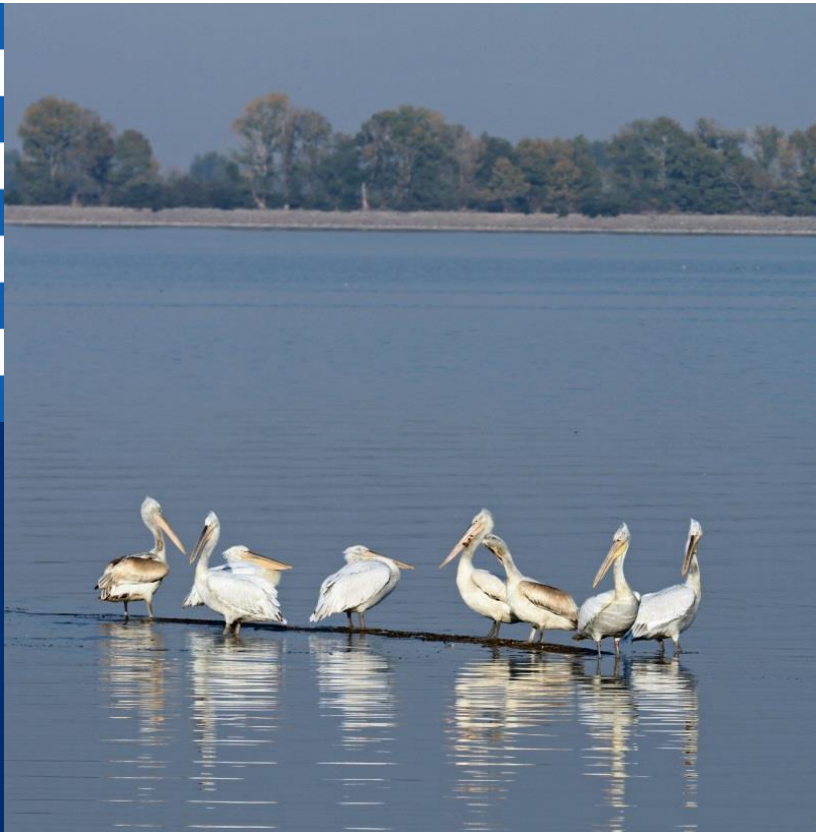


MACEDONIA

27th - 28th October 2013



www.bargainbirdingclub.com



“Value for money bird watching trips for birders on a budget”

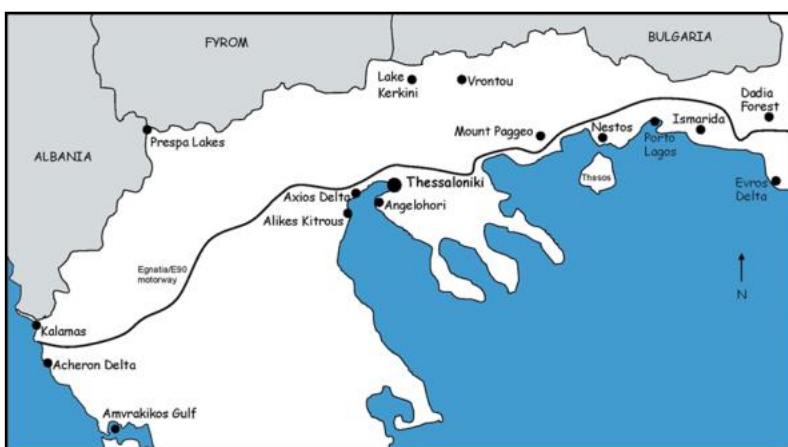
Introduction:

Macedonia is a geographical and historical region of Greece in the southern Balkans (not to be confused with the Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia just over the border).

Macedonia is the largest and second most populous Greek region and alongside Thrace, Thessaly and Epirus, is collectively referred to as 'Northern Greece' (hence the title of the book by Steve Mills 'Birding in Northern Greece', which covers this area in great detail.)

The region incorporates most of the territories of ancient Macedon, a kingdom ruled by the Argaeids whose most celebrated members were Alexander the Great and his father Philip II.

We concentrated our birding on Lake Kerkini in the north of the region near the Bulgarian border, and Angelohori Lagoon, just south of Thessaloniki.



