

A Short Winter Visit to Lake Kerkini



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Lake Kerkini had been on the radar of one of our party for some time as a reliable winter location for two potentially new species: Spotted Eagle and Dalmatian Pelican. The lake which was formed in the 1920's by the damaging of the River Strimonas lies ca.100km (ca. one hour drive) north of **Thessaloniki** whose airport is well served by budget airlines from the UK. As well as eagles and pelicans the lake is a regular November stop over for the small European population of Lesser White-fronted Geese as well as a wintering site for tens of thousands of water birds.

The three of us met at Gatwick on the evening of Thursday 7th February and we flew out early the following morning with EasyJet touching down in Greece about three hours later at just after midday local time (GMT +2hr). Airport formalities were quick and we accepted the offer by Hertz of an upgrade of the pre-booked SUV to a larger 4WD (Suzuki Vitara) which is highly recommended given the very poor condition some of the roads and tracks we used. By 2pm we had turned off the E79 motorway and were heading north-west through the agricultural land on west side of the Strimonas valley.



The first thing we noticed were flocks of thousands of Starlings feeding in the arable fields; then came the first raptors; Buzzards, Kestrels, Peregrine and a classically patterned first year Golden Eagle. As we approached the dam at **Lithotopos** we encountered our first Dalmatian Pelicans whilst beneath the dam there were hundreds of Great Cormorants (ssp. *sinensis*), plenty of Pygmy Cormorants and amongst the Black-headed Gulls a couple of unseasonal Whiskered Terns.

East of **Megalohori** we found the picnic area (Mills - p.53) and joined a track running parallel to the Strimonas river where it enters the lake. The inlet to the South of the track held hundreds of Pygmy Cormorant and three Red-crested Pochards. The trackside scrub was full of Chaffinches and Tree Sparrows whilst amongst the Water Buffalo in the flooded grassland we found Gadwall and a single Green Sandpiper. Unfortunately after about 3/4 mile the track has been washed away. From this vantage point and despite the increasingly bitter NE wind we scanned and were rewarded with Merlin and a distant soaring Spotted Eagle.



Wishing for a change of scenery we headed towards **Vironia** and after crossing the river found a group of Water Pipits around some pools on the short turf banks. Just outside Vironia we followed a track (Mills p.52 "Track A") through an area of marshy pools and woodland which was full of Hawfinches. A *Dendrocopus* woodpecker eluded specific identification, but a Green Woodpecker gave itself up more easily. With only an hour or so of light left we headed for the harbour/quay at **Mandraki** and realised how low the water in the lake was with the shore being around half a mile from the jetty. With 'scopes, we found a flock of 13 Cranes including 2 first

year birds (a notable record), a classic “spotty” juv. Spotted Eagle and our only Black-necked Grebe, plus big numbers of Eurasian White-fronted Geese and assorted duck. With light failing we headed around to **Kerkini** and the Hotel Oikoperiigitis by 1800 (dusk).



The following morning the wind had dropped and there was a ground frost; a pre-breakfast walk to the lake shore through small meadows and ditches was punctuated by the sound of a well hidden Cetti's Warbler whilst Chiffchaffs fed low in the rank vegetation. Looking into the bay south of Kerkini village we were amazed by the dense slicks of hundreds of Shoveler and Pochard; in the foreground were seven Goldeneye and GW Egrets and Grey Herons were stationed every 20m or so along the shore. It was here we encountered our only Kingfisher and the first Greater Flamingos whilst an overhead *Aquila* eagle eluded specific identification in poor light; the return walk added another Merlin and the first Ravens.

Refuelled by an excellent buffet breakfast and after a brief stop for a male Hen Harrier just south of **Livadia**, we returned to **Mandraki** harbour to take advantage of the better light. A small number of the distinctive pink-legged/pink-billed Eastern race of Greylag Goose (ssp *rubrirostris*) were feeding close to the pier, and two more distant Spotted Eagles were found in the trees by the lake.



