

Summer birding at Kerkini Lake



Blooming water-lilies at Kerkini. © Ugo Mellone, Kerkini, 7.8.2002.

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Whiskered Terns *Chlidonias hybrida* are fishing around our boat. Dozens of Collared Pratincoles *Glareola pratincola* are watching us from some little outcrops, while a young Dalmatian Pelican *Pelecanus crispus* is slowly moving away. We are surrounded by yellow patches of lily pads, and, far away, a wonderful flooded forest is studded with white dots (egrets, spoonbills and pelicans). We are exploring Kerkini Lake, one of the most amazing European wetlands, probably the richest for birds in all of Greece.

Kerkini Lake lies not far from the big city of Thessaloniki, between the mountains that separate Greece from Bulgaria and the surrounding plain created by the Strymon River. This lake has a particular story. After being drained it was again flooded by a dam in the 1950s and nowadays holds important populations of waterbirds - especially herons, cormo-



White Pelicans *Pelecanus onocrotalus* often prefer shallow water, so they are often seen close to the shore. © Ugo Mellone, Kerkini, 6.8.2002.

rants and pelicans. The range of species in the area varies considerably according to the water level. For example Gosney (1994) wrote about thousands of waders in the northeast corner, but during our visit in August 2002 we saw only a few Black-winged Stilts *Himantopus himantopus* and Little Ringed Plovers *Charadrius dubius*.

The area of the lake is approximately 10,000 ha and comprises various environments, from muddy flats in the Strymon delta, to flooded forests, wet meadows to seasonal ponds and huge carpets of lily pads, which here and there cover the water surface.

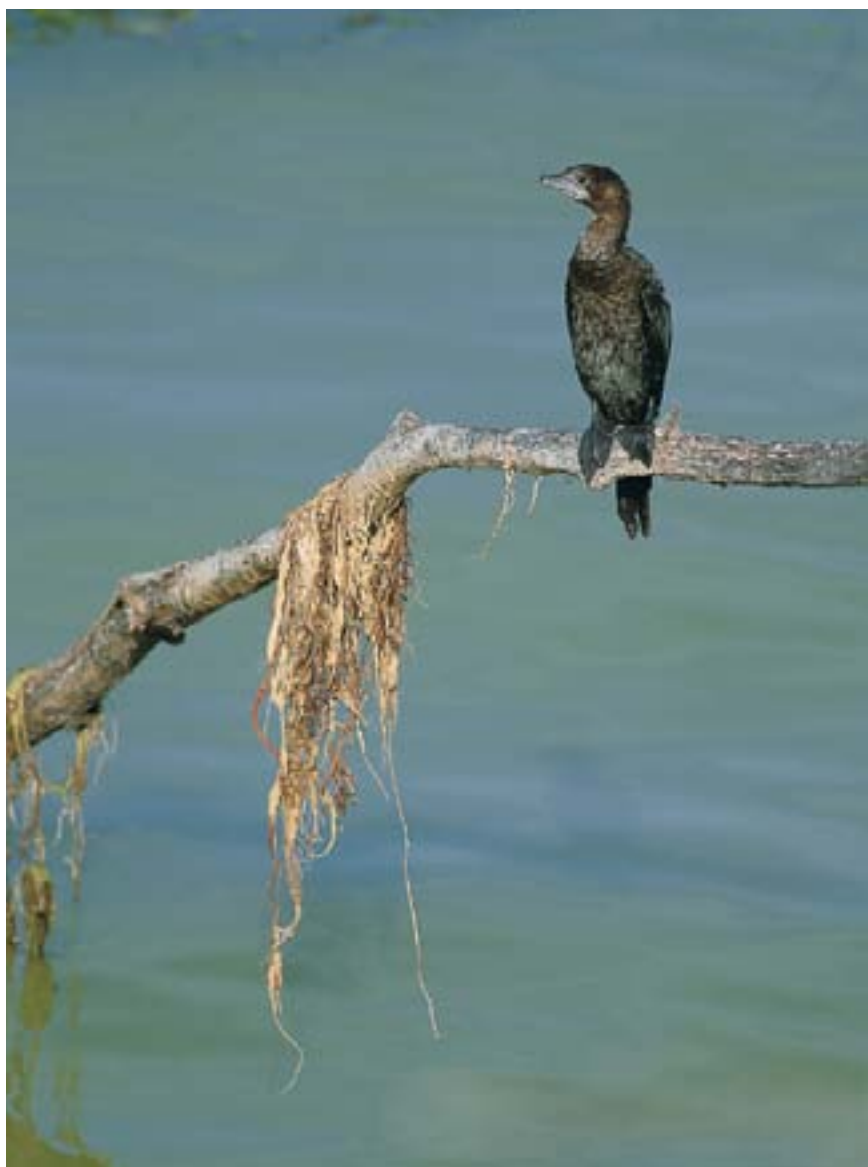
Although they do not breed here, both the Dalmatian and White Pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus* are typical of the lake's landscape. These species are resident year-round, but while the White is very rare in winter, the Dalmatian Pelican has one of the world's biggest wintering populations. Recently great efforts have been made to "build" a colony; in particular, the construction of nesting platforms succeeded in stimulating nesting activities producing juvenile Dalmatian Pelicans in 2004. Interestingly, an obvious habitat segregation occurs among the pelicans, with the Dalmatian being commoner in deep water, thus visible almost everywhere, and the White preferring shallower water, thus present especially in the northeast corner.

