

WILDLIFE TRAVEL



22nd to 29th May 2019 (1 week)

LAKE KERKINI & MACEDONIA

Balkan birds and spring wildlife

Breeding birds, butterflies, wild flowers and abundant wildlife in this little-known and unspoiled corner of the Balkans.

Macedonia is a small country, the same size as Belgium, in the heart of the Balkans. Its **varied landscapes** and position at the crossroads of the Balkans combine with traditional rural life to create the right ingredients for abundant and diverse wildlife. Almost one third of the country is still covered with traditionally sheep grazed steppe. The landscapes themselves are reason enough to visit, but we will also enjoy any and everything that moves or blooms! The country boasts **over 200 species of butterflies**, a staggering diversity for a country of this size. A great range of birds are another obvious focus, with a particularly wide range of raptors as well as many south-eastern specialities while wild flowers and reptiles abound and promise plenty of **Balkan endemics**.

Nearby **Lake Kerkini**, in Northern Greece ranks among one of the finest wetlands in the Balkans. Although an artificial reservoir there are shallow waters in the north where a large temporarily flooded riverine forest attracts many herons, egrets, spoonbills and cormorants. Both European species of pelican occur in good numbers in spring. Dalmatians breed and White just stay using this fish-rich habitat. Impressive mountains rise to the north of the lake and their foots are covered by fantastic habitats good for passerines like shrikes, buntings, warblers and tits. Raptors breed all around Kerkini with best numbers in the Kroutsia Mountains to the west of the lake.

The fine mixture of habitats ensures that you will have a rewarding and easy going holiday: whichever direction we go there should be a new species for us to see.



Price
£1675

Single Room Supplement
£110

Full board

- Day 1** flight to Thessaloniki
- Day 2** Vardar River
- Day 3** Vitachevo Plateau
- Day 4** Demir Kapija, Dojran transfer to Greece
- Day 5** Lake Kerkini
- Day 6** Kerkini & Kroutsia
- Day 7** Strimonas River
- Day 8** return to UK

Leaders
Mike Symes
and Martin Hrouzek

relaxed birding, spring flowers, general wildlife

Wildlife and culture holidays



Our profits are donated to the **Wildlife Trusts**



FOCUS OF INTEREST

This is one of our 'Easy birding and wildlife' trips which means that the itinerary is based mainly on birds and/or other animals (rather than plants or general wildlife) and this also reflects the knowledge of the leaders and guides. However, as with all of our trips, the pace is comfortable with time to enjoy other aspects of the natural history, rather than rushing from one place to another for specific species.



ITINERARY

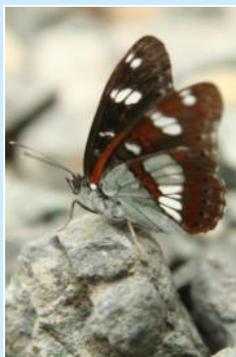
Please note that the itinerary may be changed to suit the weather or other practicalities or at the discretion of the leaders.

Day 1 22nd Our flights take us to Thessaloniki, and we then transfer north across the border into Macedonia (c2.5 hours) to the small town of Demir Kapija. Our hotel (3 nights) sits just outside town, surrounded by vineyards and grasslands, with a fantastic backdrop of mountains the Demir Kapija gorge, a dramatic scene for our early morning birding.

Day 2 23rd We start today walking along the nearby Babuna river, where Roller and Golden Oriole breed in poplars fringing the river shores, Rock Partridge is sometimes flushed from the ground and Eastern Imperial Eagles hold territory nearby. This is the best season to find **Rosy Starling**, an irruptive and unpredictable species which regularly arrives in large numbers to these Macedonian steppes. On the east bank of the **Vardar River** we will find an area of low hills, intersected with flat stream valleys. This is the driest area of Macedonia and has a real **Mediterranean character**. The butterfly season should be well advanced here, with Cardinal, Little Tiger Blue and Southern White Admiral all likely. Pyramidal Orchid and various flaxes will be amongst the flowers. The strange giant ground cricket *Bradyporus dasypus* may be found blundering about the bushes, praying mantises hunt in the grass and Nose-horned Viper and Eastern Green Lizard may be among the reptiles enjoying the warmth.

Day 3 24th An early start will see us heading to a plateau where we walk to a viewpoint overlooking a 'vulture restaurant' run by the NGO **Aquila Conservation**. The vultures of the Balkans are in serious decline, and these feeding sites help to support these dwindling populations: our visit will contribute much needed funds to the protection of the country's threatened vultures. This season is especially good for butterfly specialities such as Russian Heath, Krueper's Small White and Freyer's Fritillary. We will try to find these at Raec river along with Turquoise and Adonis Blues, Marbled and Niobe Fritillaries and Camberwell Beauty. On our way back to our hotel, we will stop in a village to observe a large colony of Lesser Kestrels. Over 130 pairs breed underneath the old village roofs, said to be one of the last large colonies in the Balkans, and the sky is full of them in late afternoon. Calling Scops Owls should provide the soundtrack to dinner, a nice finale to the day!

Day 4 25th A walk in the **Demir Kapija gorge** should reveal plenty of interesting butterflies, including Great Banded Grayling, Ilex Hairstreak and Balkan Marbled White, with



dragonflies including the wonderfully-named Eastern Spectre. Amongst the scattered scrub we will look for Olive-tree Warbler and Masked Shrike, two Balkan specialities that make their home in these sunny hillsides. Heading east, we will make a brief stop at Dojran Lake, a large shallow wetland shared between Macedonia and Greece. Little Bittern can sometimes be seen flying from one path of reeds to another, Pygmy Cormorants are usually present in good numbers and interesting dragonflies could include Black Pennant and Bladetail. After crossing the border back into Greece, we will transfer to the village of **Akritochori**, our base for 4 nights. Set near the eastern embankment of Lake Kerkini, this gives us a great position to explore the lake surroundings and the nearby mountain ranges.

