Northern Greece, 24 April – 7 May 2018

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This was my first visit to the region, and I followed the advice in the two essential books: *Finding Birds in Northern Greece* (Dave Gosney, [www.easybirder.co.uk](http://www.easybirder.co.uk)) and *Birdwatching in Northern Greece* (Steve Mills), although both were written a good few years ago now.

I planned to do it in three stages – the Thessaloniki area, Lake Kerkini area, and the Nestos and Evros Deltas. I was concentrating on the special birds of this area not seen in the UK, especially new ones for me, but I also got good views and photos of some I had only had brief and/or distant views of before.

I flew Easyjet to Thessaloniki, picked up my hire car at the airport and stayed in a hostel in the centre. Thessaloniki is a very busy city with heavy traffic, and I soon wished I had found somewhere a bit quieter to stay on the western outskirts, nearer to the key sites. But out of town, traffic was very light, and the main east-west motorway, the Odos Egnatia, is very easy driving.

Unusually, a heatwave dominated the weather for most of the two weeks, with temperatures reaching 30, making it uncomfortable to be out after 11am. I also soon realised that I had chosen to cover quite a wide area in the two weeks, which made for a lot of driving and less time for birding. Several sites involved lengthy drives along stony and rutted tracks, taking up a lot of time, often for little reward. I would have done better to concentrate on a smaller area – either the western end (Thessaloniki and Kerkini), or the eastern end (Nestos and Evros). Consequently there were several sites I didn’t get time to visit, and so I missed out on several of my target birds.

**Kalohori Lagoons.** A great site, water levels were just right for waders, and there were hundreds of them, mostly Wood, Green and Curlew Sandpiper, Ruff and Little Stint, plus plovers and larger waders, Collared Pratincoles, Little, Common, Sandwich, Gull-billed and White-winged Terns, and Flamingos of course. Very easy to access and to get close views, so I went back there several times. The central footpath is a popular early morning exercise walk for the residents of Kalohori, so many pleasant exchanges in rudimentary Greek took place, but they are obviously used to the mad British birders! The drive along the causeway was also very worthwhile, with more close views of waders, Pygmy Cormorants etc.

![Cormorant](image)

**Angelohori Lagoon.** Access to the saltpans at the north end seems to be now discouraged, the gate was padlocked. I went to the south east end, which was much more productive, with better access and display boards with maps, although these are all in Greek. There is a hide and watchpoint by the farm at the SE corner, giving views over the lagoon, and I got several Slender-billed Gulls there, plus Red-rumped Swallow and Long-legged Buzzard.
Axios Delta. I found the track down the eastern side of the river with no problem, thanks to Dave Gosney’s map. The first 2km past the flooded woodland was the best, with large numbers of Night, Squacco and Purple Herons, egrets, waders and Glossy Ibis, plus many Eastern Olivaceous Warblers Rollers, Hoopoes and Golden Orioles. After about 5km I found a pair of Spur-winged Plovers on the sandy flats, but the track was impassable beyond there, in fact I got the car stuck, was nearly eaten by a pack of dogs and had to ask a fisherman to tow me out! This really put me off driving along these stony and rutted tracks, which is slow going and on some sites can be for anything up to ten miles.
Lake Kerkini
I moved on to Lithotopos for a few days, staying in a very cheap and welcoming self-catering apartment in the village (Guesthouse Georgia) but it was even hotter this far inland. The drive along the eastern shore was another long, slow grind along a stony track, with not much to show until the northern end, where I had great views of Spoonbills, Glossy Ibis etc. The bridge over the Strimonas river is a good viewpoint, and had a colony of Sand Martins nesting on the bank, plus Lesser Grey Shrike along the track leading downstream. Kerkini harbour is tourist-orientated and didn’t produce anything much, but the shoreline at Mandraki was a lot quieter and much more interesting, I spent a most enjoyable few hours there with the feeding frenzy of Cormorants and pelicans (White & Dalmatian), views of the heron and egret colonies, and other passing birds. The western shore offered few opportunities for birding, but I chanced on a good site for Olive-tree Warbler and Masked Shrike while looking for a shady spot to park up for a while. Just north of Lithotopos, just before the observation tower, there’s a sandy track off to the left through a pinewood and childrens playground, keep left to a car park at the top by a chapel, several OTWs were singing in the scrub on the far side of the car park. The shrikes were in the pine wood, where there were also Serin and Spanish Sparrow and my only Greenfinches and Goldfinches of the trip.
The track into the hills north of Vironia was interesting, with Subalpine Warbler, Black-headed Bunting on the wires and Booted Eagle overhead, but none of the other goodies mentioned by Gosney and Mills! I didn’t go very far uphill in the heat, but I could see that a longer walk in cooler conditions could be productive. I also got my only Wren, Robin and Blackbird of the trip here!
I moved on to the eastern half of the area for the second week, staying at a self-catering apartment in the village (Porto Lagos Rooms) and exploring from there.

