

A trip to Northern Greece, 16-22 May 2011

This brief report is the result of a leisurely week spent in the area by Carol and Francis Hicks, Doug Page and Renton Righelato. We flew Easyjet from Gatwick to Thessaloniki, about a 3 hour, early morning flight (£127 return). Car hire was straightforward with Hertz, who along with Avis and others have desks in the airport.

Basically we restricted ourselves to three areas: Lake Kerkini, the Evros Hills (centred on Dadia) and the Evros Delta. The excellent site guide, *Bird-watching in Northern Greece*, by Steve Mills, was indispensable and highly recommended, a benchmark for the genre. The whole area is served by ample hotels and tavernas and with a good road system it is easy to work. A week was a little short – ten days or so would have given more time for these sites and the opportunity to visit others (eg Porto Lagos).

The timing of our visit was a little late for many of the migrants and some of the earlier breeders had stopped singing; however, it made certain that specialist breeding species such as Masked Shrike and Olivaceous Warbler had arrived in numbers. An earlier visit, in late April/early May would enable more migrants (eg Red-footed Falcon and arctic-breeding waders) to be seen.

Itinerary

16th May: Arrived Thessaloniki 11.00 local time (two hours ahead of UK) and arrived at Lake Kerkini early afternoon. Birded the rough track heading west about 3.5km south of Lithotopos. We stopped 2.9 km along the track from the main road. Highlights: Masked Shrikes, Hobby, Eastern Black-eared Wheatear.

17th May: Lake Kerkini area, including the above track, the hills to the west of the lake and the eastern embankment of the lake. Highlights: Olive-tree Warblers, Sombre Tit, Masked Shrike, Booted and Short-toed Eagles, Honey Buzzard in the hills; Penduline Tit and the nest on the lake embankment. A short boat trip on the lake took us through an abundance of Pelicans (White and Dalmatian) and huge rafts of Cormorants. Pygmy Cormorants were present in smaller numbers.

18th May: A long drive eastward to Dadia village. En route we stopped at the Evros Delta Visitor Centre to pick up our pre-arranged permits for the military zone of the delta, which we visited briefly. Highlights: Spur-winged Plovers, Collared Pratincoles and Black-headed Wagtails.

19th May: A day spoilt by persistent rain through the morning. Dadia Forest feeding station and the start of the northern section of the old Boutros road were visited. Highlights: three species of vulture, Black Storks, Eleanora's Falcon. Although Syrian and Green Woodpeckers were heard, woodpeckers proved difficult.

20th May: Lefkimi road and Kapsala radio mast in the Evros Hills. A late afternoon visit to the Evros Delta. Highlights: Lesser Spotted Eagle, Short-toed Eagle, Long-legged Buzzard, Calandra Lark, Isabelline Wheatear, Lesser Grey Shrike and a large fall of Red-backed Shrike.

21st May: Morning in the Evros Delta and late afternoon on the Lefkimi road. Highlights: Lesser Spotted Eagle, Terek Sandpiper, Olive-tree Warbler.

22nd May: Morning in the Loutros valley then a long drive to Thessaloniki via the Philippi archeological site near Kavala. Highlights: Honey Buzzard, Long-legged Buzzard at nest site, Lesser Spotted and Short-toed Eagles, Black Stork, Masked Shrike. Overnight in Thessaloniki.

23rd May: Departed Thessaloniki at midday, leaving Pallid swifts breeding on the terminal building.

Selective Systematic List N E Greece 16th – 22nd May 2011

Ruddy Shelduck: 3 Evros Delta

Red-crested Pochard: 10 Evros Delta

Quail: Surprisingly few – 3 calling at the Evros Delta

Little Grebe: Common L Kerkini

Great Crested Grebe: Very common L Kerkini

Pygmy Cormorant: Reasonable numbers at L Kerkini and a few at Evros

Cormorant: Very large rafts on L Kerkini, probably several thousand birds

Great White Pelican: Common L Kerkini

Dalmatian Pelican: Common L Kerkini

Night Heron: Common at L Kerkini (as good a site in Europe?); a few at Evros Delta

Squacco Heron: Less numerous than Night Heron, but still easy to see at L Kerkini

Little Egret: Common

Great Egret: Small numbers L Kerkini and Evros Delta

Purple Heron: About five seen daily at L Kerkini and Evros Delta

Black Stork: 9 seen in the Evros Delta; 2 at L Kerkini

White Stork: Common. A flock of 70 were seen flying north over the Loutros valley on 22nd May

Glossy Ibis: A few seen at L Kerkini and the Evros Delta

Spoonbill: Reasonably common at L Kerkini. Small numbers in the Evros Delta

Honey Buzzard: One at L Kerkini, 2 in the Loutros valley

Black Kite: Small numbers at all sites visited

Egyptian Vulture: 4 at the Dadia feeding station

Griffon Vulture: 4 at the Dadia feeding station

Black Vulture: 8 Dadia feeding station, 6 Kapsala radio mast

Short-toed Eagle: 2 L Kerkini, 4 Dadia/Evros Hills and 5 in the Loutros valley

Marsh Harrier: Common in the Evros Delta

Goshawk: 2 Evros Hills

Common Buzzard: A few in Evros/Dadia

Long-legged Buzzard: 2 displaying on the Lefkimi road and a classic on a crag in the Loutros valley. These were very different from the smaller N African race, with an almost white head and aquiline shape.

Lesser Spotted Eagle: 3 Evros Hills, 1 Evros Delta.

Booted Eagle: 4 L Kerkini, 8 Evros Hills.

Kestrel: Small numbers at all sites.

Hobby: 2 L Kerkini, 1 Dadia.

