

GREECE 20 NOV – 10 DEC 14

The plan was to drive around mainland Greece, visiting a few of the archaeological sites and enjoying the sunshine, but primarily birdwatching

Page numbers up to 2 Dec 14 in this trip report refer to Birdwatching in Northern Greece site guide by Steve Mills (second edition) .

We arrived in Athens airport late on afternoon of 20 Nov, and walked across the road to the Sofitel Airport Hotel. In terms of value for money this was easily the worst hotel we stayed in, costing 133 euros and not including breakfast. That said, it was a very nice room and there were lots of facilities within the hotel, if you wanted to use them, but having been up since 4am UK time, all we wanted to do was sleep.

21 Nov 14 We collected the hire car at 9am (from Avis inside airport), an automatic Lancia Ypsilon 4-door, which was plenty big enough for the 2 of us, but which was a bit sluggish on hills. We headed North from the airport following the E75 for about 450kms, passing through 10 toll booths costing about 3 euros each, and staying in a hotel up a big hill and not far from Mount Olympus

22 Nov 14 I had an hour's walk around the woodland by the hotel, then we went to the tourist town of Litochoro and onwards up the road towards Mount Olympus (page 110). We stopped not far short of the snow line to look at some sheer cliffs above the road (The only place I saw Wallcreeper and Goshawk). After an hour we came down the mountain, rejoining the E75 and continuing North, passing through 2 more toll booths, then going around Thessaloniki onto E79 towards Serres. Before reaching Serres we turned L to Lithotopos at the South end of Lake Kerkini, then R to Chrysohorafa and to Hotel Limneo (page 155), our base for next 3 days. It was exceptional value for money, being 39 euros per night including a superb breakfast and Niko, the owner speaks excellent English and is very knowledgeable about the birds of Kerkini.

23 Nov 14 Spent all day driving clockwise around Lake Kerkini (page 47-59), enjoying the sunshine and the phenomenal number of birds. Also met and spent some time with 2 Bulgarian birders.

24 Nov 14 Spent all day driving anti-clockwise around Lake Kerkini and including a 2 mile detour into the mountains in NE corner of the lake at Vironia.

25 Nov 14 Left Hotel Limneo in morning, drove along E wall of lake Kerkini to Vironia, then set off East, stopping at Sidirocastro (page 63-64) for 2 hours (looked for Rock Nuthatch here but no joy – habitat didn't look that good) Later, we set off East past Serres and Drama, finding very nice studio flat-type hotel in Lidia, about 2kms from Phillipi, and costing 40 euros for a night including breakfast.

26 Nov 14 Spent morning around ruins of Phillipi (page 113) before continuing East, through Kavala to road North to vulture feeding site beyond Agios Kosmas (page 69-70).

Very cold wind at highest point and no dead animals on site, so no vultures about (only site I saw Golden Eagle).

Headed back down mountain to Nestos delta area (page 73-76), looking at Agiasma lagoon before finding hotel on seafront at Keramoti 45 euros including breakfast.

27 Nov 14 Drove around seafront and beach at Keramoti before going to Nestos Gorge close to Toxotes (page 70) for Rock Nuthatch (successfully). A pair were on the first proper rock face on roadside about 1 mile North of Toxotes turning, a small quarry area with old rusty abandoned mining equipment in it. Continuing East, we stopped briefly at church by Lake Vistonada, (page 79) then onto Alexandropoli where we wandered along the seafront for an hour. We continued East to Evros delta (page 89-97) spending 3-4 hours around tracks before going to the 4 hotels in a cluster (page 95). All 4 were shut so we had to go back to Alexandropoli for hotel 52 euros including breakfast.

28 Nov 14 Drove to Dadia forest (page 105-106), spending all morning walking to the vulture feeding site and back. There were around 60 vultures there so worthwhile, but it was rather cold in this the extreme NE corner of Greece, close to Turkey so we made the decision to head West, aiming for the West coast of Greece and the sunshine. We hardly saw any of the Evros delta, but heavy rain and flooding was reported in this corner of Greece over the next few days so we probably made the right decision. We drove West for 4 hours finding a hotel at Asprovaita which was closed, but the owner opened it for us 40 euros no breakfast.

29 Nov 14 We continued West, stopping several times by Lake Volvi (page 46) before driving round Thessaloniki and continuing West on E86 to Edessa. We stopped here for 2 hours, viewing the spectacular cliff and waterfall, then stopped by Agras wetland for a short while and continued on to beautiful mountain village of Nymphao, about 4000 ft up. Hotel 45 euros including breakfast.