Itinerary:

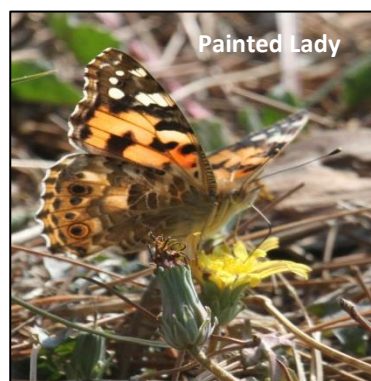
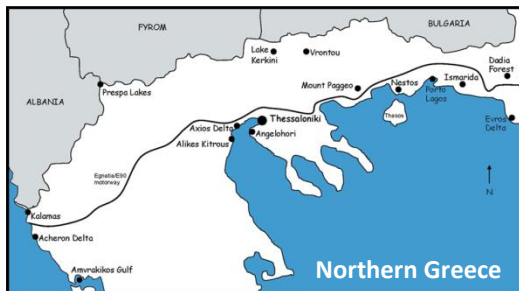
- | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Sunday 27 th October 2013 | Fly London Gatwick to Thessaloniki with easyJet
Pick up hire car and self-bird Angelohori Lagoon and salt pans
o/n Holiday Inn, Thessaloniki |
| Mon. 28 th Oct. 2013: | Drive to Kerkini to meet guide
Guided birding around Lake Kerkini
o/n Holiday Inn, Thessaloniki |
| Tues. 29 th Oct. 2013: | Drive to Kerkini to meet guide
Guided birding in foothills of Kerkini (Belles) Mountains
o/n Holiday Inn, Thessaloniki |
| Wed. 30 th Oct. 2013: | Early morning repeat visit to Angelohori Lagoon
Drop off hire car
Fly Thessaloniki to London Gatwick with easyJet |

“Value for money bird watching trips for birders on a budget”

Sunday 27th October 2013

An early (06.55hrs) Easyjet flight from Gatwick saw us land at Thessaloniki at 12.10pm local time. The flight itself was around 3 hours and Greece is 2 hours ahead of the UK. After being met by the Europcar agent in the airport arrivals hall, I collected my trusty steed for the next 4 days ... a Nissan Note. I also hired a satnav as I forgot to check that the one I'd brought with me from the UK only covered Western Europe – doh!

A 30 minute drive en-route to Angelohori lagoon bagged **Hooded Crow** and **Feral Pigeon**. The lagoon itself is a site described in the excellent book 'Birdwatching in Northern Greece' by Steve Mills. First stop was the small harbour where **Yellow-legged Gulls** and **Cormorants** were loitering with intent waiting for scraps to be thrown to them as fishermen tended their nets. Opposite the harbour was a small stand of pine trees which produced **Great Tit**, **Magpie**, **Crested Lark** and a pair of **Black Redstart** as well as many butterflies including **Painted Lady**, **Peacock**, and **Clouded Yellow**.



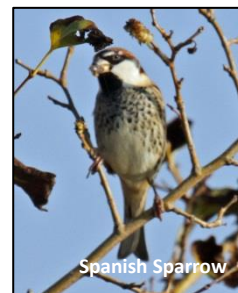
“Value for money bird watching trips for birders on a budget”

I followed the directions in Steve Mills' book, entering the saltworks through the yellow gate and then took the track with the Aegean Sea on my right and the salt pans on my left.

The salt pans weren't thronging with birds but I did add **Greater Flamingo**, **Little Egret**, **Grey Plover**, **Marsh Sandpiper** and **White Wagtail** to my trip list.

The rough track soon turned to pure sand and my Nissan Note, with its front-wheel drive, soon got stuck. After 10 mins of digging to free the wheels and placing random bits of drift wood to get some grip, I managed to get the car free and facing the direction I came. I followed a firmer track through the middle of the saltworks to get good views of **Dunlin**. The track ended at a small olive plantation which yielded **Spanish Sparrow**, **Chaffinch**, Black Redstart, **Robin** and **Siskin**.

Dragonflies of various species were in abundance, patrolling up and down the drainage channels.



