

Greek Rhodopi

Wildlife at Leisure

A Greentours Itinerary

Greek Macedonia is a rich hunting ground for the naturalist. Tremendously scenic mountains rise towards the Bulgarian border, flanked by great forests and topped by rock and alpine meadow. Between lies the Strymon River named for Strymon, a Thracian king and personified river-god. Downriver Heracles had some arguments with the Strymon's waters during his tenth labour!

Our tour visits two very different parts of this beautiful region, Kerkini Lake and its meadows and wetlands, and barely two hours to the east, the high country of the Greek Rhodope.

Day 1

Arrival Thessaloniki and transfer to Lake Kerkini

It is an early flight from London Gatwick or Manchester direct to Thessaloniki. We'll soon be on the way up into the wild expanses of beautiful countryside that are characteristic of Drama's landscapes. This is a richly varied region, a consequence of a startlingly geomorphology, and evidenced by the impressive range of flora and fauna found between the shimmering blue Aegean and snow-capped Rhodopi. It'll take us a couple of hours to reach the village of Chrysochorafa, next to Kerkini Lake, our base for the first four days of the holiday, and on this journey we'll pass coastal plains, cross poplar-lined rivers, and pass through wide flat basins between high steep-sided mountains, the limestone slopes covered in species-rich maquis. Then we'll settle into the Limneo Guesthouse and enjoy our first taste of their delicious dinners.

Days 2 – 4

Lake Kerkini and the wetlands, woodlands and meadows of Strymon

Kerkini's birdlife has become justifiably famous in recent years, in particular for its large flocks of Pelicans. Both Dalmatian Pelican and White Pelican occur in impressive flocks and we'll take boat trips out on the lake to get amongst them – the boatmen are tremendously good at getting us close the birds whilst not disturbing their fishing or loafing. Endangered Pygmy Cormorants are another special sight. Numbers of herons and egrets are particularly impressive with abundant Purple Herons and even quite a few Little Bitterns likely during our visit. Flocks of Glossy Ibis pass through and there will be Great White Egrets, Spoonbills and Cattle Egrets too. White Storks are a frequent sight, nesting in the village, and we'll see the odd Black Stork or two as well.

Overheard hunt Osprey, Harriers and even the occasional White-tailed Eagle. Greek Marsh Frog and Great Reed Warblers provide the soundtrack in wetlands along the edge of lake. These are home to Golden Jackals and abundant dragonflies: Broad Scarlet, Scarce Chaser and Keeled Skimmer are all common as well as many damselflies. In drier turf behind are drifts of *Anacamptis morio*, and surrounding meadows are full of Larkspurs and Poppies. The honeyed calls of Golden Orioles mark the cooler parts of the day and we'll see these beauties alongside Hoopoes and Eurasian Bee-eaters.

Reedbeds surrounding the wetland have plentiful *Acrocephalus* warblers whilst the shrubby field edges between our hotel and the lake have Eastern Orphean Warbler, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler and most commonly Eastern Subalpine Warblers. Cirl Buntings and Ortolan Buntings are a lovely sight and we'll find this to be perfect shrike habitat with lots of Red-backed Shrikes and Woodchat Shrikes as well as a Lesser Grey Shrike or two. Garganey and Ferruginous Duck erupt from narrow channels above which Penduline Tits have built their nests in the overhanging willows. Both European Pond Terrapin and Balkan Terrapin inhabit the same channels and we'll never be far from a Dice Snake at Kerkin!

Grey-headed and Middle-spotted Woodpeckers inhabit woodlands where Oak diversity is impressive with six species locally. Hawfinch often feed on the edge of sunny glades which are excellent for butterflies with species such as Black-veined White, Eastern Festoon, Oriental Marbled Skipper, Large Tortoiseshell, Marbled Fritillary, Queen of Spain Fritillary and the delightful Little Tiger Blue. Iridescent Beautiful Demoiselles rest on the riverside vegetation, Ruddy Darter and Scarce Chaser keep watch from tall grasses, Eastern Green Lizards scurry for cover and the local Balkan Goldenring cruises up and down paths between the trees. There's a good range of raptors likely during our four days around Kerkin. Golden Eagles are over the nearby mountains and Lesser Spotted Eagles are often spotted over the forests. Booted Eagles, Goshawks and Black Kites can all be seen whilst Red-footed Falcons sit on wires crossing the water meadows where semi-wild Water Buffalo inhabit water meadows often accompanied by Yellow Wagtails – several races pass through the area in spring. Levant Sparrowhawk is likely though not guaranteed. We'll explore some open areas of scrubby woodland that are home to a treasure trove of wildlife. Roesel's Bush-crickets are quite common and there are many butterflies such as Silver-studded Blue and both Lesser Spotted and Spotted Fritillaries. Spur-thighed Tortoises move steadily through the vegetation, whilst sitting atop the bushes are Masked Shrikes, waiting for one of the bush-crickets to jump... Dragon Arums are an impressive sight and the Greek Foxglove *Digitalis lanata* will be in full flower, possibly the Lizard Orchids still bud.