30 Nov 14 Visited Brown bear sanctuary of Arcturos before leaving the village of Nymphao and drove down the mountain to Wolf sanctuary near next village. Then headed West along mountain roads almost to Kastoria before heading South on A29 then West on A2, all the way to Igoumenitsa in the extreme NW corner of Greece. This journey took us 3 hours, through 2 toll booths and about 40 short tunnels, but the equivalent journey on the old roads would have been unthinkable. Found hotel on seafront in Igoumenitsa 45 euros including breakfast.

1 Dec 14 Spent most of the day in the Kalamas area (page 15-18) around Kestrini and Sagiada, within 3 miles of Albania. Drove along many rough tracks but lots of marsh birds to be seen. Later headed South past Igoumenitsa, stopping to look over Acheron delta (page 111), which looked to be an excellent area, but couldn't find a hotel open in nearby village of Ammoudia. Continued South finding hotel near Kastrosykia which wasn't open but owner let us have a room anyway 25 euros no breakfast no hot water!! However, for the next week, as we headed South along Greece's West coast, the daytime temperature frequently reached 20-23 C.

2 Dec 14 Left hotel at first light and had an hour around archaeological site of Nikopolis (page 25) – very impressive. Continued South past Amvrakikos gulf (page 19-20), finding church on hill just past Vigla to use as a viewing point over the vast expanse of marshes and water, and shelter from rain (only place I saw Osprey) Left here about 11am, stopping for a while beside Amyrakia then continued on to Mesolongi, where we found hotel Theoxenia overlooking Kleisova lagoon 56 euros including superb breakfast. Despite being the only place we had any trouble with mosquitoes, I would recommend this hotel.

3 Dec 14 Had a fairly relaxing day, spending most of the day around the lagoon and the town of Mesolongi. Arguably the best area of water I looked at on this holiday after Lake Kerkini (only place I saw Bittern, Moustached Warbler, Bearded and Penduline Tits, Caspian and Whiskered Terns and Greater Sand Plover)
From the front door of the hotel, either bear right along a straight road across the lagoon for 1 mile to a beach and bars, or bear left, then keep taking first right following an embankment along the other side of lagoon for about 2 miles to dead end. Also the place where we saw most shooters, though I never saw a dead bird or a bird being shot at anywhere during the holiday. I did find an empty cartridge box here with a picture of a Mallard and a Turtle Dove on it. Stayed in same hotel as previous night.

4 Dec 14 Left Mesolongi about 9am and headed SE crossing new toll bridge to Patra 13.20 euros before stopping for about 3 hrs at Kotychi lagoon, then finding hotel at Pyrgos 42 euros including breakfast.

5 Dec 14 Left hotel and continued South to Gialova lagoon, staying there for 2 hours before going onto Pylos and then heading East to hotel on seafront in Kalamata 50 euros including breakfast.

6 Dec 14 Left hotel and headed East into mountainous area, spending most of day driving windy roads through mountains to Sparta and onto more coastline. Found hotel near Kato Dollana 30 euros no breakfast.

7 Dec 14 In morning went to Nea Kios to look at remains of marshy coastline (only place I saw Armenian Gull), but entire area spoiled by 2 factories belching out massive clouds of white/orange smoke into bay, which obscured large parts of the scenery at times . Continued to Nafplio, walking around port for an hour, then headed East to Epidavros to look at well-preserved amphitheatre in forest. Then continued to Corinth canal, doing tourist thing for a while and later headed East on E94 through 2 toll booths and accidentally driving through centre of Athens before reaching coastal town of Rafina. Hotel on seafront 56 euros including superb breakfast.

8 Dec 14 Did not drive anywhere today – had a relaxing stroll around Rafina and stayed in same hotel on seafront.

9 Dec 14 Left hotel 8 am to take hire car back to Athens airport – took about 1 hour from Rafina – roads busy but moving.

Total mileage (kilometreage?) for 18 days was 3518 kms, equivalent to about 2200 miles. Dropped off suitcases at Sofitel airport hotel, then got X95 bus from airport to Syntagma Square in centre of Athens. Cost 10 euros per person return and takes about 1 hour to do the journey. Walked about in Athens for about 5 hours, visiting gardens and the Acropolis. Phenomenal views over city from latter although much scaffolding and cranes doing repair work. Bus back to airport in late afternoon. Sofitel airport Hotel 163 euros no breakfast, but no choice of hotel as we had to be in airport next morning at 5am for 6.30am flight to Paris then on to Newcastle.