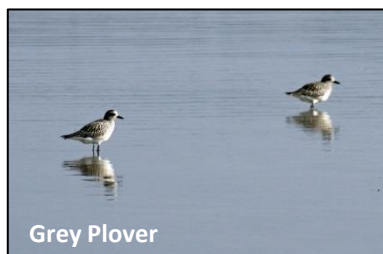
The next part of my 'plan' was to exit the saltworks by the yellow entrance gate and then drive round to the other side of the lagoon. However ... the yellow gate was now closed and secured with a hefty padlock (you never mentioned that in your book Mr Mills!). Lesser people would have panicked at this stage. Locked in a saltworks on a Sunday with the distinct possibility that I would be spending my first night in Greece, sleeping in my car, waiting red-faced for the saltworkers to open the gate in the morning. But not me .. I would be far too embarrassed to explain my unfortunate mishap to a complete stranger. There must be another way out I presumed, so I contemplated what Jeremy Clarkson of 'Top Gear' fame would do in this situation?

The only other way out of the saltworks was back along the sandy track that I'd previously got stuck on. So with no other viable option, I revved the Nissan up to the max 8000rpm, released the handbrake and went for it! 500m of slipping and sliding, bumping and grinding, holding on to the steering wheel for dear life got me through the sand and back onto terra firma ... and I felt so proud! Mid-rally there was an overhead flypast of six Greater Flamingos with outstretched necks and legs but I wasn't stopping to take photos. The sandy track quickly became tarmac and the drama soon passed. Extreme birding in a Nissan Note is the story I now tell!

The tarmac road took me back to the civilisation of Angelohori village and en-route I added **Stonechat**, **Starling**, **Meadow Pipit** and **Collared Dove** to my trip list. I then re-programmed the satnav for the Holiday Inn at Thessaloniki which was my base for the next 3 nights.

Arriving at dusk, I saw a flock of **Ring-necked Parakeets** flying above the main shopping street in the city centre.

A quick bath, change, dinner then back up in my room to write up today's notes before crashing out at 10pm.

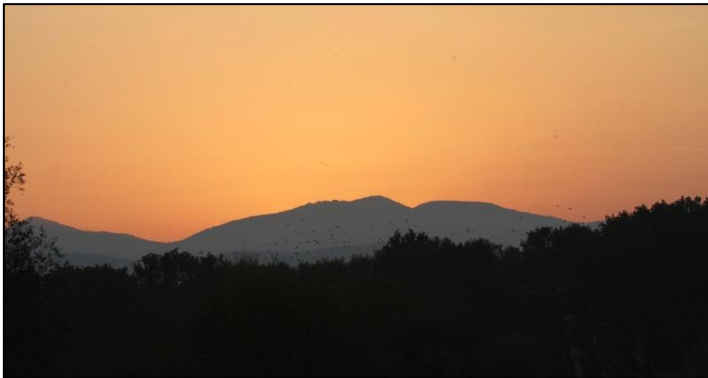


"Value for money bird watching trips for birders on a budget"

Monday 28th October 2013

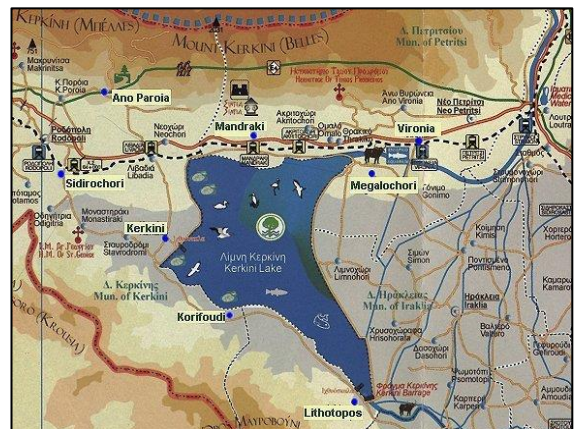
I left the hotel in Thessaloniki at 5.30am to the sound of **Jackdaws** calling before sunrise, and drove 90 minutes to Kerkini village arriving 1 hour before my pre-arranged 8am rendezvous with George, my guide for the next 2-days. Whilst sat in the car in the sleepy village square waiting for George, it was quite nice to absorb the sights, sounds and smells of the village waking up to the start of a new day. Dogs barked, **House Sparrows** chirped and the church bell chimed. Wood-burning stoves filled the air with their characteristic smokey aroma and the villagers themselves stirred. Collared Doves gathered in the square while Hooded Crows and **Wood Pigeons** gathered in the fields. Remnants of White Stork nests lay abandoned on the platforms provided by Lake Kerkini National Park Authority.

