowhawk. A **White-backed Woodpecker** and a **Black Woodpecker** both briefly flew low above the forest canopy to the north. A one hour return visit in the afternoon gave no raptors of note but did reveal a grounded **Lesser Grey Shrike** in a bush on top of the hill.

This site is not mentioned in any previous literature to my knowledge so I attach directions here. I do not have a GPS or access to large scale mapping to give a grid reference so directions are given the old-fashioned way. From the 3-way road junction, Megha Dherio - Ariana - Esimi, head east towards Esimi for 4.5 km until reaching an area of ruined buildings with an open car-port/garage dead ahead. Turn left here on the initially driveable dirt road towards Treis Vrysses for 0.4km until the steep bank on the right gives out and a tractor track (un-driveable) goes off on this side. Park here. Walk up this track for just 50 metres or so until a slight path heads off to the left through the trees and leads quickly to more open ground which continues to the hill-top. I suspect that this site has the potential to be just as good as Kapsalo mast for raptors. It is further from the Dadia vulture feeding station but the views are unobstructed with no man-made clutter and it is right in the centre of the forest.

In the late afternoon, in the Evros Hills between Dhoriko and Nipsa, we saw 2 separate **Rollers** and a male **Red-backed Shrike**.

Friday May 1st

A pleasant morning near Nipsa in the Evros Hills featured a thermal over the hill-side which was utilised, in turn, by a **Black Stork**, a **Goshawk**, a **Booted Eagle** and a **Short-toed Eagle** over a period of half an hour. From here we re-visited Anthia Marshes which were now covered so completely by an emergent plant with white flowers that the area looked as though a heavy snowfall had taken place. A disappointing collection of birds included 12 **Bee-eaters**, 3 **Whiskered Terns**, 15 **Wood Sandpipers**, several **Red-backed Shrikes** and a few **Glossy Ibises**. From here we moved to the Evros Delta proper to check the Isabelline Flats for Isabelline Wheatears, which should be in about now, but no show. Further on we saw a handful of **Calandra Larks** and heard a **Quail** at the far end of the Isabelline Flats (Mills p.94).

Saturday May 2nd

Still no Isabelline Wheatear early this morning at the site just south of the railway line where they have usually been seen by this time of year, including in 2014. Three **Black-headed Buntings** were new in by way of compensation. We discussed the high water levels and consequent lack of wader passage with Eleni at the visitor centre and she suggested trying the beach behind the airport at Alexandroupoli. This proved a good move as the beach held a nice flock of 200+ small waders, mainly **Dunlin**, but including a few **Little Stints**, around 50 **Sanderling**, 5 **Turnstone** and a handful of **Ruff** and **Grey Plover**. In the afternoon, Drana Lagoon was dead except for a single **Gull-billed Tern** and a few **Grey Plover**.

Sunday May 3rd

The morning was spent targeting one of the wanted species of the holiday, Olive-tree Warbler. The area we chose was an area just north of Lefkimi which can be found by following streets to the very highest point of the village on the north side where a track leaves the road opposite a large house and adjacent to, today at least, a large wheely-bin. Five to ten minutes up this track we arrived at an area of overgrown fields with scrub and low trees and immediately began to hear **Olive-tree Warblers**. Hearing was one thing, seeing another, and only Ann had a satisfactory view, I had to be content with brief glimpses. We estimated a minimum of three, maximum of five, singing males were in the area. On this hill-side we also saw a tiny young tortoise, olive green in colour, and no more than three inches long.

In the afternoon we drove north to Dadia and spent the rest of the day by the Diavolorema River just north of the village (Mills p.108). The highlight was a large raptor which I put up from the ground when I poked my head around a corner to look into a field. It struggled to gain height and came right overhead at low level showing the double under-wing 'commas' of a **Lesser Spotted Eagle**. Additionally we saw a **Little Ringed Plover** on the edge of the river, a **Lesser Grey Shrike** along with many **Red-backed** and **Woodchats**, **Great Reed Warbler**, **Black-headed Buntings**, **Eastern Bonelli's Warbler** and a classically plumaged **Long-legged Buzzard** with pale rump and orange tail. A Sparrowhawk species was fleetingly seen which appeared to have black wing-tips, a miss which seemed unimportant at the time but which would give cause for much regret later.

Monday May 4th

Back to the **Olive-tree Warbler** site at Lefkimi this morning and this time, with patience, we both got lucky. Later in the day a **Nose-horned Viper** was sunning itself on the road to Kapsalo mast.



Nose-horned Viper, Kapsalo Mast Road



'Baby' Tortoise, Lefkimi

Tuesday May 5th

The final day before exploring the Evros Delta military zone. In the morning, following a tip-off from Steve Mills and Hilary Koll, whom we were fortunate to meet several times whilst away, we drove to the lower part of Loutros Hill, more or less the area from which we had seen the Eagle Owl in April. This time we had very good views of a pair of **Masked Shrikes** and the first **Eastern Olivaceous Warblers** of the trip singing in the same area. We then went back to the Isabelline Flats on the delta but again drew a blank at this previously reliable spot. Are the Isabelline Wheatears very late arriving, have they abandoned this site, or is this a bad year for the species, perhaps part of a longer-term decline? We had lunch on the open ground between Alexandroupoli airport and the beach where there were several **Calandra Larks** and then went to Anthia Marshes for what would prove to be the final time. A **Dark Spreadwing** damselfly was new to us though the only birds of note were 3 **White-winged Black Terns** with a flock of 50 or so **Whiskered**. Most extraordinary was the incredible noise made by thousands (millions?) of frogs after dark, a wildlife experience quite unlike any other that I have known.

