

Tour Report

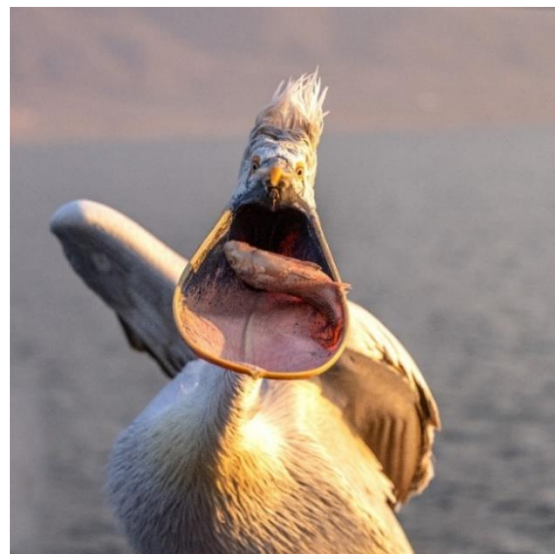
Greece - Pelicans of Lake Kerkini

6 – 10 February 2023

Dalmatian pelican



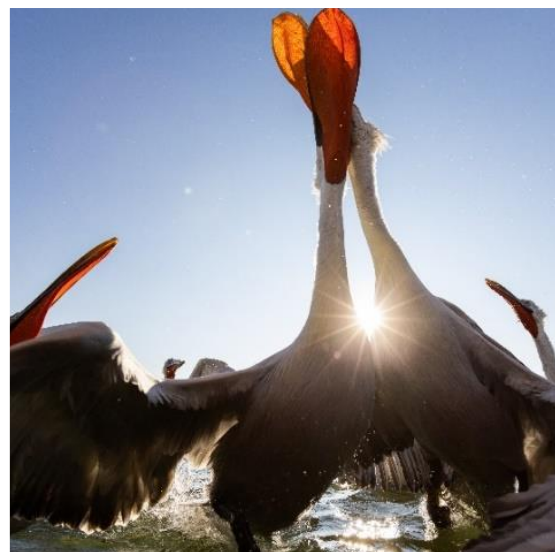
Dalmatian pelican



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Dalmatian pelican



Compiled by Emma Healey

Day 1: Monday 6 February 2023

Some of the group came from London, but with others arriving from various locations we all met up at Thessaloniki Airport, where we also met our guides/drivers for the week – Babis (our English-speaking guide) and Giannis (hotel owner and boat/jeep driver). We got into the two 4x4 vehicles and made our way towards Lake Kerkini. The drive takes around 1.5 hours but we were out of town fairly quickly, enjoying the views of the hills and landscapes that opened up in front of us. We saw mountains in the distance and Babis advised that this was the direction in which we were heading as the lake lies in the valley. When we arrived at the lake, the road followed the shoreline and roughly halfway along, we made a brief stop for our first views of the lake and its famous residents – the Dalmatian pelicans. When we stopped, the sun was already getting quite low in the sky so some of the group grabbed their cameras and took a few shots of the landscape with lovely orange/pink light on the snowcapped mountains.

The temperature was dropping quite quickly so we decided to continue to the hotel to settle in. About half an hour later, we arrived at the hotel to a lovely welcome, a roaring log fire, and a lovely spread of welcome snacks and drinks.

After checking into our rooms and freshening up, it was time for dinner and an introduction to what the next few days were going to look like, with the mix of boat trips and shore feeds. All our questions were answered and everyone went off to bed for a much needed sleep.

Day 2: Tuesday 7 February 2023

When we woke up early, had a quick drink of coffee then jumped into the jeeps to head to the boat at 06:45. It was only five minutes' drive to the jetty, and we made our way to the boat while Giannis prepared it for us (scraping ice off the cover!), enjoying the beautiful orange/pink sunlight that illuminated the lake. As the boat started to move out through the small inlet, we could see some Dalmatian pelicans waiting for us at the start of the lake proper.

The pelicans know the drill, so any birds who want to join in the fun and get involved in the photoshoot follow the boat as it starts to speed up, with Giannis calling and throwing fish out to encourage them. By the time the boat slowed down, we had around 20 pelicans of varying ages around us. The older pelicans are the ones we really wanted, as the colouring on the underside of their beak is much brighter during breeding season. The light over the lake is very special so we were keen to make the most of it. We stopped for a while early on to capture the pelicans in the rising sunlight, which offered lots of photographic opportunities; then we were in a great position for some portraits in the lovely warmth of the sun, before it got too strong.