George arrived bang on time. He is a Greek-Cypriot forestry graduate, now living in Kerkini, and combines voluntary work for the National Park with wildlife guiding. His speciality is birds and mammals and he is a genuinely nice guy. The photos below of Lake Kerkini at sunrise show why he has chosen to call this place home.



Lake Kerkini is an artificial reservoir created in 1932 on what was previously an extensive, malaria infested marshland. It is now the premier birding site in Greece as it is situated along the migratory flyway for birds en-route to/from the Aegean Sea, the Balkans, the Black Sea and the Hungarian steppes.

Lake Kerkini is also a major over wintering site for the internationally threatened Dalmatian Pelican and Pygmy Cormorant. The land around the lake attracts winter birds of prey such as Greater Spotted Eagle and White-tailed Eagle. The deciduous woods in the foothills of the Kerkini (Belles) mountains support 8 species of woodpecker (Lesser-spotted, Middle-spotted, Great-Spotted, Black, Green, White-backed, Grey-headed and Syrian).



“Value for money bird watching trips for birders on a budget”



Dalmatian Pelican



Dalmatian Pelican



Dalmatian Pelican



Dalmatian Pelican



Greater Flamingo



Lake Kerkini at sunrise



Lake Kerkini at sunset

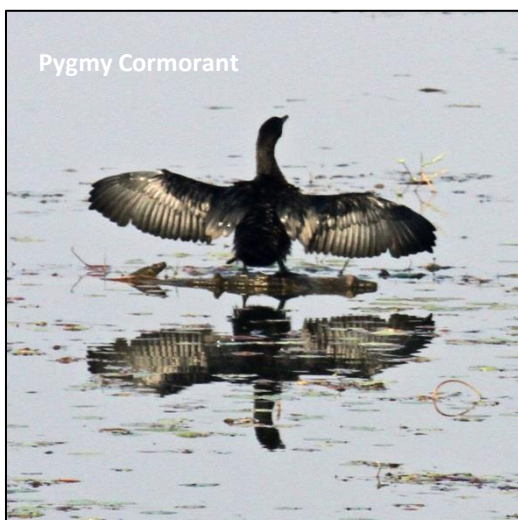
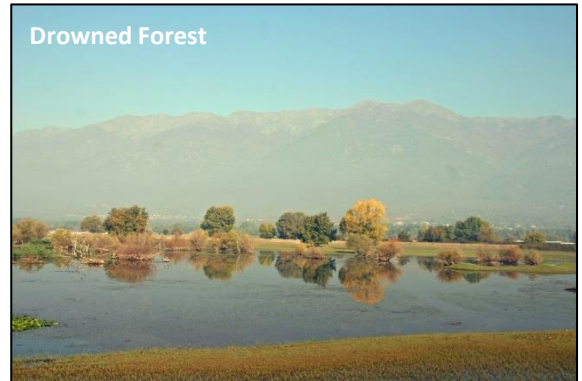
The sun quickly burnt off the early morning fog and boosted the temperatures from a chilly 6°C at 7am to a very pleasant 25°C by 10am.

From Kerkini village we drove around the top of the lake to Vironia and soon picked up a track after the railway line. This track followed the eastern shore of the River Strimonas past the 'Drowned Forest' which has an impressive colony of mixed cormorants, egrets and herons.

Here we saw **Grey Heron**, **Great White Egret**, Little Egret, **Pygmy Cormorant** (see photos below) Cormorant, **Teal**, **Wigeon**, **Pochard**, **Gadwall**, **Mallard**, **Mute Swan**, **Coot**, **Moorhen** and **Little Grebe** all at the first watch point.