Wednesday May 6th

Finally the day arrived when our permit allowed access to the Evros Delta military zone so we drove to the checkpoint south-east of Monastiraki and presented our permit and passports to a mixed group of seven police and army personnel who spent a prolonged period scrutinising them before we were allowed through; however our passports were *retained*. We were unhappy about this as we had not understood that this was the system and were concerned about being spot-checked whilst in the military zone, though arguing was pointless as they spoke little English and our Greek is limited.

From the checkpoint we drove along the riverbank to the pumping station and walked from here south-westwards for a few hundred yards hoping for **Isabelline Wheatear** and, right on cue, one appeared. I was struck by just how different this species is from our female Northern Wheatear, being a much more sandy-orange colour and having a Woodlark-like display flight with fast fluttery wing beats and spread tail. After watching it for a few minutes, a second bird suddenly appeared with it as if from nowhere. Also in this area is a **Sand Martin** colony and we also saw **Short-toed Larks** and **Bee-eaters**. **Spur-winged Plovers** were also about and we saw several during the day. From here we continued to the wader pools (Mills p.98) which were occupied by a farmer and cows only and then looped around to the Evros River and back north-east. There were plenty of common reed-bed species as well as 20 **Black-winged Stilts** on one pool and 100 **Glossy Ibises** in a single flock. No flocks of small waders were found and water levels were still high.



Tawny Pipit, Evros Delta



Red-backed Shrike, Evros Delta

By the riverine forest in the far eastern portion of the area, the incident that we feared happened. We were stopped by an army patrol and a smiling young soldier asked for our passport. This seemed to be his only word of English. I produced the delta map and pointed to the checkpoint repeatedly saying 'passport here' to no avail. He simply held out his hand and repeated 'passport' back to me. The permit cut no ice. The stand-off was resolved by Ann remembering that she had scanned our passports before leaving home, found the copies and handed them to the soldier who went to his vehicle and made a phone call before handing the copies back and waving us on. But for this we would probably now be languishing in a Greek jail. It was now late afternoon and we had little appetite for more birding so we retrieved our passports from the checkpoint and drove out but not before being stopped 50 yards beyond the checkpoint by an unfriendly police patrol who wanted our passports and permit even though we were no longer in the military zone. The following morning we told the visitor centre staff about our permits being kept at the checkpoint and they said that this had never happened before to their knowledge.

Thursday May 7th

Our military zone permits covered today and the next but, following yesterdays fiasco, there was no way we were going back in. We were also fed up with the level of security, having been stopped and spot-checked around 10 times whilst in the area near the Turkish border by both army border patrols and police. Generally the army were more friendly and polite than the police. On two occasions our number plate aroused suspicion and our registration document was demanded which we did not have. Fortunately I found a letter from the DVLA with our registration prominently displayed and this worked on both occasions. I would recommend taking your registration document with you to Greece; we were also asked for it when checking-in for the ferry back to Italy from Igoumenitsa - again the DVLA letter worked.

Enough of the admin. We drove back west to Lake Ismarida and this time the track to the lake on the west side was accessible on foot. Around 50 marsh terns were hawking insects high above the lake and we picked out **Black Terns** among greater numbers of **Whiskered** and **White-winged Black**. A male **Pochard** was on the lake which was otherwise quiet except for the ubiquitous **Great-crested Grebes**. In the afternoon we went back to Ptelea Lagoon and walked along the beach to the far eastern end which again proved productive. The best migrant flock of small waders yet seen was feeding on the small lagoons just inland here, although viewing was difficult. We estimated 300 birds which included **Dunlin**, **Sanderling**, **Ruff**, **Little**

Stint and Curlew Sandpipers. We found nothing rarer. There were also 9 **Black-tailed Godwits** here and plenty of **Flamingos** plus a few **Bee-eaters**. Two **Stone Curlews** were on a gravelly area behind the beach along with **Kentish Plovers** and **Common, Little** and a few **Gull-billed Terns** passed overhead. We liked this spot.

Friday May 8th

We drove up Mount Paggeo (Mills p.68) to search for mountain birds as well as to gain a rather cheap summit as a 4X4 could get more or less to the top. We walked the last mile and saw a male **Shore Lark, Alpine Chough, Rock Bunting, Ortolan**, and a pair of **Tawny Pipits** as well as many commoner species such as **Wheatear, Linnet, Meadow Pipit, Black Redstart, Skylark** and **Mistle Thrush**. The summit was in cloud. In the evening we parked up on the road at about 1,500 metres and I saw a **Treecreeper** species at distance in beech woodland which was probably **Short-toed**.

Sunday May 10th

After a day spent driving and sheltering from the rain we climbed Mount Falakro (2229m) north of Drama. There was still plenty of snow about and we went up from the ski centre to the north-west. The birding was disappointing, not helped by poor visibility at times in cloud, but we did record **Shore Lark, Alpine Chough** and **Crag Martin**.