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Throughout the morning we split the activities between moving the boat at a consistent speed to get some in-flight shots, staying quite still to achieve some lovely portraits, and trying more creative shots with wider angle lenses of birds close to (or on the) boat. One pelican decided that it wanted to be centre of attention and landed on the post at the bow. This allowed some fun photo opportunities, both portrait and action shots. After a while we moved on to another part of the lake and the pelicans flew up to, and alongside, the boat enabling us to get some lovely photos of them in flight and landing on the lake.



We stopped for tea and coffee (and delicious homemade cake) on the boat, which gave us time to capture some more portrait shots as the pelicans relaxed, as well as more creative images focusing on feathers, beaks, water droplets etc. We then made our way back to the jetty and on to the lodge, where the log fire and a hearty breakfast were waiting to warm us up.

We had time to download our images, enjoy the fire, and/or catch up on sleep before we left again at 15:00 for a shore feeding session close to where we had stopped yesterday on our way to the lodge. This is an area around 30 minutes drive away where there are some accessible beaches - so we drove down and parked on the shore. We made ourselves as comfortable as we could with our yoga mats on the shingle beach, facing the lake with the beautiful snow-capped mountains in the background. A group of around 20 pelicans made their way over to us and for the next couple of hours we tried various angles and positions. The shore feed gives an opportunity to get some more ground/water level shots, so it's great for being more creative and achieving some lovely portrait images.

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Babis and Giannis had been a bit concerned that the pelicans would be more wary of us as the park authorities had been tagging some birds in recent weeks, but we were fortunate and they accepted our presence quite well, although they were not keen on people standing up - so we all stayed as still as we could and captured some lovely images of the shore feeding session.

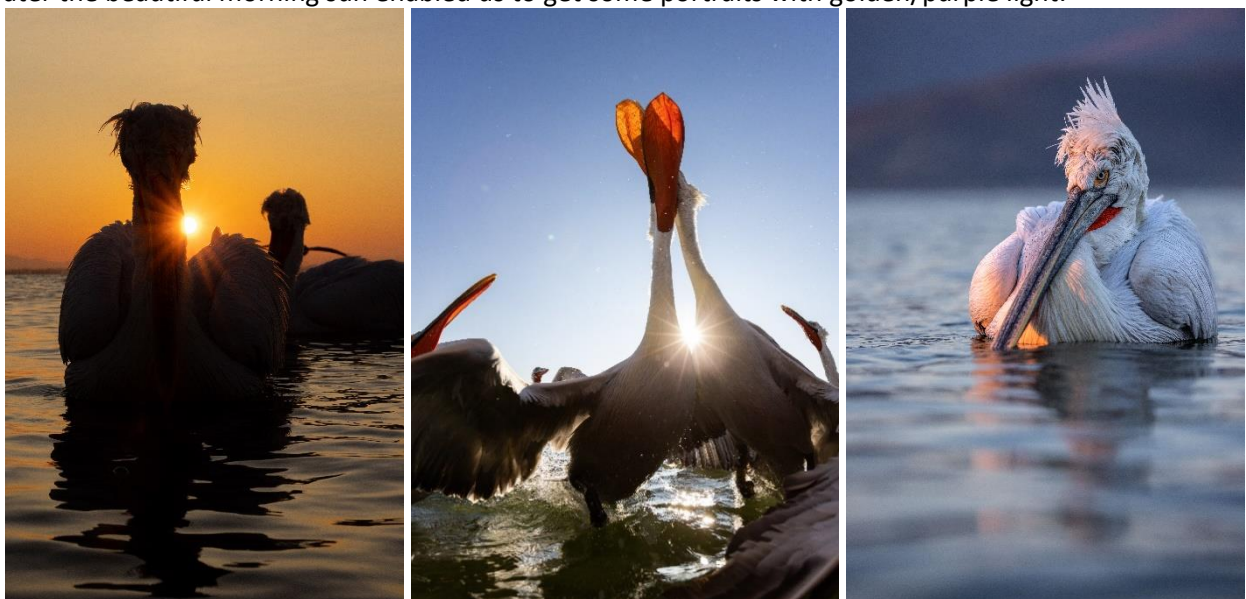
At around 16:45 the sun disappeared over the hill behind us, which resulted in some beautiful orange light on the mountains in front and a muted blue/pink light on the lake. We captured some lovely portrait images of pelicans, grebes and egrets in the beautiful sunset light as we watched flocks of cormorants flying overhead to roost for the night.



Once the light had faded, the temperature dropped quickly and we made our way back to the hotel to enjoy the log fire, drinks and dinner.