Driving a little further south we soon added **Dalmatian Pelican**, **Spoonbill**, **Black Stork**, **Snipe**, White Wagtail, **Grey Wagtail**, **Kingfisher**, Jay, **Syrian Woodpecker**, **Long-tailed Tit**, **Goldfinch**, **Cetti's Warbler**, **Girl Bunting**, **Corn Bunting**, **Water Pipit**, **Green Sandpiper** and **Black-headed Gull**.

The view across the 'Drowned Forest' with the Kerkini mountains in the background was truly stunning, made even more memorable by the sound of a Greek Orthodox priest calling his followers to prayer high on a distant hill.

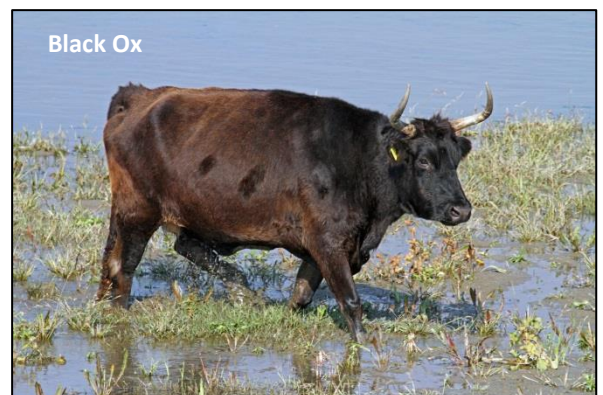
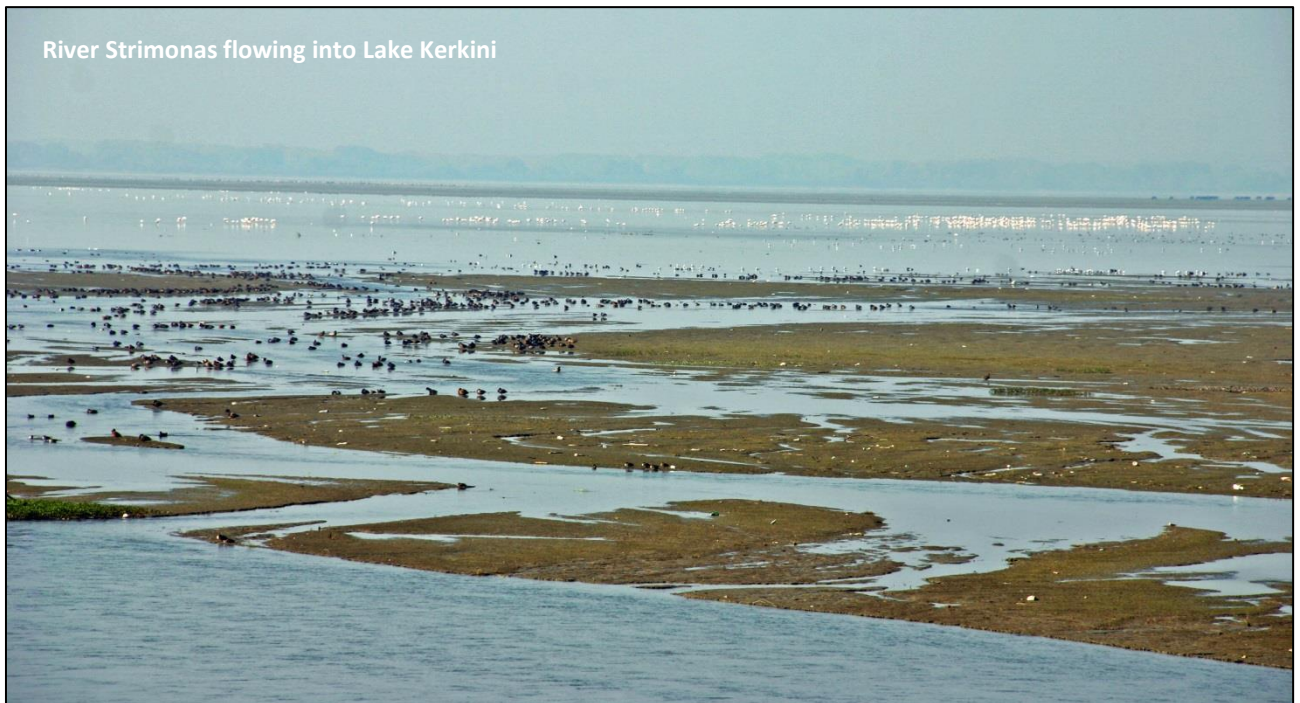


“Value for money bird watching trips for birders on a budget”

Continuing south, down the east-side of the river, the raptors began to show and we soon saw **Sparrowhawk**, **Merlin**, **Common Buzzard**, **Peregrine**, **Great Spotted Eagle** and **White-tailed Eagle**. The eagles circled before resting on fallen tree trunks, scanning the savannah-like habitat for suitable prey.



