

LAKE KERKINI, APRIL 2017



Logistics

- A long weekend in the last week in April, leaving Saturday morning and returning on Monday lunchtime.
- British Airways operate a seasonal Gatwick route to Thessaloniki, and from there it is about an hour or so by car. In the winter (for Pelican photography) you would need to go on Easyjet which does not go every day, or take Aegean Air via Athens, which does.
- Birded around and on the lake (a couple of cheap boat trips) for the whole time.
- Two nights at the lakeside Morfi Hotel for under £100. Yes, an actual hotel with an actual bed! Sometimes I can be normal.
- Car hire at Thessaloniki for about £50 for a Nissan Micra or something. Very cheap and cheerful.

Day 1

I had to get up at a crazy time in the morning to make the 7am departure from Gatwick. In the end I breezed it but this was the first time I had used the night tube and I was a bit worried. In the event that part was fine but it was a little odd walking from Bank to Blackfriars laden with camera gear in what was effectively the middle of the night! We arrived on time at around midday, and after collecting the car I headed north, skirting the city of Thessaloniki on route 25, eventually joining routes 2 and then 12 before striking off on small country roads up towards the lake. When I reached Lithotopos I unpacked all the gear and started birding my way around the lake anticlockwise. The first thing I noticed is that singing **Nightingales** were absolutely everywhere, it was quite incredible. I stopped the car near one particularly loud one and immediately found a **Woodchat Shrike** - this was going to be a good trip I felt!

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Woodchat Shrike

Heading west from Chrisochorafa I found my way up onto the raised track that borders the lake at this point and surveyed the scene. Wow! The entire north-east corner of the lake was a flooded forest. Cattle were grazing on the drier parts, but the numbers of water birds was astonishing, particularly **Great Crested Grebe**. It was quite hazy but there were seemingly vast clouds of birds further out. I continued along this track to the village of Megalochori - quite bumpy but quite manageable in a normal car. This was notable for quite a few **White Stork** nests, and from here I drove the very short distance to the Struma bridge on the way to Vironia. There is a small **Bee-eater** colony here, although a word of warning - there are some pretty unpleasant dogs here as a lot of grazing takes place. West of the bridge are some excellent woodlands, and I happily birded around this area for a couple of hours before continuing around the lake to the old harbour at Mandraki. This too was an excellent spot for birding with numerous **Squacco Herons**, **Egrets**, fly-by **Pelicans** and all manner of other water birds. In the distance however I could see boats with people on, and they seemed to be coming from a certain direction. This was what I had come for - I felt sure that if I drove around the lake I would find wherever it was they were coming from.

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So it was that I eventually I found my way around to the village of Kerkini itself, and there to the pier directly to the SE of the town. It being a Saturday boat trips were in full swing and I booked myself onto one leaving in about an hour and went off to check into my hotel and find some food and some cash. In the end I had to go to Rodopoli for the latter, there are no cash machines at all in Kerkini. In fact the whole area is extremely underdeveloped - a great thing for birds and birding, but a little bit of a bind if you are after things that make the world go round. Like money. Supermarkets are non-existent, and the various corner shops are very depressing indeed. You can see that austerity and the precarious nature

of Greece's economy has hit this area very hard. All the more reason to spend some tourist euros here in my opinion, and so I bought various horrible bits of food from these shops to do my bit. Grim is the word - I suspect most people subsist on what they grow and farm so there just isn't a market for convenience.

At about 6.30pm and once the sun's harshness had gone, my boat set off across a mirror-like lake. The departure point is on the west side whereas the sunken forest is on the east side, so the first part of the trip is always pretty uneventful. Eventually you get to this area, and that's when you start getting **Pelicans** and **Pygmy Cormorants** flying past the boat at eye level. In short it was superb, but it wasn't really a photography tour, more of a taster for what might be possible on a more dedicated trip. **Terns**, **Herons**, **Egrets**, **Spoonbills**, and of course more **Dalmatian Pelicans** than I had ever seen - there are some man-made islands, essentially vast nesting platforms. These birds were the main reason that I had booked this trip, not realising then that winter was the season for the best photography - I guess I was somewhat trigger-happy, saw a cheap flight to Thessaloniki and booked immediately. Subsequent research revealed that everyone came in the winter months to get the **Pelicans** in breeding plumage. Oops. Still, no worries, I knew that there would nonetheless be a fabulous selection of south-eastern European breeding birds and that I would doubtless enjoy myself immensely.





The boat trip lasted roughly an hour and cost €8, not at all bad for such good views of loads of birds. I organised there and then that I'd do a repeat trip, and met Vasilis Arabatzis at the Oikoperiigitis Hotel later that evening to organise it. Vasilis is the main man, or at least one of the main men, for Lake Kerkini bird photography. Most of the amazing **Pelican** photos you see have probably involved his boat in some way shape or form. He has it all sewn up actually as it's his hotel too, and whereas the whole area is a bit sad, clearly his business is thriving on the basis of bird photography. As well as discussing plans for a winter return visit, 7am on Monday morning was agreed for a second boat trip. Dinner was €7, another reason I really like Greece.