Day 3: Wednesday 8 February 2023

We woke to another beautiful day and the temperature had only (!) dropped to -5° C overnight, so it felt a little more bearable as we got into the jeeps and drove down to the lake. As we moved slowly through the inlet into the lake a kingfisher crossed in front of us and disappeared into the bushes. We continued to the lake, stopping for some morning silhouettes with the lovely red sky behind, then as we moved into open water the beautiful morning sun enabled us to get some portraits with golden/purple light.



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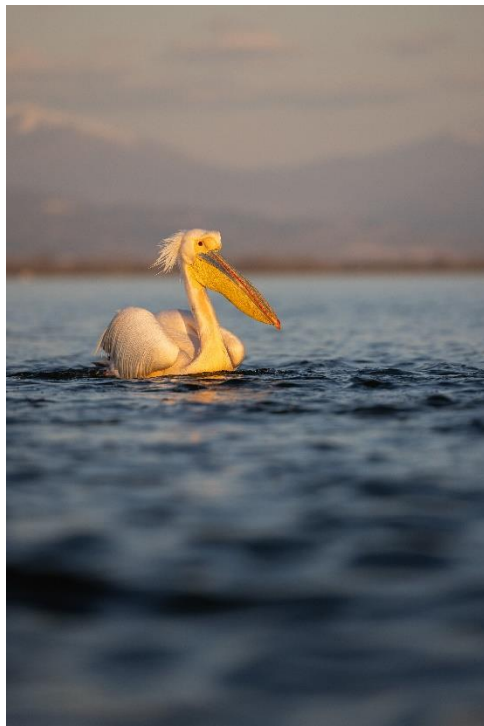
After a while we started to move at speed, taking the pelicans with us and doing in-flight shots, before we slowed down for portraits and close-up feeding shots. We continued this process a few times before stopping for coffee then making our way back to the hotel for breakfast.



On our way back the wind had calmed and the water was very still, allowing for lovely reflection shots.



This afternoon, rather than another shore feeding session, we went back out on the lake to experience it in different light conditions. As expected, the light was a bit harsh at first so photography was quite difficult, but after a short time we were treated to a beautiful sunset followed by lovely soft light that turned the mountains pink. As well as the infamous, and now very familiar, Dalmatian pelicans a great white pelican also came to join us.



As the sun went down, the light started to go and it got quite cloudy, so we decided to try some panning for those who were keen to give it a go. The flight of the pelicans alongside the boat lends itself well to this technique, so it's a great time to practice. It generally ends up with many more images being deleted than kept, but it's good fun and when it works the effect can be lovely.

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Day 4: Thursday 9 February 2023

After we boarded the boat this morning the pelicans were waiting for us at the edge of the lake as usual. Luckily there were more adults around this morning, so lots of bright red and orange colours were visible. The sunrise was beautiful so there were intense orange colours on the water. We started off much more slowly, with a few silhouettes, before going further out and getting some lovely in-flight and portrait shots with the warmth of the morning sun.



We continued with some panning shots before the sun came up and we subsequently focused on a mixture of portraits, silhouettes and pelicans flying in.

We then went over into the shade of the hills and took some slightly different images with the dark water behind providing a black background, which allowed for dramatic portraits. The flatter light also enabled us to get more close-up images of feather detail etc.

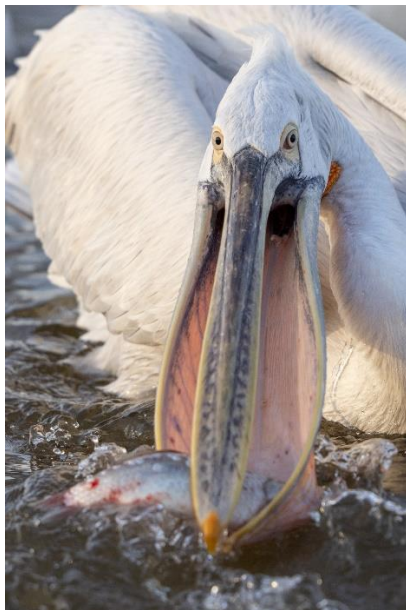
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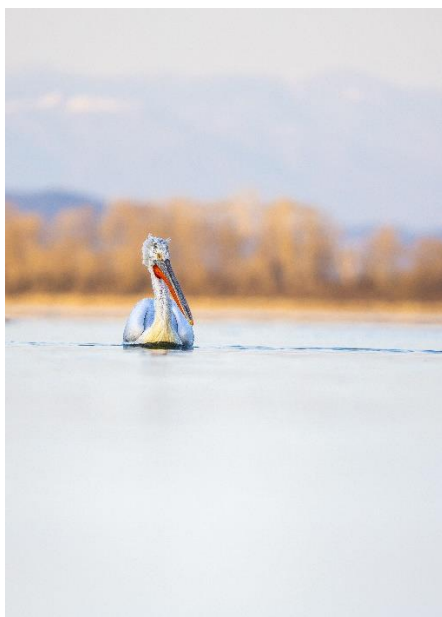


As we headed back towards the port, gorgeous high cloud and hazy fog over the hills provided the perfect backdrop for portraits and soft in-flight shots. Happy with the variety of shots we had managed during the day, we went back to the lovely log fire and waiting breakfast.