Around **Vironia**, short turf areas by the River Strimonas produced flocks of White Wagtails, Water Pipits, and large gatherings of sparrows, finches and buntings around livestock. Returning to the picnic area west of **Megalohori**, this time we took the left hand track which leads out to the lake's eastern embankment. The inlet held all of yesterday's birds plus a Black Stork. The embankment overlooks a shallow part of the lake interspersed with some small low lying islands and stunted trees of the “drowned forest”; this turned out to be **the** place to see Spotted Eagles - we noted at

least six individuals in about 1.5 hours including one feeding on a freshly killed duck, despite the attention of a Marsh Harrier, a Buzzard and assorted corvids. Out on the water were good numbers of Bewick's Swans. Just outside the village, a brief exploration of some poplar belts yielded both Great-spotted and Syrian Woodpeckers.

Apart from a ringtail Hen Harrier the woodland around “Track A” near **Vironia** was quiet, so we cut our losses and headed towards the Bulgarian border and an area of mature woodland east of **Promachonas** (“Woodpecker Wood” – see Mills p.62), where we spent about an hour in the early afternoon and located Great-, Middle- and Lesser-spotted, Syrian and Green Woodpeckers (but sadly no Grey–



headed), along with Marsh Tit, Nuthatch and Short-toed Treecreeper.

Our final site was a little further south-east through the village of **Sidirokastro**; the rough twisty road up to "The Waterfall" described by Mills (p.64) failed to produce the target of Rock Nuthatch, but we did jam into an Eagle Owl in the pines below the falls. Back-tracking along the North side of Lake Kerkini, and had a final look at the lake near to our hotel until dusk.

We requested an early (07.30hrs) breakfast on our final morning, but then lost time over difficulties with our credit cards and the hotel's machines. Finally checked out 08.30hrs and drove round the south side of the lake, finding a lone Tufted Duck amongst the hordes of Pochard plus Cirl Buntings. The Dalmatian Pelicans attending the fishermen's boats near to the dam provided superb photographic opportunities in morning light, before we headed back to the airport for our lunchtime flight.

The Verdict: **Lake Kerkini** is certainly worth even a two day winter visit, and the Hotel Oikoperiigitis in Kerkini village is highly recommended. An additional day would have allowed more time to explore the wooded Belles Mountains to the north of the lake, and devote a little more time to photography.



Reading

Birdwatching in Northern Greece; a site guide (2nd edition) by Steve Mills (ISBN 978-0-9567770-0-3) published by Birdwing Books (www.birdwing.eu)

1:250.000 Road/Tourist Map of Macedonia - Sheet 052 (ISBN 978-960-8283-99-2) published by Orama Editions (www.oramaeditions.gr).

Accommodation

Hotel Oikoperiigitis (<http://www.kerkinihotel.com/>)

Systematic List:

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| 1. Black-necked Grebe – 1 from Mandraki | Megalohori |
| 2. Little Grebe | 10. Greater Flamingo |
| 3. Great-crested Grebe | 11. Mute Swan |
| 4. Dalmatian Pelican – spectacular, with probably up to 1,000 present | 12. Bewick's Swan – several 100's |
| 5. Great Cormorant ssp. <i>sinensis</i> - abundant | 13. Greylag Goose <i>A.a.rubirostris</i> - < 10 Mandraki harbour |
| 6. Pygmy Cormorant - abundant | 14. White-fronted Goose – many 100's on broad lake margins |
| 7. Great White Egret | 15. Shelduck |
| 8. Grey Heron | 16. Mallard |
| 9. Black Stork – 1 in inlet near picnic site, | |