Monday May 11th

This was a varied birding day on the way back to Lake Kerkini. We first stopped at Paleokastro Cliffs (Mills p.65) which is a somewhat grand title for two large adjacent quarried holes in the ground one of which is partially flooded. Rock Sparrow has been recorded here but we saw none. We did see large numbers of **Rollers, Olivaceous Warbler, Little Bittern, Golden Oriole** and a **Lesser Grey Shrike** nearby when we took a wrong turn.

From here we drove to Sid Rock at Sidirokastro hoping for Rock Nuthatch. The weather was poor which may have deterred any Nuthatches from announcing themselves but we did originally miss the turning to the top of Sid Rock going a further 0.5km up the lane and found ourselves face to face with a pair of **Masked Shrikes**. Sid Rock itself had **Blue Rock Thrush, Black-eared Wheatear** and lots of **Serins** in the pines. A nearby stream held **Grey Wagtail**. In the evening a brief visit to Strimon Marshes (Mills p.61) turned up an obliging migrant **Marsh Warbler** which confirmed its identification by singing away quietly to itself whilst feeding. Also here were 2 **Wood Sandpipers**, a **Spoonbill**, a pair of **Red-backed Shrikes** and huge numbers of **Purple Herons**.

Tuesday May 12th

Early morning at Strimon Marshes gave 30+ **Ruff**, 3 **Wood Sandpipers**, 2 **Little Ringed Plover** as well as further extraordinary numbers of **Purple Herons**. After this we attempted to force a way on foot up to the ridge of Mount Kerkini from the Akritochori picnic area but had to give up in impenetrable scrub a few hundred feet from the ridge. We did see **Black** and **Great-spotted Woodpeckers, Wood Pigeons** (not common in Greece) and an **Olivaceous Warbler** singing by the picnic area.

Wednesday May 13th

Mandraki harbour gave the first **Greylag Goose** of the holiday with several close **Squacco Herons** and **Pygmy Cormorants**. Later the Glossy Ibis Strip had many **Bee-eaters** giving excellent photo opportunities and the Kerkini eastern embankment was excellent for **Night Heron** with more **Greylags** and six **Pochard**.



Bee-eater, 'Glossy Ibis Strip', Lake Kerkini



Black-winged Stilt, Evros Delta

Thursday May 14th

A driving day, however 2 fruitful hours was spent at Alikes Kitrous on the west side of Thermaikos Gulf (Mills p.41) where we managed to get the campervan down a track towards the shore 1.8km south of Pydna, although the continuation up to the lagoon was too difficult. Nonetheless from this track we saw many **Black-winged Stilts**, **Black-tailed Godwits** and **Collared Pratincoles** as well as a large flock of small waders, difficult to see in the vegetation but including **Dunlin**, **Little Stints** and **Kentish Plover**. A golden haze of thousands of teneral **Common Darter** dragonflies rose ahead of us from the reeds as we walked or drove on the track.

From about this point the focus of the holiday shifted from seeing as many bird species as possible to climbing as many mountains over 2000 metres high as possible. Binoculars, though, were always carried and there were still a few days spent birding at lower levels. Days where purely routine mountain birds were seen are not described hence there are many dates missing from the account from this point. Butterflies, rather than birds, were often the wildlife giving the most interest in the mountains from here on.

Friday May 15th

First **Honey Buzzard** of the trip near Livadhi, west of Mount Olympus.

Saturday May 16th

First proper long hill-walk of the trip from Kokinoplos, west of Olympus, up Chodza and along the ridge to Kitros. 2 pairs of **Rock Partridge** were seen on Chodza at around 2000m and 9 **Shore Larks** (3 pairs and 3 singletons) at various points. A flock of about 40 **Alpine Chough** circled around the crags of Kanaki and the only **Tree Pipit** of the holiday was song-flighting from isolated pines descending Kitros back to Kokinoplos. Also here were many **Woodlarks** and **Bonelli's Warblers**.

Monday May 18th

An exciting ascent of Olympus today from the army ski-centre to the south as it gives a higher starting point than the usual route via the refuge from Prionia to the east. I recommend ascending Olympus with hesitation to non-hill walkers as the summit ridge is very exposed, although it is easier than it first appears from the summit of Skala which is reached by either of the routes previously mentioned. This is about the earliest in the year that either route can safely attempted without ice-axe and crampons. We had the mountain to ourselves and it was a

magnificent experience.

Bird interest included 3 **Rock Thrushes** singing at various points from the ski-tow paraphernalia of the army ski centre, 2 **Shore Larks** seen on bare areas at around 2,700m, 5 **Alpine Accentors** on the summit ridge and 2 **Alpine Choughs** flying around the summit itself.

Tuesday May 19th

An ascent of Kakavrakas and Metamorphosi (south of Olympus) from the army ski-centre. Three **Shore Larks** were seen separately, again favouring barren tundra-like areas between snow patches, and a **Rock Partridge** on the road by the ski-tows at 2,100m were the highlights.

Wednesday May 20th

We drove round to the east side of Olympus today to the busy road to Prionia from Litochoro hoping we might see Chough in the gorge here. We had no luck with this species but did see a **Short-toed Eagle** from the viewpoint high above the gorge and later went to the ruined Agios Dionisios monastery in the bed of the gorge. A singing **Firecrest** and **Nuthatches** were present here and an adult **Dipper** (not a common bird in Greece) feeding a juvenile was seen on the river upstream. **Grey Wagtails** were in the car park at Prionia.

