

Tour Report Greece – Lake Kerkini in Spring 8 – 12 May 2023

Coypu



Cormorant



Balkan green lizard



Marsh frog



Compiled by Sean Weekly

Day 1: Monday 8 May 2023

Weather: Cloudy

We had an early start for our flight to Thessaloniki. I met up with two guests who I knew quite well and we had a brief catch-up before heading to our gate. There we met the other guests before boarding the plane. On arrival in Greece, we were greeted by Babis and Yannis, both guides and good friends of mine. We loaded our kit onto the vehicle and headed north to Kerkini, a drive of approximately one and a half hours.

On arrival at our hotel, we enjoyed some light snacks and welcome drinks. Everyone was shown to their rooms, then 30 minutes later we walked to the harbour to see the green lizards. The weather was nice and sunny, which attracts lizards, and I anticipated that we would have a good session.

En route to the harbour, I saw a little owl sitting in someone's garden, which was a bonus find and gave everyone an opportunity to take some lovely photos. We continued and it didn't take long to get to the harbour, where sure enough, we soon found some lizards. Everyone enjoyed photographing them for a few hours before heading back to our hotel to have dinner.

Day 2: Tuesday 9 May 2023

Weather: Heavy rain, 14°C

We had coffee at the hotel at 06:45 before heading to the harbour at 07:00. There were plenty of birds around and we were very lucky to see hundreds of white pelicans and cormorants fishing together on the lake. It was a great sight to watch them flying to and from different fishing spots. Next, we briefly headed to the sunken forest, which is home to 10 different species that nest here.

On returning to the hotel, it was time to dry off, as we all got soaked on the boat, then reconvene for a photo editing masterclass before lunch. I showed the group how I edit my images from start to finish and how I work with presets. Lunch was at 14:00, and we enjoyed a nice warming homemade soup with Greek salad.

At 15:00 we left for a 4x4 jeep tour at the coypu site in Megalochori, a small wetland north of Lake Kerkini. We used the vehicles as 'mobile hides' to shelter from the weather and look for wildlife. On arrival, we instantly saw four or five coypus swimming in the lake, although they were some distance away. Whilst waiting for the coypus to come closer, we turned our attention to a few marsh frogs on the surface of the water. The ground was sopping and muddy, but a few of us chose to lie down to get eye-level with the frogs for some more dynamic portraits.

Soon it was time for a coffee and cake break. As we were heading back to the vehicles on top of the bank, a coypu was swimming directly towards us in the water below. It was heading to the lake's bank to feed on waterlily shoots. I gathered the group and, slowly, we walked down the bank keeping very low and quiet. We sat there at the edge of the bank as the coypu emerged just metres away from us to feed on the plants. It was a fantastic moment that certainly made up for the weather!

Soon it was time to head back to the hotel for dinner and then a well-deserved sleep.

Day 3: Wednesday 10 May 2023

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Weather: Cloudy, 15°C

We had a slightly later start this morning as the weather was still unpleasant with heavy rain. Breakfast was at 07:45, then at 09:00, we headed out to the fishing huts north of the lake, where there are usually some young Dalmatian pelicans.

On arrival, as predicted, there were a few pelicans around but a little too far away for close-up portraits. Our attention soon turned to numerous grey herons that were diving for fish in the shallows, and a few cormorants fishing too. It was a nice little spot and we spent a couple of hours there.

Then we moved on back to the Megalochori area for the coypus and marsh frogs again, as the weather had cleared. We took a longer route to get there, via the river, so that we could look out for bee-eaters which might be flying now the rain had subsided. A few were around catching insects, which was great, so we decided to head back to this spot the following day for a bee-eater session in the hides.

On arrival at the lake, we spotted six coypus - another promising session. It didn't take long for one coypu to come fairly close to some flowering lily pads, where it was observed eating the roots of the lily flowers. We had another impressive encounter which allowed us to capture some great shots while lying down at water level with the lilies behind, and lots of marsh frogs around too.

We returned to the hotel for a tasty lunch and a little rest before heading back to the harbour again for an afternoon and evening boat trip to the nesting area of the lake. We stopped off along the lakeshore to look for night herons to photograph. Then we headed straight to the mouth of the Struma River, which feeds Lake Kerkin. There we found a large group of white pelicans, preening and yawning. It made for some lovely photos, with the mountains as a backdrop.

After some time we moved in around the nesting sites, photographing cormorants, squacco herons and other pelicans. The weather was great and the lake was very calm – a contrast to the day before – and everyone enjoyed the boat trip.

Day 4: Thursday 11 May 2023

Weather: 16°C

After a slightly later breakfast, to ensure the rain had stopped, we headed to the riverbank of the Struma River. This area is home to European bee-eaters during spring, as they migrate here to breed. It was around a 35-minute drive to get to the river, which lies in the northern part of Lake Kerkin. On arrival, it was a matter of taking a short drive alongside the white clover-filled sandbanks looking for bee-eater nests, and it didn't take long to find them at all, as the area is riddled with them. We set up three pop-up hides and put two guests into each hide. Babis and I then placed sticks near the entrances of the nest holes to encourage the birds to perch if they chose to.

Once everything was set up, Babis and I moved the vehicles and watched the group from a distance with binoculars. Soon there was a lot of activity, with bee-eaters flying all around the hides catching insects. Few birds chose to perch, but everyone got really nice action and in-flight photos. One guest in particular captured great shots of two bee-eaters squabbling over a nest. After two and a half hours in the hides, it was time to pack up and head back to the hotel, ready for a nice home-cooked soup and salad for lunch.

We finished lunch at 15:00 and headed straight to the harbour for our last boat trip of the tour. The weather had improved and the lake was very quiet, resulting in lots of activity from the birds - especially two separate groups of white pelicans and some preening flamingos.

On the boat trip, we sailed around the flooded nest sites and looked out for any birdlife on the trees and driftwood. We had opportunities to photograph night herons and a couple of good sightings of squacco herons

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too. As always, there was plenty of activity from the cormorants and pelican species, which made for some lovely portraits.

It was time to head back to the harbour for dinner. As the wind had started to pick up, our boatman Yannis decided to take us back a little earlier so that the ride back would be less choppy - a great idea!

Day 5: Friday 12 May 2023

Weather: Cloudy, 14°C

We headed to the local village, down the road, to photograph storks nesting on telegraph posts. There were plenty of them around. The sun was out and it was getting pretty warm - a great time for macro photography. Lots of insects were also present, including bush crickets, shield bugs, and various spider species. Some of the group went to the harbour to look for more lizards, but they had no luck as it clouded over.

We returned to the hotel, where I gave a final talk on lighting and how to expose for highlights and shadows before it was time to drop the group off at the airport.

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