Driving in Greece is quite straight forward. There are some roads upgraded to the equivalent of motorways, but with toll booths on them, principally around Athens. Most of the rest of the roads are in very variable condition; some of the potholes were spectacular and would undoubtedly damage the car and quite a few roads suddenly degenerated to rough tracks. Overall, there is not much traffic outside of the towns and cities, so it is not too difficult to birdwatch and drive at the same time.

Road markings seem to be largely ignored, especially double white lines in the middle of the road, and zebra crossings. If you stepped out onto a zebra crossing in Greece you would be flattened!! The Greek equivalent of our hard shoulder is mainly used for slower vehicles to drive along to allow faster cars to overtake – stopping in one is risky.

Three times we saw the police with hand-held speed guns, but cars coming the other way were flashing so there was some warning.

At this time of year a significant number of hotels are closed, so it did occasionally take us a little while to find one open, but even those that opened a room for us despite being closed were clean. Breakfast was not always available, but where it was the quality was always adequate to superb, and price was not always a guide to quality.

In general, the Greeks seem to have no interest in the environment. Most roadside pull-offs and lay-bys (many with spectacular views) are used as rubbish dumps, principally builders rubble and plastic bottles, even in the mountains and miles away from towns or villages. There are also many, many building projects, such as houses and apartment blocks, that are in various degrees of construction, but have been abandoned, as well as many industrial premises that have been in use but are now derelict. The Black Redstart must be increasing in numbers.

SIGNIFICANT SPECIES SEEN

I am old-school, so the order follows that which I have used most of my life, not the recent order, which changes monthly.

| | |
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| BLACK-THROATED DIVER | 2 Alexandroupoli harbour 27 Nov |
| BLACK-NECKED GREBE | 4-8 Lake Kerkini 23 – 25 Nov |
| SHAG | up to 7 Alexandroupoli harbour 27 + 28 Nov |
| PYGMY CORMORANT | around 500 Lake Kerkini 23 + 24 Nov, c25 Lake Vistonada 27 Nov c15 Amvrakikos Gulf 2 Dec |
| WHITE PELICAN | at least 1 juvenile Lake Kerkini 23 Nov |
| DALMATIAN PELICAN | c200 Lake Kerkini 23 + 24 Nov, c90 Lake Vistonada 27 Nov, c30 Lake Volvi 29 Nov, c100 Amvrakikos Gulf 2 Dec |