Almost all the European species of herons breed in the area, except for the Great Bittern *Botaurus stellaris* which is only a winter visitor, and the Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*, a regular but rare spring migrant. The flooded forest hosts an important colony of Spoonbills *Platalea leucorodia*, while unfortunately only a few pairs of Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus* still breed at Kerkini. There are also several breeding pairs of Lesser Spotted Eagle *Aquila pomarina*, while the Greater Spotted Eagle *A. clanga* is a regular wintering bird.

The Lesser White-fronted Goose *Anser erythropus* winters almost every year, sometimes joined by Red-breasted Goose *Branta ruficollis*, Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea* and White-headed Duck *Oxyura leucocephala* which reach the lake in the coldest months, as do all three species of swan. The White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* is present year round, although it is easier to observe in winter. The Honey Buzzard *Pernis*



Dozens of White Storks *Ciconia ciconia* are often seen on the eastern shore. © Ugo Mellone, Kerkini, 4.8.2002.



There are good opportunities to photograph Pygmy Cormorants *Phalacrocorax pygmeus* near the village of Kerkini. © Ugo Mellone, Kerkini, 5.8.2002.



Kerkini is also an excellent place to study juvenile shrikes. This is a Lesser Grey Shrike *Lanius minor*. © Ugo Mellone, Kerkini, 5.8.2002.



It is sometimes possible to find a Black Stork *Ciconia nigra* among the White Storks. © Antero Topp, Lesbos, huhtikuu 1999.

apivorus is a common breeding bird, together with the Black Kite *Milvus migrans* whose breeding activity in the area is considered extraordinary as this species breeds in only a few places in Greece. The Hobby *Falco subbuteo* is not difficult to find, and Peregrines *F. peregrinus* are also attracted by the huge concentrations of potential prey, while Eleonora's Falcon *F. eleonorae* is a rare summer visitor. In some years, in addition to the classic specialities, it is possible, at the end of the spring season, to observe noticeable numbers of Rosy Starlings *Sturnus roseus*, during their periodic irruptions.

The lake offers many photographic opportunities, usually whilst sitting comfortably in the car. We warmly recommend, however, also taking a boat tour, especially in the northeast corner, thus completing the Kerkini visit and making it an unforgettable experience. In our case, we used our own inflatable boat but it is also possible to rely on help from the local fishermen. With regard to the sunlight it is better, as always, to visit

the western side in the afternoon and the eastern in the morning, but do keep in mind that in many places there are good opportunities to spot and photograph birds on both sides of the road.

Starting from Lithopos, on the southern side of the lake, where there is a dam (and nests of Red-rumped Swallows *Hirundo daurica* near it), the road follows the shore to Kerkini village. Along this route you can observe dozens of White Storks *Ciconia ciconia*, Spoonbills, Dalmatian Pelicans, herons and Pygmy Cormorants *Phalacrocorax pygmeus*, while hundreds of Great Crested Grebes *Podiceps cristatus* fish everywhere in the lake.

The western and northern sides of the lake are surrounded by small dry hills giving the opportunity to easily spot Levant Sparrowhawks *Accipiter brevipeps*, Lesser Spotted, Booted *Hieraaetus pennatus* and Short-toed Eagles *Circaetus gallicus*, Golden Orioles *Oriolus oriolus*, Sombre Tits *Parus lugubris*, Hawfinches *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*, Black-eared Wheatears *Oenanthe hispanica* (more difficult, but try in rocky areas, also very near the road) and four species of shrikes: these include the Masked *Lanius nubicus*, which we saw perched low in bushes and small trees, only on the western side of the lake, while Red-backed *L. collurio*, Woodchat *L. senator* and Lesser Grey *L. minor* can be observed all around the lake perching on the very tops of bushes and trees. The Nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus* is common from dusk to dawn.