Day 5

Mount Orvilos and to Volakas

The dry slopes of Orvilos are home to much *Iris reichenbachiana* with both plum and yellow forms in fine form. Abundant Toothed Orchids make a colourful show with mats of *Globularia cordifolia* and yellow mounds of *Genista depressa*. Berger's Clouded Yellows are abundant and we'll see a good number of European Swallowtails and Scarce Swallowtails too. Queen of Spain Fritillary and the uncommon Weaver's Fritillary are found here and we'll note Sombre Tit and Cirl Buntings in scattered shrubs. One of Orvilos's prime attractions for us will be the Wild Cat. Of course, Wild Cats are secretive creatures and we certainly can't guarantee a sighting however we've found them to be more visible here than anywhere else we've been. Two sightings on the day visit last year being an example. We can but hope.... Typical birds of the area include Rock Buntings, Alpine Swift, European Serin, Red-rumped Swallow, Eastern Bonelli's Warbler and Eastern Subalpine Warbler.

Day 6

Mount Phalakron & Mount Pangeio

The Aloni Hotel is ideally located to explore Phalakron, the highest mountain in the Greek Rhodope. Volakas makes its living these days largely as a ski-centre, and though there will still be snow on the upper reaches of the mountain the skiers are long gone and Volakas has a quiet out-of-season feel before the arrival of the summer trekkers. It is just a short drive up through the sparse *Pinus nigra* forests on to the mountains snow-streaked slopes. We'll keep an eye out for Black Woodpecker as we pass through this zone. As the trees give way to the alpine turf we'll find totally amazing groups of huge-flowered *Pulsatilla halleri* in bloom. These meadows are also littered with tight clumps of *Viola perinensis* whose lilac and blue heads completely obscure the leaves. The local endemic *Saxifraga friderici-augusti* loves the marble road cuttings, the glaucous rosettes topped by drooping panicles of dusky red flowers. *Genista lydia* and *Astragalus monspessulanus* make yellow, blue and pink carpets on the rocks.

Amongst the magnificent pasque flowers are both yellow and magenta forms of *Dactylorhiza romana* and striking blue groups of *Gentiana verna*, yellow *Primula veris* and the striking pink whorled lousewort *Pedicularis friderici*. Here is abundant *Fritillaria drenowskyi*, the little brown and orange bells found in only a few areas on the western slopes of Phalakron.

A little higher and by the first snows large noisy flocks of Alpine Choughs will vie with Northern Wheatears and Black Redstart for our attention. Here is a colourful pastiche of *Crocus chrysanthus* mixing with blue *Scilla biflora* and both white and deep pink forms of *Corydalis solida* subspecies *incisilobata*. Rarer is the local endemic *Crocus orphei*, a lovely plant with indigo-streaked undersides to the

tepals. Yellow cushions of *Draba lasiocarpa* are a pretty sight and we'll find two more rather beautiful crucifers, *Thlaspa ochroleucum* and *Thlaspi tymphaeum*. Here we'll explore a botanical heaven. Rocks are plastered with two saxifrages, the lovely red *Saxifraga sempervivum* and the striking mats of *Saxifraga ferdinandicoburgi* splattered with yellow blooms.

On the highest slopes reached by a track we'll find swathes of *Erythronium dens-canis* by snow alongside abundant *Crocus veluchensis* glowing in the sunshine. The views down into the valley and towards the Bulgarian border to the north are sublime with wooded hills hardly broken by agriculture stretching all the way from the reservoir below to the border. Water Pipits and Shorelark feed quietly as we admire the most incredible show of *Viola perinensis*, in places this lovely little plant colours the landscape lilac-purple. We'll keep an eye on the skies too, it's a good time for migrant Short-toed Eagles and Honey Buzzards to be passing over.