As we approached the point where the River Strimonas flows into Lake Kerkini itself, we observed **Lesser White-fronted Geese**, Greater Flamingo, **Common Crane**, **Shoveler**, **Shelduck**, **Pintail**, **Lapwing**, **Avocet**, **Redshank** and Marsh Sandpiper. A **Green Lizard**, **Red-Admiral** butterfly and a huge black male **Black Ox** wading powerfully across the river, provided brief distractions from the wonderful variety of birds at this amazing site.



“Value for money bird watching trips for birders on a budget”

We re-traced our route back to Vironia for a brief coffee and sandwich stop before moving on to an old quarry nearby to look for Eagle Owl, Sombre Tit and Rock Nuthatch ... but we were unlucky on all 3 counts. We did however see a pair of Black Redstarts, lots of Jays and we also heard a distant **Raven** cawing.

Back in the car we drove south to Kerkini Dam and en-route saw an injured **Hermann's Tortoise** (which we moved to the safety of the roadside vegetation) and 3 road-kill snakes (**Grass Snake**, **Caspian Whip Snake** and **Dice Snake**).



Below the dam itself, we took the track down the western side of the river which held large numbers of Pygmy Cormorant, Grey Heron, Great White Egret and Pochard.

We retraced our route back to the dam and then followed the main road north along the western-side of the lake, back towards Kerkini village. We stopped briefly to observe Greater Flamingos and Dalmation Pelicans, the latter resting on some rocky islets surveying the lake..

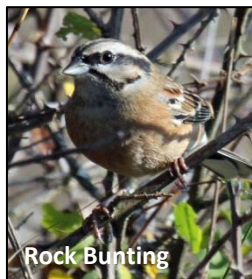
Back on the road towards Kerkini, we caught a brief glimpse of a **Wild Cat** – or rather a brief glimpse of the backside and short, fluffy tail of a Wild Cat! We got out of the car hoping for a better look but the cat had disappeared, leaving only its footprints in the sandy shore of the lake. Further north we stopped to scope the area known as Korifoudi Marshes which produced **Mistle Thrush** and **Great Crested Grebe** as well as Pochard, Teal, Wigeon, Grey Heron, Water Pipit and Green Sandpiper. We arrived back in Kerkini at dusk (5.30pm) and finished with a **Little Owl** on a tiled roof.



“Value for money bird watching trips for birders on a budget”

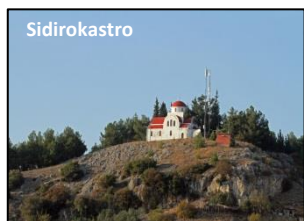
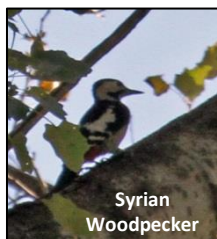
Tuesday 29th October 2013

I left the hotel in Thessaloniki at 5.30am again and drove the route back to Kerkini village to meet George at 7am. First stop this morning was George's 'Magic Tree' – a tree overlooking an old earth extraction site that George told me was a favourite haunt of Sombre Tit, Syrian Woodpecker and on one occasion Wryneck! During the 3 hours of intense staring at every leaf and every branch on this 'Magic Tree' all it revealed was **Chiffchaff**, Robin, **Blue Tit**, Great Tit, Long-tailed Tit, Jay and **Blackbird**! In the distance a Sparrowhawk sparred with a **Common Kestrel**. As we were about to leave, as is so often the case with birding, our attention was caught by Cirl Bunting, **Rock Bunting** and **Hawfinch** in quick succession – not in the 'Magic Tree' but in the smaller bushes in the quarry bottom.