Eleanora's Falcon: 1 dark phase at Dadia.

Peregrine: At least 2 in the Evros Hills.

Water Rail: 1 Evros Delta

Black-winged Stilt: Small numbers in the delta.

Avocet: About 40 seen in the delta.

Collared Pratincole: Surprisingly few seen (8) in the delta.

Little Ringed Plover: 1 Evros Delta.

Ringed Plover: 2 Evros Delta.

Kentish Plover: At least 5 in the delta.

Spur-winged Plover: At least 30 seen on visits to the delta.

Lapwing: 1 Evros Delta.

Common Sandpiper: 1 Evros Delta.

Curlew Sandpiper: A minimum of 280 on the Evros Delta, many in full summer plumage, others still in winter plumage – a fabulous sight.

Little Stint: A party of 20 L Kerkini and 18 in the Evros Delta.

Dunlin: Just one amongst the Curlew Sandpipers.

Ruff: 1 Evros Delta.

Curlew: 2 late migrants in the Evros Delta.

Terek Sandpiper: 1 adult summer plumage bird among the Curlew Sandpiper in the Evros Delta was one of the trip's highlights. Excellent views of this charismatic wader.

Little Gull: 1 at L Kerkini and 1 at the Evros Delta.

Mediterranean Gull: Common at the Evros Delta – over 100 on each visit.

Yellow-legged Gull: Widespread in small numbers.

Little Tern: At least 60 on the Evros Delta.

Gull-billed Tern: small numbers on the Evros Delta.

Whiskered Tern: At least 300 on L Kerkini.

Black Tern: About 100 on L Kerkini.

White-winged Black Tern: 1 among the Black Terns.

Turtle Dove: A pleasure to see this species in good numbers throughout the trip. 25 on the Evros Delta were probably migrants.

Little Owl: 1 Dadia village.

Common Swift: Very small numbers noted throughout.

Pallid Swift: Common Thessaloniki.

Bee-eater: Very common throughout.

Roller: Only seen in the east, where up to 10 were noted in Evros/Dadia.

Hoopoe: Very common.

Calandra Lark: At least 10 in the southern part of the delta; a pair seen in the northern part.

Short-toed Lark: Common along the dirt tracks of the delta.

Crested Lark: Common and widespread.

Woodlark: 1 L Kerkini; several in the Evros Hills/Dadia.

Skylark: 1 in the Delta.

Crag Martin: Several Kapsala Radio Mast.

Red-rumped Swallow: widespread and common.

Tawny Pipit: 3 Evros Delta.

Black-headed Wagtail: Common in suitable habitat, such as the delta.

Grey Wagtail: A few by a stream in the Evros Hills.

Nightingale: Abundant; seemingly in every patch of shrubbery.

Isabelline Wheatear: 4 in western part of the Delta.

Black-eared Wheatear: 3 south of Lithotopos, 3 Kapsala Radio Mast.

Blue Rock Thrush: At least 2 at Kapsala Radio Mast.

Cetti's Warbler: Common in suitable habitat, both wet and dry.

Zitting Cisticola: Common in suitable habitat.

Great Reed Warbler: common in the Delta.

Eastern Olivaceous Warbler: Very common and abundant in scrub throughout, in gardens, roadsides field margins.

Olive-tree Warbler: 3 near Lefkimi village on the road to the radio mast, 2 with one bird singing and in display flight in hills on track 4 km south of Lithotopos.

Subalpine Warbler: Not uncommon, usually in oaks in hilly areas.

Eastern Bonelli's Warbler: 1 in the Dadia Forest.

Sombre Tit: 1 seen well in hills south of Lithotopos; a few heard in Dadia Forest.

Short-toed Treecreeper: A few seen and heard in Dadia Forest.

Penduline Tit: Common in wet, shrub-filled ditches around L Kerkini and in the Delta. A completed nest seen from the eastern embankment of L Kerkini.

Golden Oriole: Common in suitable habitat.

Red-backed Shrike: Common in all areas. At least 150 were seen along a 3 km stretch of track in the western delta on 20th May (a rain front had passed through the previous day); if this transect were representative of the whole Delta, then several thousand birds would have been involved.

Lesser Grey Shrike: 1 among the Red-backed Shrike fall on 20th May.

Woodchat Shrike: Fairly common.

Masked Shrike: At least 5 in the Kerkini area; 1 on the Lefkimi road; 4 in the Loutros Valley. Not difficult to find.

Spanish Sparrow: Quite common in isolated groups in the Delta.

Serin: A few scattered in typical sites.

Hawfinch: Several in L Kerkini and Dadia areas.

Cirl Bunting: Small numbers at all sites except the Delta.

Black-headed Bunting: common.

Other species seen included: Mute Swan, Shelduck, Mallard, Grey Heron, Moorhen, Coot, Oystercatcher, Black-headed Gull, Common Tern, Rock Dove, Stock Dove, Feral Pigeon, Woodpigeon, Cuckoo, Green Woodpecker, Syrian Woodpecker, Sand Martin, House Martin, Swallow, Tree Pipit, White Wagtail, Robin, Dunnock, Stonechat, Song Thrush, Mistle Thrush, Sedge Warbler, Reed Warbler, Blackcap, Whitethroat, Chiffchaff, Spotted Flycatcher, Long-tailed Tit, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Marsh Tit, Nuthatch, Jay, Magpie, Jackdaw, Hooded Crow, Raven, Starling, House Sparrow, Tree Sparrow, Chaffinch, Greenfinch, Goldfinch, Linnet, Yellowhammer, Corn Bunting.

In total 149 species were recorded on the trip.

Report compiled by Doug Page.

Renton Righelato - July 2011