Other interesting species breed in the lowlands such as Eastern Olivaceous *Hippolais pallida* and Olive-tree Warblers *H. olivetorum*, Cirl *Emberiza cirrus*, Black-headed *E. melanocephala* and Corn Buntings *Emberiza calandra*. Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis* also breeds in the isolated stork nest in the water on your right just some one hundred metres before the village of Kerkini. After Kerkini, be careful not to continue on the main road to Livadia, and take the road along the shore instead, which allows you to get very close to Pygmy Cormorants. It is worth spending some time in this nice town, which gives its name to the lake. Almost all the houses have their own stork's nest, probably the highest breeding density in Greece and near the village we briefly saw a juvenile Lesser Spotted Eagle perched less than 10 m from the car feeding with Magpies *Pica pica* on



Squacco Herons *Ardeola ralloides* prefer the ponds near the lake. © Antero Topp, Lesbos, huhtikuu 1999.

carriage, and hopping away, not flying, after our astonished stop. Thrilling!!!

There is also a visitor centre in the village, which is very well built and provides useful information on the history and wildlife of the area.

Continuing along the main road, after Livadia, turn right to Mandraki, where a road begins which allows you to see the northern side of the lake, which is not easy to visit because of the flooded forest. The most exciting zone of the Kerkini



A colony of Collared Pratincole *Glareola pratincola* was surprisingly found on the small islets in the lake. © Ugo Mellone, Kerkini, 7.8.2002.

Lake lies all around the Strymon delta in the lake, the northeast corner, easily reached from the village of Vironeia. There are two possible roads: the first starting just before the bridge above Strymon and following the right bank of the river, then ending in the wonderful flooded forest. Here there are colonies of herons, spoonbills and cormorants – and where some Golden Jackals *Canis aureus* are believed to live. This road is worth taking, since it allows one to closely approach White Pelicans, which concentrate here in huge numbers, thanks to the shallow depth of the water. One of the most wonderful sights that Kerkini offered us was to observe more than one hundred of these pelicans flying in their incredible snake-like formation (impossible to describe!).

The other possible road starts out small and unpaved after the same bridge and continues along the whole eastern shore of the lake. Together with the White Storks there are also some Black Storks *Ciconia nigra*, as this is probably the closest feeding area to their breeding sites in the nearby mountains. On the pools you can see Spoonbills, Squacco Herons *Ardeola ralloides*, Black-winged Stilts, but keep an eye on the sky too because this is also the best place to spot Lesser Spotted Eagles. We saw up to three eagles together and once, in the same thermal, we had a White Stork, a Lesser Spotted Eagle and a White Pelican! The poplar plantations are a favourite habitat for Syrian Woodpeckers *Dendrocopos syriacus*. Continuing along this road the forest is a little farther from the shore and the space to the open water is covered by lily pads. The bushes and small trees on the shore are favourite perching sites for Pygmy Cormorants, European Bee-eaters *Merops apiaster* and Lesser Grey Shrikes, but in this area the best feature is the hundreds of Dalmatian Pelicans, that sometimes approach the shore to catch dead fish left by fishermen. The bits of land above the water are worth special attention; we found an unexpected colony of Collared Pratincoles, a very strange breeding habitat compared to what we are used to. Also, the deeper water should be scanned for Ferruginous Ducks *Aythya nyroca*, some pairs of which still breed on the lake. This area is literally “overflowing” with birds and ends at the half-flooded



Many of the Dalmatian Pelicans *Pelecanus crispus* winter on Kerkini lake. © Ugo Mellone, Kerkini, 5.8.2002.

village, the remains of which are nowadays home to Common *Sterna hirundo*, Black *Chlidonias niger* and Whiskered Terns (with White-winged *C. leucop-terus* being a common migrant); a little farther on there is, on the left, a canal with an unbelievably high concentration of herons and Great Cormorants *Phalacrocorax carbo*, where we also saw a juvenile Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*. The rest of the southeast side does not warrant much attention, in comparison to the rest of the lake, with only some Dalmatian Pelican and Great Crested Grebes spotted in the middle of the lake, rather far from the road. In addition, another interesting place is the little marsh below the dam; in particular it is one of the best sites to spot Glossy Ibis.

Kerkini Lake is worth visiting year-round, possibly in a tour of at least ten days in Northern Greece, an area holding several other hot spots, such as the Dadia forest, the Evros delta and the Prespa lakes.

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Literature

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