At 11am we headed off to a deciduous woodland in the foothills of the Kerkini Mountains, close to the border with Bulgaria. En-route we picked up Effie (George's girlfriend) as an extra pair of eyes as we were on a mission to spot as many as possible of the 8 species of woodpecker that have been recorded here. After 3 hours of searching the canopies of the willow, poplar and hornbeam trees, our only conquest was **Green Woodpecker**, Syrian Woodpecker and **Great Spotted Woodpecker**. We did hear the kazoo-like call of the **Black Woodpecker** but failed to lock our bins on it. **Nuthatch**, **Short-toed Treecreeper**, **Wren** and **Marsh Tit** added to the trip list but didn't compensate for the disappointment of missing Lesser, Middle, Grey-headed, White-backed and Black Woodpeckers or Sombre Tit.

At 2.30pm we drove to the town of SidiroKastro. Here we did see **Rock Nuthatch**, **Blue Rock Thrush**, **Crag Martin**, Little Owl and **Tree Sparrow** on or close to a sheer cliff-face overlooking the town.



As dusk approached, our last stop was to a raised wooden observation hide near Megalohori. Here we watched the sun setting over Lake Kerkini as the shepherds and their dogs guided their sheep and goats to the sanctuary of their overnight pens, safe from the Golden Jackals and Wolves which are both present in this area. When the mosquitos got the better of us, we returned to Kerkini village, bid our fond farewells and I returned to Thessaloniki.

“Value for money bird watching trips for birders on a budget”

Wednesday 30th October 2013

Dense fog prevented my planned early morning repeat visit to Angelohori Lagoon, so I dropped the hire car off early and spent 3 hours in the airport sorting through hundreds of photos before my flight back to Gatwick. In summary, **86 species seen** and **3 species heard** in 3 days.

NORTH GREECE BIRDING TRIP LIST (27TH-30TH OCTOBER 2013)

Little Grebe	Sparrowhawk	Syrian Woodpecker	Nuthatch
Great Crested Grebe	Common Kestrel	Black Woodpecker (H)	Rock Nuthatch
(Great) Cormorant	Merlin	Gt Spotted Woodpecker	Short-toed Treecreeper
Pygmy Cormorant	Peregrine Falcon	Green Woodpecker	Eurasian Jay
Dalmatian Pelican	Common Buzzard	Crested Lark	Magpie
Little Egret	Moorhen	Crag Martin	Jackdaw (H)
Great White Egret	Coot	Meadow Pipit	Hooded Crow
Grey Heron	Common Crane	Water Pipit	Raven (H)
Black Stork	Pied Avocet	Grey Wagtail	Common Starling
Eurasian Spoonbill	Grey Plover	White Wagtail	House Sparrow
Greater Flamingo	Northern Lapwing	Wren	Spanish Sparrow
Mute Swan	Dunlin	Robin	Tree Sparrow
Lesser White-front Goose	Common Snipe	Black Redstart	European Siskin
Common Shelduck	Common Redshank	Stonechat	Chaffinch
Eurasian Wigeon	Marsh Sandpiper	Blue Rock Thrush	European Goldfinch
Gadwall	Green Sandpiper	Mistle Thrush	Hawfinch
Common Teal	Black-headed Gull	Blackbird	Cirl Bunting
Mallard	Yellow-legged Gull	Cetti's Warbler	Rock Bunting
Northern Pintail	Wood Pigeon	Chiffchaff	Corn Bunting
Northern Shoveler	Collared Dove	Long-tailed Tit	Ring-necked Parakeet
Common Pochard	Feral Pigeon	Blue Tit	
White-tailed Eagle	Little Owl	Great Tit	
Greater Spotted Eagle	Common Kingfisher	Marsh Tit	

OTHER NOTABLE SPECIES (RK = Road Kill)

Clouded Yellow	Painted Lady	Peacock	Red Admiral
Speckled Wood	Hummingbird Hawkmoth	Hermann's Tortoise	Green Lizard
Grass Snake (RK)	Caspian Whip Snake (RK)	Dice Snake (RK)	Wild Cat

“Value for money bird watching trips for birders on a budget”