In the afternoon we'll visit Mount Pangeon – the name coming from the idea that one can see all the Aegean from the top! Though much lower than the Rhodopean Mountains Pangeon is well-separated from them and close to the coast and has an unusual and rich flora. Here we'll seek another beautiful *Viola*. The strange almost phlox-like pink faces of *Viola delphinantha* can be found in marble crevices (Pangeon also has schists and gneiss) in just a few places on this mountain and at only a few other localities in Greece. If *Saxifraga ferdinandicoburgi* was not in bloom on Phalakron then likely will be here along with *Saxifraga sempervivum* and *Androsace villosa*. Olive Tree Warblers sing from the open maquis and Rufous Bushchats can be seen. This is good country for Rock Partridge, and as we enjoy *Viola grisebachii*, known only from this mountain, we might flush a covey or two. Magnificent specimens of *Ophrys mammosa* are common on the mountain's lower more Mediterranean slopes alongside more orchids such as *Ophrys reinholdii*, *Serapias bergonii*, and striking large-flowered *Serapias orientalis*. As the Turkey Oaks give way to a beautiful beech forest we'll find a truly amazing sight. Thousands and thousands of the local endemic *Paeonia saueri* flowering thickly in little clearings. We'll already have seen the lovely true-red *Paeonia peregrina* flowering amongst Sweet Chestnuts at another site. We'll find *Fritillaria pontica* as well as *Symphytum ottomanum*, and higher up *Ornithogalum nutans* and three species of Birthwort. There are orchids at these levels too including Provence Orchids and Sparse-flowered Orchid. On road cuttings are great displays of the stock *Matthiola fruticosa* with vibrant pink flowers as well as the elegant white-topped *Iberis sempervivum*.

Day 7

Simida Birch Forest and the River Despatis

The Rhodope is famous for its forests, some of the most unspoilt in Europe. Simida is particularly unusual in that it is dominated by Birch, a forest type more typical of much more northerly regions. The birds too show more northerly affinities and this is

one of the few places in Greece where Hazel Grouse, Crested Tit and Northern Nutcracker can be found. Marsh Tit and Willow Tit, Red Crossbill and there's even a chance of both Collared Flycatcher and Red-breasted Flycatcher.

Woodpeckers and nuthatches are common and we're sure to see signs of Wild Boar. The trees will hardly be in leaf and this is the time when the woodland floor is at its best for flowers. We'll see many wonderful blooms from the unusual Red Lungwort *Pulmonaria rubra* to blue Scilla biflora, and from the Townhall Clock Adoxa moshatellina to green-bellied *Fritillaria pontica*. Spectacular tall specimens of Lady Orchids nestle under hazels and oaks, alongside Birdsnest Orchids, White Helleborines and *Ophrys cornuta*. With these is the lovely *Scutellaria altissima* and dark red *Silene atropurpurea*. Magnificent stands of the local form of Green-winged Orchid, *Orchis picta*, mix with both *Saxifraga carpetana* and *Saxifraga rotundifolia*.

We'll drop down to the River Despatis for lunch. The waters of this river are a beautiful turquoise. The steep-sided gorge has a richly varied wooded flora, part maquis and part oak woodland and birds and butterflies are plentiful, it's a great spot to enjoy a lunchtime siesta. Red-backed Shrike, Black Stork, Black Vulture and Osprey are among the birds we can enjoy here. *Haberlea rhodopensis* showers us with delicate pale mauve or ivory blooms. Rocky defiles are covered in wonderful mosaics of pink *Geranium macrorrhizum*. Bright blue-flowered *Ajuga genevensis* and pink *Anemone pavonina* colour the turf and we'll see several *Ornithogalums* and *Muscari*s. Brilliant blue-hued ground beetles and almost equally colourful Balkan Green Lizards will distract us from butterflies such as Wood Whites, Common Glider, Powdered Brimstone, Green Hairstreak, Hungarian Skipper and Adonis Blues.

Day 8

Departure

After a leisurely breakfast we'll make the journey back to Thessaloniki Airport and our lunchtime departure.

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