Day 2

I got up early and for some woodland birding on the north side of the lake. The plan was to see if I could pick up some new species for the trip, particularly **Grey-headed Woodpecker** which is present year-round. The best area per various trip reports are the tracks north of the river and south of the main road, so I parked the car up next to what looked to be an abandoned swimming pool complex just east of Vironia, and headed south into the area almost immediately crossing some railway tracks. These are in use, albeit infrequently, so look and listen before you cross!! The area was very productive with lots of birds of the type you would expect, particularly rich in **Nightingale** and **Cuckoo** in all wooded areas, and in **Corn Buntings** in more open areas like fields. Once again non-intensive agriculture is clearly responsible for a far better selection of birds that we get in the UK. Despite tracking down some promising drumming and calls, I never managed to see the **Grey-headed Woodpecker**, but I did get excellent views of **Lesser Spotted** and **Great Spotted** along with lots of other birds. You can eventually get quite close to the river, and in the flooded margins here were the usual **Squacco Herons** and **Egrets**. I walked a mostly circular route which took me first east towards the bridge, and then west alongside the north side of the river on various tracks until I reached a farm and could go no further, at which point I headed more or less directly back up to the road and walked alongside the railway tracks until I refound my car.

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Pleasingly large numbers of Corn Bunting

By now it was early afternoon. I had read about some productive ditches on the east side of the lake, and headed off there, stopping off at the Bee-eater colony to enjoy those for a little bit longer. The ditches are reached by driving into the village of Chrisochorafa and taking the south-eastern route out and towards the lake. As you approach the lake you hit some farm buildings, and if you take an obviously white unpaved track that heads NNE and to the right of the larger buildings you will soon see the irrigation channel. Simply drive alongside these ditches for some really good birding – I turned right and spent the rest of the afternoon enjoying numerous close encounters with **Great Reed Warblers, Whinchats** and **Yellow Wagtails**. The best photography opportunities are from the car, so make sure you hire something appropriate – either a 4x4, or if you are a cheapskate like me, the lightest possible micro-sized car as these can generally be coaxed over some quite rough terrain where a heavy saloon would struggle. What I had not ever realised is that **Whinchats** really like reedbeds for some reason, and they were very closely tied to the stands of reeds that lined the irrigation channels. Throughout my time here I was also constantly treated to fly-over **Hérons** and **Egrets**.

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Whinchat. Better than Wheatear? Jury is out....

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Ooof!

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Great Reed Warbler

I spent the final part of the day at Mandraki trying to get better photos of **Squacco Herons**. This was only partially successful because the pier at the end is quite a popular spot for early evening strolls and there was a fair bit of disturbance which caused the birds to remain distant, or fly off when they had returned closer. Very frustrating when you have been squatting patiently for half an hour and bird is very nearly now coming into range only for a passing pedestrian out to admire the view to flush it back fifty metres! Loads of birds though, including more **Wood Sandpipers** than I think I have ever seen. They were literally everywhere and even with just binoculars I got really excellent views.



Day 3

Another really early start as today was not only my final day, but also the day of the second boat trip. We met at the Oikoperiigitis Hotel, and after a coffee for the assembled boat passengers we went down to the lake and got on the boat. It was immediately apparent that conditions were not as good as the first evening, with quite a breeze causing what had been a lovely still surface to be quite choppy, but we set off east anyway. In contrast to the evening trip, even from a distance we could see a lot of bird activity, including what looked like a massive **Pelican** feeding frenzy. We were soon at the other side of the lake quite near to Mandraki, and Vasilis positioned the boat to drift alongside the activity, to the extent that he was not limited by the very shallow water levels. In short it was fantastic, with excellent views of feeding birds, and of birds flying to and from roosting areas to feeding areas. By excellent views I mean through binoculars, as photography-wise it didn't really tick the box due to light and priority being given to a boat full of passengers who were happy with bird snaps rather than anything else. This was fine with me; as previously mentioned I now know that the key period for the kind of images seen on the web is in winter, and I am in the process of crafting a plan for that. So I was simply happy to be there and be soaking up what was quite a spectacle. **Dalmatian Pelicans** of course, but also **White Pelicans**, **Spoonbills**, **Pgymy** and **Regular Cormorants**, **Common Terns**, **Black-crowned Night Herons**, and lots and lots of hirundines.

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Overall we were out about an hour and a half, so when we got back to the dock I needed to get my skates on as it wasn't that long until my return flight. Returning to my hotel I turned things around in exactly eleven minutes, which once back to Thessaloniki gave me a little time to stop at various places and see what was about, particularly the south-west corner of the lake which I hadn't really explored. Again lots of water birds and **Pelicans**, but nothing new at this late stage. It should be about an hour to the airport, but it was quite hard to find somewhere to refuel and I had to go out of my way. This meant I arrived at the car hire place about 55 minutes before my flight left which is somewhat under the recommended time frame! Luckily the airport is a doddle, and I was waiting by the gate about 10 minutes later and boarded shortly afterwards. Yes I would like a Gin and Tonic please!

In summary: Northern Greece in spring? A big thumbs up from me!

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