This afternoon we drove out to the south side of the lake for another shore feeding session. It was a bit quieter than it had been on our last visit, but a good-sized group of pelicans still came over to see us. We managed to find a better position for the light today, but it was still quite tricky to get a good background without too many distractions. Giannis did a good mix of high and low throws, creating different angles for images. Being down this low, lying on the beach, gives a great perspective for portraits, particularly when the water is still.



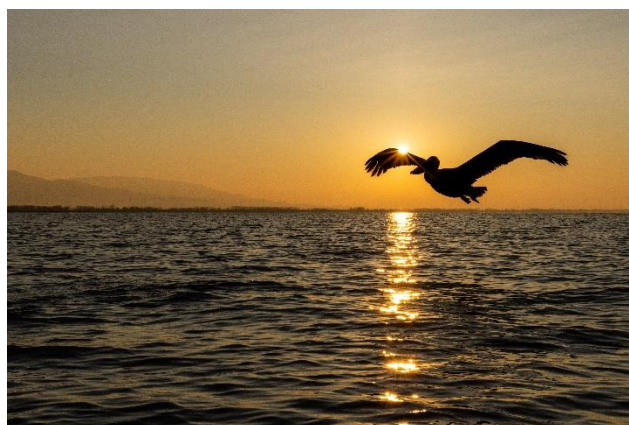
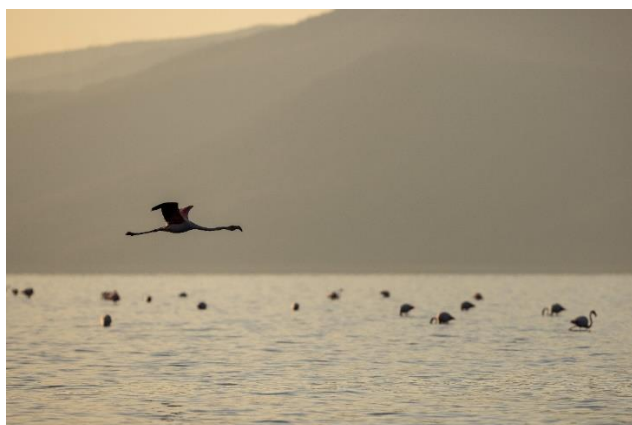
As the sun set over the mountains it cast a golden glow over the trees at the shoreline. There was a race to try and get a bird at the right point in front of the trees before the golden light disappeared.



A couple of the group left the shore feeding to see what else was along the beach. A walk along the shore resulted in sightings of a cirl bunting and some grebes catching fish. After enjoying more of the beautiful sunset and watching great crested grebes hunting in the shallow waters, we made our way back to the hotel for our final dinner.

Day 5: Friday 10 February 2023

This morning we decided to head further across the lake towards the flamingos we'd seen in the distance on Wednesday afternoon, in the hope that we might be able to get closer today. There was a risk that we would leave the pelicans behind, but luckily they followed us over. We managed to get a bit closer than we had before but were still quite far out - so we focused on capturing silhouettes and flocks flying by.



Some creative minds were playing with various images using the light of the rising sun and wide-angle or fish-eye lenses to make the best of the feeding shots. As well as getting another pelican on the bow for a while, watching what we were up to, we also had a few pelicans landing on top of the boat cover, giving us opportunities to take candid close-up portraits by leaning up and over the roof.

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After a final break for tea, coffee and cake we made our way back to the vehicles and on to the hotel for breakfast. The water close to the shore was very still by this point, so we moved slowly in order to get some lovely final images of these gorgeous birds landing on the still water - providing great reflections of them and the mountains.



After a final breakfast and packing up our bits and pieces, it was sadly time to say goodbye to the lovely staff (and log fire!), and make our way back towards the airport to catch our flights home. We weren't quite finished yet though ... on the way along the road that skirts the riverbank, close to where we did the shore feeding, we came across thousands of starlings on the road and in the fields/beaches next to it. It was an incredible sight and Giannis told us that this was a sign signalling the end of winter;- spring is on its way!

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