Days 5-7 26th to 28th Renowned as one of the finest wetland sites in Europe, **Lake Kerkini** attracts thousands of water birds throughout the year. Springs sees this place probably in its best as all the breeding migrants are back and we can explore not only the lake itself but also the diverse habitats found in proximity of the lake. One morning we will have an early start to take a boat trip along the northern shore. The boat will go past the river delta edge where the heronries and a large colony of Cormorants are, an area teeming with thousands of birds: various herons and egrets, Spoonbills and Glossy Ibis. Amongst the many Common and Whiskered Terns we will look out for Black and White-winged Terns. The pier at Mandraki is an excellent place for close-up views of Squacco Heron and Pygmy Cormorant, alongside two species of terrapin, while we will listen out for the song of Great Reed Warblers, Golden Orioles and Penduline Tits. The lake is sure to provide plenty of excellent photo opportunities.

We will explore the warm hillsides in search of wildflowers, including Eastern Lizard Orchid *Himantoglossum caprinum* and the Dragon Lily *Dracunculus vulgaris*, while Nettle-tree Butterflies sometimes number in their thousands. To the west of the lake, the Kroutisia Mountains hold exceptional numbers of breeding raptors: Lesser Spotted Eagle, Levant Sparrowhawk and Honey Buzzard will be amongst our targets, along with Black Stork.

Day 8 29th After one last morning walk through the lanes near our hotel, in search of Syrian Woodpecker, Red-backed Shrike and Little Owl, we will head towards the coast. Amongst the lagoons of the Axios River delta, (time permitting) we will look for Slender-billed and Mediterranean Gulls, Gull-billed Tern, Avocet and Black-winged Stilt. Sometimes a few Greater Flamingos summer here, and passage waders could include Marsh Sandpiper. Unfortunately our time will soon be up, and we return to Thessaloniki for our flight home.

Health and fitness

Please see the General Information leaflet for health and fitness requirements. On most days, we are out and about for much of the day, albeit walking a relatively slow pace. It is necessary to walk on rougher ground and up some **slopes**, although **none of the walking is strenuous**. The pace will generally be relaxed with time to enjoy the surroundings and take photos as well as watching the wildlife we find. Our visit to Kerkini includes a boat trip: you should be steady enough on your feet to get on and off the boat. There may be steps at our hotels, as well as up/down into the bus and boat.

Passports and Visas

Macedonia is NOT in the EU. You must have a passport for this trip, valid for at least six months after the end of the holiday. Visas are not required by holders of British Passports. For holders of other passports it is essential that you check with both the relevant embassies or consulates and obtain the necessary documents prior to travel.

Accommodation, meals and transport

We will be staying at two, good, local hotels, both with en-suite accommodation. The holiday is full board, meals being a mixture of **Balkan and International dishes**, with an emphasis on local cuisine. Requests for special diets can be accommodated. Evening meals will be at the hotels. We will have picnic lunches on most days. We will travel by small coach or minibus.

Leaders and guides

Mike Symes is our leader for this trip, an excellent all-round naturalist and professional ecologist who has worked for Devon Wildlife Trust for almost ten years. Mike has led previous Wildlife Travel holidays from Norfolk and the Burren, to the Danube Delta and the Serengeti.

Martin Hrouzek has been our guide for Wildlife Travel's previous trips to Macedonia and central Europe. An experienced natural history guide as well as an excellent wildlife photographer, Martin is keen to share one of the lesser known corners of Europe with us.

Between them, our leaders will provide you with an excellent introduction to the wildlife of Macedonia including some specialities of the Balkans. They will ensure that you get the most from your time in Macedonia and have a relaxing, enjoyable holiday.



Flights

Group flights are with Easyjet from London Gatwick to Thessaloniki.

22nd May depart Gatwick 05.55, arrive Thessaloniki 11.10

29th May depart Thessaloniki 11.55, arrive Gatwick 13.25

It is also possible to fly from Manchester with Easyjet as follows:

22nd May depart Manchester 05.55, arrive Thessaloniki 11.30

29th May depart Thessaloniki 12.10, arrive Manchester 13.50

Macedonia is 1 hour ahead of UK time: Greece is 2 hours ahead.



TO BOOK

Contact us to check availability and reserve a place. Complete the Booking Form and send to Sunvil Holidays (CAA-ATOL Licence 808, ABTA V6218), our tour operator, with your deposit. All details about booking are given in the Booking Pack.

DEPOSIT £500 PER PERSON, BALANCE DUE BY 20/02/2019
SEE GENERAL INFORMATION LEAFLET ON HOW TO BOOK

INCLUDED: Return flight from UK to Thessaloniki. Local transport as specified in itinerary. 7 nights' accommodation, full board. Services of leaders.

NOT INCLUDED: Refreshments. Entrances (optional). Gratuities. Insurance.

WILDLIFE TRAVEL

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Wildlife Travel Ltd. Reg. No 2237697; (for Registered Charity numbers, please contact us)

Photos: Wildlife Travel and courtesy Martin Hrouzek.

Front (clockwise): Heerman's Tortoise, Russian Heath, Dalmatian Pelican, Balkan Marbled White, Lesser Grey Shrike **Back** (top to bottom): Eastern Green Lizard, European Bee-eater.

Inside: White Stork, Southern White Admiral, Macedonian hillside, Black-crowned Night Heron