Thursday May 21st

Today we climbed Skourta from the Gortsia car park on the Prionia road. 4 **Alpine Choughs** were seen around the summit and 5 **Alpine Accentors** were north of the summit around the edge of the cliffs. Additionally seen were **Crested Tit**, **Bullfinch**, **Wood Pigeon**, **Goldcrest** and **Black Woodpecker**.

Sunday May 24th

This day we enjoyed a fine round of all of the 2,000 metre tops of Parnassos and had probably our most productive day for mountain birds of the whole holiday. The highlight was a pair of **Snow Finches** on the cliffs of Gerondovrachos above the Kelaria ski resort. We only saw these in flight (twice) but the wing pattern is completely distinctive. We expected these birds in the Pindos Mountains but were surprised to find them here. Also seen were a **Shore Lark** on Kailes, an **Alpine Accentor** and two **Alpine Choughs** on Tris tsoubes, a singing **Rock Thrush** - again on ski-tow equipment (which seems to be a favoured 'habitat') - and a **Rock Partridge** on Kaloghiros. There were **Wheatears** and **Black Redstarts** everywhere.

Monday May 25th

This day was spent around the tourist honeypot of the ancient site of Delphi. Even around 9am there were many cars and coaches parked on the road and people everywhere often giving us curious looks as we scanned the cliffs and adjacent areas just to the east of the ruins looking for Rock Sparrow and Rock Nuthatch. We were out of luck with the former but had two good views of **Rock Nuthatch**, on both occasions atop conifers rather than on the cliff itself.

In the afternoon we walked up the E4 footpath from Delphi village looking for Ruppell's Warblers. Butterflies were everywhere in the hot sunshine and the path is steep but eventually we were rewarded by discovering two singing **Ruppell's Warblers** about half an hour's walk above Delphi where the E4 takes a sharp left turn as it reaches the edge of the gorge. From here there is a view steeply down on the Delphi ruins by a metal post. Eventually one of the singing birds gave prolonged close views.

Thursday May 28th

Our only **Scop's Owl** of the trip was heard this evening from our night time park-up on a wooded hillside east of the farthest inlet of the Gulf of Corinth from the minor road between Paliochori and Psatha.

Saturday May 30th

Now at the southern part of the Peloponese, we decided to explore the Evrotas Delta at the head of Lakonikos Bay, near Skala, an area recommended in the Hamlyn guide to Turkey, Greece and Cyprus. The area seemed entirely given over to commercial orange growing, a situation which may have occurred in the twenty years since the book was written, and the only wetlands we found were the beach and river. The beach held **Little Stint** and **Ringed Plover** and a **Fan-tailed Warbler** song-flighted in the area behind the beach. **European Green Lizards** were common here.

Sunday May 31st

By now it was becoming seriously hot and hill-walking from near sea-level hard work, a fact we discovered on an ascent of the two highest hills of Outer Mani, Kourkoutsilas and Profitis Ilias, from the west. The day was productive for birds, though, with a pair of **Cretzschmar's Buntings** at 950m on the rocky slopes below the col between the two hills. A **Ruppell's Warbler** was singing from scrub at the col and a **Rock Partridge** was near here also. A pair of **Long-legged Buzzards** flew over, one carrying a snake, and dozens of **Alpine Swifts** quartered the sky above the summit of Kourkoutsilas. Also of note was an enormous pale green spider, a veritable Tarantula, seen on a rocky slope descending from the hills.

Monday June 1st

A morning stroll along the minor road that skirts the north-west side of yesterday's hills, north-east of the village of Kokinoghenis, gave views of **Sombre Tit**, **Ruppell's** and **Sardinian Warblers** singing together on opposite sides of the road (which was instructive), **Woodchat Shrike** and **Black-headed Wagtail**. A *palpares* Ant-lion was also seen here, a thoroughly weird looking creature.

In the afternoon we drove to Cape Tenaro, the southern tip of the Mani peninsula and of the Greek mainland, and walked to the lighthouse on the very southernmost point. From here half an hour spent scanning the generally quiet sea gave two **Scopoli's Shearwaters** and three **Yelkouan Shearwaters** all heading east.

Tuesday June 2nd

Today we turned north and drove up the east side of the Mani Peninsula, the start of the long journey home. Two **Short-toed Eagles** were the only birds of note seen, just south of the village of Laghia.

Wednesday June 3rd

A long traverse of the highest tops of the Taygetos Mountains in Inner Mani resulted in one of the highlights of the holiday for me when Ann drew my attention to a group of falcons flying around in the distance as we were descending south from the summit of Profitis Ilias, the highest peak in the Taygetos. Unfortunately I was descending a sheer twenty-foot rock-step at the time and trying to watch fast flying falcons through binoculars whilst hanging on with one hand above a drop did not work but thankfully the birds were coming closer and we were able to reach safer ground. The birds revealed themselves as four **Eleonora's Falcons**, all pale phase, and a single **Kestrel**, which seemed to be trying to copy their hunting technique. Many insects were being blown into the air by up-draughts from the cliffs and we watched for twenty minutes as these superb birds hunted right overhead, at times swooping within fifty feet or so. The contrast between the dark underwing coverts and pale flight feathers was easy to pick out. Other than this little was seen except a single **Alpine Chough** and a **Rock Partridge**.