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| BITTERN | 1 Kleisova Lagoon 3 Dec |
| CATTLE EGRET | 8 N end Lake Kerkini 23 Nov, 27 Kestrini 1 Dec, c40 Kotychi Lagoon 4 Dec |
| BLACK STORK | 1 in flight NE corner of Lake Kerkini 24 Nov |
| WHITE STORK | 2 following tractor w side Lake Kerkini 24 Nov |
| BEWICK'S SWAN | 11 NE corner Lake Kerkini 24 Nov |
| WHOOPEE SWAN | up to 27 NE corner Lake Kerkini 23 + 24 Nov |
| MUTE SWAN | up to 11 NE corner Lake Kerkini 23 + 24 Nov, 2 Lake Volvi 29 Nov, 4 Sagiada 1 Dec and 1 nr Kato Dollana 6 Dec |
| WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE | c120 N edge of Lake Kerkini 23 Nov |
| LESSER WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE | 49-50 NE corner Lake Kerkini 24 + 25 Nov |
| PINTAIL | 1 Lake Kerkini 23 + 24 Nov, 14 Kotychi Lagoon 4 Dec, 8 Gialova Lagoon 5 Dec |
| FERRUGINOUS DUCK | 23 Acheron Delta 1 Dec and c240 Amvrakikos Gulf 2 Dec |
| BLACK KITE | 1 nr Keramoti 26 Nov, 1 Dadia Forest 28 Nov, 1 Lake Volvi 29 Nov |
| WHITE-TAILED EAGLE | an adult N edge Lake Kerkini 25 Nov and a juvenile Dadia Forest Vulture feeding site 29 Nov |
| GRIFFON VULTURE | at least 23 Dadia Forest feeding site 28 Nov |
| BLACK VULTURE | at least 34 Dadia Forest feeding site 28 Nov |
| HEN HARRIER | 2 Lake Kerkini 23 Nov, 1 Keramoti 26 Nov, 2 Lake Vistonada 27 Nov |
| GOSHAWK | 1 Lake Volvi 29 Nov, 1 Kleisova Lagoon 3 Dec |
| LONG-LEGGED BUZZARD | 1 near summit of Mount Olympus 22 Nov |
| SPOTTED EAGLE | at least 2 just S of Kitochoro 22 Nov |
| GOLDEN EAGLE | 3-5 Lake Kerkini 24+ 25 Nov, 1 Agiasma Lagoon 26 Nov, 1 Sagiada 1 Dec and 4 Amvrakikos Gulf 2 Dec |
| OSPREY | 2 over disused vulture feeding site at Agios Kosmas 26 Nov |
| MERLIN | 1 Amvrakikos Gulf 2 Dec |
| PEREGRINE | 1 nr Cato Dollana 6 Dec |
| OYSTERCATCHER | 2 Sagiada 1 Dec |
| AVOCET | 6 Keramoti 27 Nov, 1 Kotychi Lagoon 4 Dec, 1 Nea Kios 7 Dec |
| LITTLE RINGED PLOVER | c20-30 Lake Kerkini 23-25 Nov, c25 Kleisova Lagoon 3-4 Dec |
| RINGED PLOVER | 3 on W shoreline of Lake Kerkini on 23 Nov |
| KENTISH PLOVER | 4 Kleisova Lagoon 3 Dec and 1 Nea Kios 7 Dec |
| GREATER SAND PLOVER | 9 Sagiada 1 Dec, c400 Kleisova Lagoon 3 Dec, 2 Nea Kios 7 Dec |
| GOLDEN PLOVER | 2 Kleisova Lagoon 3 Dec |
| LITTLE STINT | C15 Lake Kerkini 25 Nov, 2 Sagiada 1 Dec, c25 Nea Kios 7 Dec |
| SNIPE | c350 Kleisova Lagoon 3 Dec |
| SPOTTED REDSHANK | 9 NE corner Lake Kerkini 25 Nov, 1 Amvrakikos Gulf 2 Dec, 3 Kleisova Lagoon 3 Dec |
| GREENSHANK | 2 Lake Kerkini 25 Nov, 1 Lake Vistonada 27 Nov, 1 Sagiada 1 Dec |
| GREEN SANDPIPER | 4 Lake Vistonada 27 Nov, 2 Kestrini 1 Dec, 1 Amvrakikos Gulf 2 Dec 1 Kleisova Lagoon |
| COMMON SANDPIPER | 2-4 Lake Kerkini 23 + 24 Nov, 1 Agiasma Lagoon 26 Nov, 1 Amvrakikos Gulf 2 Dec |
| MEDITERRANEAN GULL | 1-2 seen Lake Kerkini 23 Nov, Sagiada 1 Dec, Kleisova Lagoon 4 Dec And Kotychi Lagoon 4 Dec |
| SLENDER-BILLED GULL | 3 nr Volos 21 Nov, 2 Sagiada 1 Dec, 8 Kalamata 5 Dec, 1 Nafplio 7 Dec and 3 Rafina 8 Dec |
| COMMON GULL | 2 Sagiada 1 Dec, c120 Kleisova Lagoon 3-4 Dec, 2 Nea Kios 7 Dec |
| ARMENIAN GULL | 1 adult Lake Kerkini 25 Nov |
| CASPIAN TERN | 1 adult Nea Kios 7 Dec |
| WHISKERED TERN | 3 Kleisova Lagoon 3-4 Dec |
| RING-NECKED PARAKEET | 2 Kleisova Lagoon 4 Dec |
| MONK PARAKEET | c15 Athens centre 9 Dec |
| EAGLE OWL | c20 Athens centre 9 Dec |
| | 1 E wall Lake Kerkini 24 Nov |