**Nestos Gorge**  
The footpath through the gorge from the car park is fairly challenging to walk, I got decent views of Long-legged Buzzard but little else. The road into the mountains produced Griffon Vulture and Black-eared Wheatear.

**Nestos River**  
The riverine forest site (Gosney site 4) I found difficult to work, although I did get Lesser Spotted Eagle. But Café Nestos (Gosney site 5) was much better, I ended up making three visits. It’s a quiet area with few people (although I would avoid weekends), and the woods provided some welcome shade right next to the river. Woodpeckers were the main attraction, especially in the first kilometre south of the café, and I got close views and photos of Middle and Lesser Spotted, Black and Grey-headed, plus Collared Flycatcher and Levant Sparrowhawk, so I was well pleased, and there was a good supporting cast of commoner woodland birds. A group of dogs welcomed my arrival, but this time they were friendly, insisting on accompanying me on my walk!
Porto Lagos
The lagoons and saltpans NW of Porto Lagos were difficult to access and didn’t produce much, but I had a Syrian Woodpecker in the village, and the usual gulls and terns on the lagoons and shoreline, including White-winged Tern, and Daliani Lagoon and the fish farm are easy to access and worth a look.
**Mandra Beach Marsh**
A superb spot, I ended up going several times. The lagoon and pools were absolutely full of herons, stilts, ibis and waders, all at fairly close range, plus Garganey, seven Ferruginous Ducks (plus two Pochards and a Shoveler!), a pair of Spur-winged Plovers, Great Spotted Cuckoo, Bittern, Black-tailed Godwit and Black-necked Grebe. It’s a good spot for raptors too, I had another Long-legged Buzzard, Marsh Harrier and Black Kite. Don’t look for the caravan in the garden mentioned in Gosney, it’s not there (although there is one much further on), but the entrance track is 2.7km from the point where the road reaches the sea. I would recommend parking up and spending some time walking round.

**Avas Gorge & railway station**
Parking up by the chapel, I was hardly expecting to get the Scops Owl reported by Dave Gosney’s evening visit, but I clearly heard one calling in the middle of the day! At the station, I flushed a Little Bittern from the riverbank, but found no warblers and nothing else of note.

**Loutros Hill**
I parked halfway up the track where it started to get a bit too steep for the car, there’s plenty of space, and walked the rest of the way to the top. I couldn’t find any Rock Nuthatch, Masked Shrike or Sombre Tit, but an Alpine Swift went past and I had good views of Black-headed and Ortolan Bunting and Black-eared Wheatear. A great place, no people at all there.
Isabelline Flats
The only part of Evros I covered was the track south of Loutros. Despite spending some time there, like Dave I couldn’t find any Isabelline Wheatears, but there were Short-toed and Calandra Larks and a Montagu’s Harrier. A large all-dark falcon went overhead, I got out of the car so quickly I fell over, and after getting up, watched it disappear into the distance, almost certainly a dark phase Eleanora’s.

Thassos
I decided to take the ferry from Keramoti to Thassos and back, in the hope of seeing Scopoli’s or Levantine Shearwater on the way over. No such luck, but sitting on the beach on the island, an obvious pale phase Eleanora’s Falcon went past, compensation for the earlier inconclusive view!

In summary, a great area for birds you won’t see any nearer to the UK than this, but best tackled in two halves and given plenty of time. A trip total of 140 species, including 14 lifers, made it a very worthwhile expedition.