Thursday June 4th

Another day on the Taygetos. Two **Alpine Accentors** were on Sidirokastro with several **Alpine Chough**.

Saturday June 6th

A **Middle-spotted Woodpecker** flew across the road ahead of us as we drove up to Soha, south-west of Sparti, and a **Pine Martin** strolled along a wall a few feet from our campervan in the evening until it saw us watching through the window whence it turned tail.

Tuesday June 9th - Thursday June 11th These three days were spent around the Menalo ski-resort north-west of Tripoli which was an excellent area for butterflies. Birds were less conspicuous but the area was good for **Rock Buntings** and a **Little Owl** spent much time sitting on posts and wires by the ski-resort itself.

Wednesday June 17th

We were now in the northern Peloponese at Mount Ziria where we recorded two separate **Shore Larks** on the summit plateau a mile or so apart. These birds seem much scarcer in the Peloponese than further north. On the Ziria plateau, to the east of the mountain, we heard **Quail** and **Nightjar** in the evening.

Wednesday June 24th

On Mount Chelmos, moving west from Ziria, we found a large flock of around 30 **Alpine Choughs** on Profitis Ilias, to the south of the highest top, and **Rock Partridge** and 'churring' **Nightjar** by the ski-centre.

Saturday June 27th

By now we had re-crossed the Gulf of Corinth, leaving the Peloponese behind. We headed for the Giona massif, the middle one of the three major mountain ranges of central Greece, the others being Vardhousia, to the west, and the previously visited Parnassos further east. On Profitis Ilias, a few miles south of Giona itself, we found a large flock of 50 or so **Alpine Chough** and four **Rock Partridges** were seen. It should be explained that in Greece it often seems as if every second hill is called Profitis Ilias. It translates as Prophet Elijah and these hills are often topped with either a tiny church or a shrine.

Sunday June 28th

Today we climbed Giona from the north-east via the col between the highest summit and Plativouna. A flock of 40 **Alpine Chough** was seen; these birds seem commoner in central Greece than anywhere else. A **Shore Lark** was on the col between Piramidha and Plativouna and a singing Ortolan graced the corrie.

Saturday July 4th

This day saw a big walk on Vardhousia and its rugged satellite peaks to the west. A **Rock Thrush** was seen on the Stavros plateau along with at least three singing **Ortolans**. An **Alpine Accentor** was on Soufles and there were many **Rock Partridges** including a female with a young brood.

Monday July 6th

Problems with Sheepdogs are mentioned in the introduction and it was today that they reached their peak. The previous day Ann and I had walked over Vouno Chomirianis, north of Vardhousia, and descended into the valley to its west. This valley is traversed by the E4 long-distance path which cropped up frequently on our travels as it links most of the mountain areas

of Greece. Whilst walking along this path we were attacked (there is no other word for it) by a pack of six dogs which we managed to beat off with trekking-poles before the shepherds arrived and called them off with difficulty. Today I wanted to climb the magnificent peak of Plaka which involved re-visiting this valley. Ann declined following yesterday's trauma.

Once again I was attacked by the same group of dogs which ran for at least a quarter of a mile to reach me, leaving their sheep, even though they were only specks in the distance when I first caught sight of them. Once again I was forced to resort to screaming at them, stamping my feet aggressively and hitting them with trekking poles whilst backed against a steep slope until the shepherd arrived after a very long five minutes or so. Even then they continued to lunge at me while he threw rocks at them from a position between myself and the dogs. Higher up a similar incident occurred with another group who thankfully were slightly less bold and I was able to back away for fifteen minutes or so until they gave up. I am convinced that turning my back on either group of these dogs would have led to them attacking me with potentially serious results.

Plaka, itself, had many **Alpine Chough** as well as **Alpine Accentor**, **Alpine Swift** and **Crag Martin**.

Wednesday July 8th

We had moved north, now, to the area around Karpenisi at the very southern tip of the Pindos Mountains, by far the most extensive mountain area in Greece, and today we ascended Kaliakoudha to the south of Karpenisi. Here we found a pair of **Rock Thrushes**, **Alpine Chough** and **Alpine Swift**.

Thursday July 9th

A **Short-toed Eagle** flew over the Karpenisi ski-centre north of the town.

Monday July 13th

Today was in many ways a turning point in the holiday. We visited the magnificently wild and rugged Agrafa mountains in the southern part of the Pindos range, starting from a low level in the gorge of the Aghrafotis River. Two litres of water carried proved inadequate on a baking hot day and we were de-hydrated and exhausted on our return from an ascent on Liakoura. Additionally we sat for an hour or so on the summit in an area of grass obviously used frequently by goats and by the late afternoon I was beginning to feel extremely itchy. I came up in many very itchy spots which continued for the rest of the holiday, afflicting Ann as well, and eventually making life in the campervan a misery and leading, along with the excessive heat, to the decision to return home. It appears that one or more fleas travelled with me in my clothes on the descent of Liakoura and made themselves at home in the van. Liakoura itself had a flock of 45 **Alpine Chough** and a sighting of a large bird of prey in the distance and flying away which if seen near Dadia I would have confidently identified as a Griffon Vulture.