17. **Gadwall**
18. **Pintail**
19. **Shoveler**
20. **Wigeon**
21. **Teal**
22. **Pochard**
23. **RC Pochard** – male + 2 fem, inlet near Megalohori picnic site
24. **Tufted Duck** - 1 male found in brief search of Pochard rafts at W end of lake
25. **Goldeneye** - 7 (incl. one drake), Kerkini
26. **Golden Eagle** – 1st year bird near exit from the E79.
27. **Spotted Eagle** – possibly <10 seen, mostly adult or sub-adult birds
28. **Marsh Harrier** – c.6 seen
29. **Hen Harrier** – ad.male Livadia; ringtail track “A” Vironia
30. **Buzzard** – common, mostly very dark morph birds
31. **Sparrowhawk** – a few singles seen
32. **Kestrel**
33. **Peregrine** – 1 over the Lithotopos road near to the junction with the E79.
34. **Merlin** – adult male from bund beside inlet at Megalohori; fem/imm Kerkini
35. **Moorhen**
36. **Coot**
37. **Crane** – party of 13 (incl. 2 x 1w) from Mandraki harbour.
38. **Avocet**
39. **Lapwing**
40. **Curlew**
41. **Green Sandpiper** couple of singles on pools near Megalohori inlet
42. **Black-headed Gull**
43. **Yellow-legged Gull**
44. **Whiskered Tern** – 2 wintering birds near dam at Lithotopos
45. **Feral Pigeon**
46. **Collared Dove**
47. **Eagle Owl** – 1 fluked in pines near waterfall above Sidirokastro
48. **Little Owl** - 1 from road between lake dam and motorway
49. **Kingfisher** – 1 in lakeshore near Kerkini
50. **Green Woodpecker** – 1 Vironia track “a”; 1 Promachonas wood
51. **Greater Spotted Woodpecker** - several positively ID’ed, and some other unidentified *Dendrocopos* were this or the following sp.
52. **Syrian Woodpecker** – positively identified: pair in poplars Megalohori; 1 or 2 Promachonas wood
53. **Middle Spotted Woodpecker** – 1 Promachonas wood
54. **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker** – 1 or 2 Promachonas wood
55. **Skylark** – often in large flocks on short turf or cultivated fields
56. **Crested Lark** – small number at several sites
57. **Water Pipit** - loose flock of c.10 on banks of Strimonas R., Vironia
58. **Meadow Pipit** – few with Water Pipits
59. **Grey Wagtail** – 1 Kerkini village
60. **White Wagtail** – flock of 20+ beside Strimonas R.
61. **Dunnock**
62. **Robin**
63. **Black Redstart** – 2 single fem/1w birds near Megalohori
64. **Song Thrush** – 4 over Livadia
65. **Mistle Thrush** - 1 near Mandraki
66. **Blackbird**
67. **Cetti's Warbler** - heard Kerkini
68. **Chiffchaff** - common, esp. in scrub and ditches
69. **Goldcrest** – 1 in pines above Sidirokastro
70. **Great Tit**
71. **Blue Tit**
72. **Marsh Tit** - 2 Promachonas wood
73. **Long-tailed Tit**
74. **Nuthatch** – 1 Promachonas wood
75. **Short-toed Treecreeper** - 2 Promachonas wood
76. **Jay** – fairly frequent in wooded areas
77. **Jackdaw** – small flock Kerkini village
78. **Rook** – 1 nr. Thessaloniki airport
79. **Hooded Crow**
80. **Raven** – pair Kerkini village; few in hills
81. **Starling** – impressive flock of several 1,000’s near the junction of the Lithotopos road with the E79, and several other flocks elsewhere
82. **House Sparrow**
83. **Tree Sparrow** – fairly frequent, often mixed in with House Sparrows
84. **Chaffinch**
85. **Linnet** – 1 only with other finches and buntings near Megalohori inlet
86. **Goldfinch**
87. **Greenfinch**
88. **Siskin** – pines above Sidirokastro
89. **Hawfinch** – loose flock of <20 on track “a”, Vironia; 1 Promachonas wood
90. **Yellowhammer**
91. **Cirl Bunting** – pair in roadside scrub on S.side of lake, and another heard singing near dam
92. **Corn Bunting**