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| GREY-HEADED WOODPECKER | 1 on roadside Kitochoro to Mount Olympus |
| GREEN WOODPECKER | 2 Lake Kerkini 24 Nov and 1 Dadia Forest 28 Nov |
| SYRIAN WOODPECKER | at least 2 around Chrisohorafa 23 + 24 Nov, 3 Phillipi 26 Nov 1 Asproviata 29 Nov |
| LESSER SPOTTED WOODPECKER | 1 heard by wolf sanctuary Nymphao 30 Nov |
| BLACK WOODPECKER | 1 by hotel Old Skotina 21 + 22 Nov |
| CRESTED LARK | 3 by Lake Kerkini 23 Nov, 6 Lake Vistonadav 27 Nov, 3 Lake Volvi 29 Nov |
| CRAG MARTIN | 1 Sidirocastro 25 Nov, 1 Toxotes 27 Nov, c40 on roadside just S Of Igoumenitsa 1 Dec and 5 nr Sparta 6 Dec |
| BLUE-HEADED WAGTAIL | at least 7 on beach by Kotychi Lagoon on 4 Dec |
| EASTERN YELLOW WAGTAIL | 1 male on beach by Kotychi Lagoon 4 Dec |
| DIPPER | 1 below bridge just N of Igoumenitsa 1 Dec |
| BLUE ROCK THRUSH | 1 ruins at Phillipi 26 Nov, 3 on town walls Nafplio 7 Dec |
| REDWING | 6 Lake Kerkini on 24 Nov |
| FIELDFARE | 1 Lake Kerkini 24 + 25 Nov |
| FAN-TAILED WARBLER | 2 Kotychi Lagoon 4 Dec and 2 Gialova Lagoon 5 Dec |
| MOUSTACHED WARBLER | 1 Kleisova Lagoon 4 Dec |
| SPECTACLED WARBLER | 1 on hillside just NE of Kalamata 6 Dec |
| FIRECREST | 1 on W side Lake Kerkini 23 Nov, 2 Epidavros 7 Dec |
| BEARDED TIT | 3 Kleisova Lagoon 3 Dec |
| PENDULINE TIT | 1 heard along E wall of Lake Kerkini 25 Nov and 2 seen Kleisova Lagoon 3 Dec |
| MARSH TIT | 2 Old Skotina 22 Nov, 1 Lake Kerkini 24 Nov, 3 Nymphao 30 Nov |
| SOMBRE TIT | 1 on hillside N of Vironia, Lake Kerkini 24 Nov and 2 on hillside Above ruins of Phillipi 26 Nov |
| NUTHATCH | 1 Old Skotina 22 Nov, 2 Nymphao 30 Nov, 1 Athens centre 9 Dec |
| ROCK NUTHATCH | 2 Toxotes 27 Nov, 3 Nymphao 30 Nov and 1 E of Sparta 6 Dec |
| WALLCREEPER | 1 lower slopes of Mount Olympus 22 Nov |
| SHORT-TOED TREECREEPER | 1 Dadia Forest 28 Nov |
| SPANISH SPARROW | c40 N end Lake Kerkini 23 Nov, c10 E side Lake Kerkini 24 Nov And 4 Gialova Lagoon 5 Dec |
| BRAMBLING | 2 Old Skotina 22 Nov, 1-2 Lake Kerkini 23-25 Nov, 1 Nymphao 30 Nov |
| CROSSBILL | 2 Dadia Forest 28 Nov and 3 Epidavros 7 Dec |
| YELLOWHAMMER | 1 Lake Kerkini 23 Nov, 2 Nymphao 30 Nov |

THE FOLLOWING SPECIES WERE SEEN ON 6 OR MORE DATES DURING HOLIDAY.

GREAT CRESTED GREBE
LITTLE GREBE
CORMORANT
GREAT WHITE EGRET
LITTLE EGRET
GREY HERON
SPOONBILL
FLAMINGO
SHELDUCK
WIGEON
GADWALL
TEAL
MALLARD
SHOVELER

STOCK DOVE
GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER
KINGFISHER
SKYLARK
WOODLARK
GREY WAGTAIL
WHITE WAGTAIL
WATER PIPIT
STONECHAT
BLACK REDSTART
CETTI'S WARBLER
CHIFFCHAFF
BLACKCAP
SARDINIAN WARBLER

POCHARD
TUFTED DUCK
MARSH HARRIER
BUZZARD
SPARROWHAWK
WATER RAIL
COOT
LAPWING
GREY PLOVER
CURLEW
SANDERLING
DUNLIN
REDSHANK
YELLOW-LEGGED GULL
BLACK-HEADED GULL
SANDWICH TERN

MISTLE THRUSH
GOLDCREST
BLUE TIT
GREAT TIT
COAL TIT
LONG-TAILED TIT
JACKDAW
ROOK
HOODED CROW
RAVEN
JAY
LINNET
SISKIN
SERIN
TREE SPARROW
HOUSE SPARROW
BULLFINCH
HAWFINCH
REED BUNTING
CIRL BUNTING
CORN BUNTING

MARTIN BLICK FEB 2015