Tuesday July 14th

We moved to the northern Agrafa and climbed Voutsikaki today in the area to the west of the large Tavropos Reservoir. Here we had two very close and clear sightings of **Griffon Vultures**, one of two birds and one of a single bird, as well as another of a more distant bird. These confirmed my suspected sighting of the previous day. I had believed that all of the Griffons on mainland Greece were in the Dadia Forest area but it seems that this is not so. Certainly the sparsely populated, wild and rugged Agrafa is a perfect setting for this species. We also heard two calling **Quail** in areas of rank vegetation on the hillsides as well as two sightings of **Hobbies** and one of an **Alpine Swift**.

Saturday July 18th

Our last hill-walk in Greece before heading for the ferry at Igoumenitsa and the journey home. We ascended Smolikas, highest of the Pindos Mountains, from the village of Samarina to the east. As a hill-walk it did not disappoint but I had hoped for more interesting birds than we saw on this vast plateau-like mountain not far from the Albanian border. Snow still lay in large banks but no Snow Finches were seen and there were no Shore Larks either. We did see two **Alpine Accentors** (one singing) and two **Alpine Choughs**.

Species Seen - Systematic List

Here is the full list of species seen. A few species were heard only and these are marked with an asterisk. A total of 242 species were seen or heard.

Mute Swan
Greylag Goose
Shelduck
Mallard
Gadwall
Pintail
Shoveler
Wigeon
Teal
Garganey
Pochard
Ferruginous duck
Tufted Duck
Rock Partridge
Chukar
Quail*
Black-necked Grebe
Little Grebe
Great Crested Grebe
Scopoli's Shearwater
Yelkouan Shearwater
White Pelican
Dalmatian Pelican
Cormorant
Shag
Pygmy Cormorant
Bittern
Little Bittern
Night Heron
Squacco Heron
Cattle Egret
Little Egret
Great White Egret
Grey Heron
Purple Heron
White Stork
Black Stork
Glossy Ibis
Spoonbill

Greater Flamingo
Griffon Vulture
Black Vulture
Egyptian Vulture
Golden Eagle
Lesser Spotted Eagle
Short-toed Eagle
Booted Eagle
Black Kite
Marsh Harrier
Montagu's Harrier
Long-legged Buzzard
Common Buzzard
Honey Buzzard
Sparrowhawk
Goshawk
Kestrel
Lesser Kestrel
Hobby
Eleonora's Falcon
Peregrine Falcon
Water Rail
Little Crake
Moorhen
Coot
Oystercatcher
Avocet
Black-winged Stilt
Stone Curlew
Collared Pratincole
Little Ringed Plover
Ringed Plover
Kentish Plover
Grey Plover
Lapwing
Spur-winged Plover
Sanderling
Turnstone
Dunlin
Curlew Sandpiper
Little Stint
Wood Sandpiper
Green Sandpiper
Common Sandpiper
Redshank
Spotted Redshank
Greenshank
Marsh Sandpiper
Black-tailed Godwit
Curlew
Whimbrel

Snipe
Ruff
Black-headed Gull
Slender-billed Gull
Mediterranean Gull
Yellow-legged Gull
Little Gull
Little Tern
Sandwich Tern
Gull-billed Tern
Common Tern
Caspian Tern
Black Tern
White-winged Black Tern
Whiskered Tern
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Turtle Dove
Cuckoo
Great Spotted Cuckoo
Eagle Owl
Long-eared Owl
Tawny Owl*
Barn Owl
Little Owl
Scops Owl*
Nightjar*
Swift
Pallid Swift
Alpine Swift
Hoopoe
Kingfisher
Bee-eater
Roller
Black Woodpecker
Green Woodpecker
Grey-headed Woodpecker
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Syrian Woodpecker
Middle Spotted Woodpecker
White-backed Woodpecker
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker
Wryneck
Skylark
Crested Lark
Woodlark
Short-toed Lark
Calandra Lark
Shore Lark
Sand Martin
Crag Martin

Swallow
Red-rumped Swallow
House Martin
Tawny Pipit
Meadow Pipit
Tree Pipit
Water Pipit
White Wagtail
Blue-headed Wagtail
Grey-headed Wagtail
Black-headed Wagtail
Grey Wagtail
Dipper
Alpine Accentor
Robin
Nightingale
Redstart
Black Redstart
Wheatear
Isabelline Wheatear
Black-eared Wheatear
Whinchat
Stonechat
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Blackbird
Blue Rock Thrush
Rock Thrush
Blackcap
Whitethroat
Lesser Whitethroat
Eastern Orphean Warbler
Sardinian Warbler
Ruppell's Warbler
Eastern Subalpine Warbler
Sedge Warbler
Fan-tailed Warbler
Grasshopper Warbler*
Savi's Warbler*
Cetti's Warbler
Reed Warbler
Marsh Warbler
Great Reed Warbler
Olive-tree Warbler
Eastern Olivaceous Warbler
Willow Warbler
Wood Warbler
Eastern Bonelli's Warbler
Chiffchaff
Goldcrest
Firecrest

Wren
Spotted Flycatcher
Pied Flycatcher
Semi-collared Flycatcher
Collared Flycatcher
Great Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Crested Tit
Marsh Tit
Sombre Tit
Long-tailed Tit
Bearded Tit
Penduline Tit
Nuthatch
Rock Nuthatch
Treecreeper
Short-toed Treecreeper
Lesser Grey Shrike
Red-backed Shrike
Woodchat Shrike
Masked Shrike
Magpie
Jay
Jackdaw
Alpine Chough
Hooded Crow
Raven
Starling
Golden Oriole
House Sparrow
Spanish Sparrow
Tree Sparrow
Snowfinch
Chaffinch
Linnet
Goldfinch
Greenfinch
Siskin
Serin
Bullfinch
Hawfinch
Common Crossbill
Reed Bunting
Ortolan Bunting
Cretzschmar's Bunting
Cirl Bunting
Black-headed Bunting
Corn Bunting
Rock Bunting

Other Wildlife Seen

Ann and I certainly do not claim any great expertise in other areas of wildlife identification, not that we have that much with birds, but we do have an interest in insects and the Butterfly and Dragon and Damselfly lists were regularly updated. We did not keep accurate records of dates and places for either but both appear chronologically in these lists. The dragon and damsel list would be longer were it not for the presence of another, more unwelcome, insect in huge numbers in the wetland areas where they are mostly found. The huge variety of frogs, lizards, snakes, etc. found in Greece served to underline our ignorance in this area and we would certainly invest in an identification guide to Reptiles and Amphibians before any return visit. Similar sentiments can be attached to our knowledge of Mammals.

Butterflies

Greece is a wonderful country for butterflies, the best we have ever visited, hence the length of this list. To put it in perspective, Britain has around sixty permanently resident species. Had we stayed until October, as originally planned, we would surely have seen well over a hundred species. Eighty-nine species were recorded.

Brimstone
Cleopatra
Small White
Holly Blue
Swallowtail
Peacock
Orange Tip
Red Admiral
Nettle Tree Butterfly
Small Copper
Mountain Small White
Green Hairstreak
Large Tortoiseshell
Scarce Swallowtail
Eastern Dappled White
Camberwell Beauty
Painted Lady
Wall Brown
Large White
Small Heath
Clouded Yellow
Grecian Copper
Speckled Wood
Grizzled Skipper
Brown Argus
Gruner's Orange Tip
Southern Festoon
Mallow Skipper
Little Blue
Queen of Spain Fritillary
Green-veined White
Wood White
Sooty Copper
Eastern Baton Blue
Green-underside Blue

Glanville Fritillary
Common Blue
Southern White Admiral
Duke of Burgundy
Small Tortoiseshell
Meadow Brown
Balkan Marbled White
Blue-spot Hairstreak
Ilex Hairstreak
Southern Grayling
Black-veined White
Clouded Apollo
Large Wall Brown
Eastern Bath White
Lulworth Skipper
Berger's Clouded Yellow
Dingy Skipper
Olive Skipper
Turquoise Blue
Oberthur's Grizzled Skipper
Spotted Fritillary
Mazarine Blue
Orbed Red Underwing Skipper
Southern Comma
Large Skipper
Great Banded Grayling
Small Skipper
Comma
Adonis Blue
Sloe Hairstreak
Ripart's Anomalous Blue
Balkan Fritillary
Heath Fritillary
Purple-shot Copper
Marbled Fritillary
Essex Skipper
Pearly Heath
Niobe Fritillary
Knapweed Fritillary
Marbled White
Apollo
Silver-washed fritillary
Osiris Blue
Marbled Skipper
Scarce Copper
Great Sooty Satyr
Meleager's Blue
Eastern Wood White
Ottoman Brassy Ringlet
Woodland Ringlet
Lesser Spotted Fritillary

Russian Heath
Balkan Copper
Purple Hairstreak

Damselflies and Dragonflies

A somewhat pitiful eighteen species which merely scratches the surface of what can be seen in Greece. Blame the mosquitoes and other, conflicting, priorities.

Red-veined Darter
Small Blue-tailed Damselfly
Club-tailed Dragonfly
Lesser Emperor
Scarce Emerald Damselfly
Dark Spreadwing
Black-tailed Skimmer
Broad-bodied Chaser
Scarce Chaser
Common Darter
Small Pincertail
Hairy Dragonfly
Greek Goldenring
Variable Damselfly
Emperor
Beautiful Demoiselle
Norfolk Hawker
Scarlet Darter

Reptiles and Amphibians

Caspian Whip Snake
Nose-horned Viper

These were the only species identified though others were seen.

European Green Lizard was common and we saw several other lizard species.

Tortoises were common, especially in the east, but we lacked the knowledge to separate them into species.

Fire Salamanders were seen in Rodopi Forest and also on the slopes of the Taygetos mountains.

European Pond Terrapin was seen at several locations.

Frogs and Toads of several species were also seen.

Mammals

This is not a complete list as we were unable to identify everything we saw, especially the small mammals, but we did identify the following.

Rabbit
Brown Hare
Badger
Red Fox
Wild Boar
Red Squirrel (which in Greece are virtually black)
Coypu
Pine Martin
Eastern Hedgehog
Chamois
Roe Deer

Appendices

Hill-walking in Greece

Greece's hill-walking potential is largely untapped as there are very few hill-walkers on the mountains away from the east side of Olympus. We met only two other parties in thirty or forty days on the tops. Because of this Greece provides enormous potential for making your own discoveries as there are no specific hill-walking guides available, only a handful of guidebooks, such as by Lonely Planet, more concerned with multi-day treks through the mountains rather than single day walking routes up them. Pleasingly, Greece has hardly any mountains whose summits cannot be attained by competent, experienced hill-walkers who are prepared to do some scrambling and who are not put off by a general absence of paths other than in the lower valleys and woods. We were struck by how similar many of the Greek Mountains were to the those of the Scottish Highlands, but with absolutely no-one else about once the shepherds, sheep and dogs had been left behind. Parnassos reminded us of Beinn Eighe and Smolikas of Ben Macdhui for instance.

Obviously the Greek mountains are considerably higher than their Scottish counterparts in absolute height but once above the forests, which generally clothe the lower slopes up to a height of around 1,700 - 2,000 metres, the scale is actually quite similar. To get through the forests either requires a long uphill slog, which can make the ascent to the day's first top as much as five or six thousand feet, or the use of a vehicle and a brave driver to utilise one of the many unsurfaced vehicle tracks which network the hills and are continually used by the shepherds in their pick-ups. A 4X4 is an advantage here.

There are some issues to consider in planning a hill-walking holiday in Greece in addition to those normally faced in Britain.

a) The Greek mountains over 2,000 metres high are snowbound generally until May, which may also mean that some access roads, other than to ski-centres, are blocked in addition to most dirt tracks. Snow conditions on the hills vary. We managed to climb Olympus on May 18th and found the snow deep and soft. On Parnassus in late May the snow was much harder and the snow fields could only be negotiated with crampons, which we didn't carry, necessitating some detours.

b) Once the snow has melted the mountains rapidly become hot and dry as the underlying rock is nearly always limestone. In July and August, especially, the heat is intense even above 2,000 metres and the lack of water sources means that you need to carry your own. We carried a litre each and this was barely enough. Carrying more, of course, increases the rucksack weight which then becomes another factor to consider.

c) Reasonable quality maps for nearly all of the mountain areas are now available from Anavasi at the scale of 1:50,000 and these do show paths although some of these proved not to exist on the ground. Paths are generally marked by paint splashes on rocks and trees (sacrilege in Britain but strangely re-assuring abroad) but these fade and can easily be missed. In forests it is easy to get lost. Consult map and compass regularly if on a poorly marked trail.

d) Although the weather during the hill-walking 'season' is generally hot and dry, thunderstorms are common and these often come in at hill-top level and are then basically dangerous. We were caught out several times. The advice is to get down quickly if thunder is heard nearby and to monitor the situation carefully if heard distantly.

e) Greek shepherds usually have a number of sheepdogs with them on the hills to guard the sheep. These dogs do not herd sheep like the Border Collies in Britain, but follow them and guard them from predators. Many years ago, when wolves were much commoner than they are now, this may have been necessary but now the dogs are something of an anachronism. Sometimes the dogs are left with the sheep without supervision, though usually a shepherd is somewhere in the area. All of these dogs respond by barking if someone approaches the sheep and will attempt to see off the intruder, though the degree of ferocity varies. Generally it is good

advice to give such gatherings a wide berth although Ann and I were actually attacked by dogs on three occasions in the same area when well away from the sheep (see entry for July 6th). A Lonely Planet trekking guide which we looked at before travelling recounts an incident where a walker was seriously mauled by sheepdogs whilst on the hills. The Greek version of 'One Man and his Dog' must be interesting.

It is hoped that the foregoing does not put anybody off going hill-walking in Greece. Many of the high mountains are magnificent and the walking airy and exhilarating. At present there is no definitive list of peaks over 2,000 metres high of which I am aware - although surely someone will start poring over their maps sometime soon - and no guidebook to their ascent. In the meantime studying the maps and exploring on the ground gives a type of experience not available in Britain in the last hundred years. Even the most impossible looking peaks usually have a route, the challenge is to find it. Plaka, near Vardhousia, for instance, looks impossible from nearly ever angle yet I found a sneaky and complex route up, and the feeling whilst sitting on the top and contemplating the views of the amazing mountains surrounding it made all of the hassle and effort worthwhile.



Mitikas, highest peak of Mount Olympus



Plaka from the north-east

Campervanning in Greece

Ann and I have had a number of campervans over the last twenty years and use them for virtually all of our holidays at home and abroad. For us any other type of accommodation (other than a tent which we would rule out on the grounds of comfort!) would have been too expensive to allow us to go away for such a long time as on this occasion. We also love wild camping in the van (e.g. not using camp sites) both at home and abroad. The advantages are that you can choose where you stay, often in interesting surroundings with a beautiful view and handy for the following day's planned activity. It is also cheap. We try and tuck ourselves away from people where we cannot be seen from any houses.

In Greece wild camping is technically illegal but like many laws in Greece (e.g. wearing crash-helmets on motorcycles, not smoking in public places, etc.) the law does not seem to be enforced and, in any case, there are hardly any camp-sites away from the beaches and other tourist hot-spots. We found we were universally welcomed and people often waved to us on their way past.

There are three key things that are provided on camp-sites which when wild-camping you have to find for yourself. These are fresh water, places to dispose of litter and public toilets. In Greece water fountains are found in nearly every village and often by roadsides, and litter bins are everywhere (though often not used) but public toilets are very rare. You need to accept that

you will have to toilet in the countryside, burying the results and keeping away from water sources.

The reward, from a birding point of view, is that the days birding sometimes begins in bed waking to a chorus of song from Nightingales and Golden Orioles.

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