

Mountain birds, flowers and butterflies, with extension to lake Kerkini (northern Greece)

Bulgaria's exceptional natural history is well-known to travelers, who have previously joined our wildlife holidays. This tour is designed to diversify our mountain birdwatching, butterfly and botanical experience by introducing you to the wealth of wildlife of Lake Kerkini in northern Greece.

During the first part of this tour we will explore the Pirin and the Rila Mountains. This is landscape of exceptional natural beauty, boasting high peaks over 2500 m, alpine meadows dotted with glacial lakes, dense forests, spectacular rocky gorges and precipitous cliffs. For six months of the year thick snow covers the mountains' alpine share. The arrival of spring, however, is marked with an outburst of rare and beautiful mountain flowers, like *Pulsatilla vernalis* and *Geum bulgaricum*, the blue blossoms of *Gentiana pyrenaica*, the dark-pink of the heavenly *Primula deorum*, a local endemic, and many more rare or localized flower species.

The Pirin and Rila National Parks hold outstanding wildlife. They provide refuge to the Brown Bear, the Wolf and the Balkan Chamois. A big variety of attractive birds occur in the alpine and forest areas, including Alpine Accentor, Yellow-billed Cough, Spotted Nutcracker, Hazel Grouse, Capercaillie, Tengmalm's Owl, White-backed Woodpecker. The butterfly fauna there features the Balkan Copper, Balkan Marbled White, Higgin's Anomalous Blue, Phalakron Blue, Amanda's Blue, Meleager's Blue, Yellow-banded Skipper, Balkan Fritillary and many others.

Medieval monasteries with magnificent murals and icons are huddled in the mountain recesses. One of them is the famous Rila Monastery, which is included in UNESCO's world heritage list and which we are going to visit.

Having spent a couple of days in the mountains we will move down along the Struma river valley and across the Bulgarian-Greek border to Lake Kerkini in northern Greece. Nestled picturesquely between two separate mountain ranges, Lake Kerkini is one of the true jewels of European birding and the core of a nature reserve that is a relatively unexplored wonderland of beauty and biological diversity. Plenty of White and Dalmatian pelicans, Pygmy Cormorants, herons, ducks and storks, Rollers and Bee-eaters, river-side forests, water-lilies and fantastic panoramic view from the mountains



Leontopodium alpinum



Spoonwing Lacewing



May-July

of Belasica and Kroussia give it a characteristic atmosphere. The combination of wildfowl, flora and fauna, good weather for a large part of the year and a virtually traffic-free track around the lake make it ideal for a day's birding.

Back in Bulgaria we will spend another couple of days in the foothills of the Pirin Mountain and around the town of Melnik – our base. Melnik is one of those traditional villages in the mountains turned into open-air crafts and architecture museums, where one can feel what life used to be like a century or two ago. It is also famous for its locally produced wines, which we are going to taste.

The climate and the flora here are predominantly Mediterranean, the dry and rocky terrain encouraging a variety of butterflies and dragonflies to add their color to the displays of wild flowers. Great Banded Grayling, Swallowtail, Freyer's Purple Emperor and Hungarian Glider are just a few of the butterflies recorded here.

Mountains, though quite different in nature, will be our next destination – the Rhodopes. Their western part with rounded, pine-covered hills is occasionally cut by streams and rivers running through deep gorges. One of them is the famous Trigrad Gorge – the realm of the Wallcreeper. Its vertical limestone cliffs resound with the noise of numerous Alpine Swifts and Crag Martins and echo with the shrill calls of the Peregrine Falcon. The range of interesting and colorful plants in the Rhodopes is a feast for the eye – *Haberlea rhodopensis*, *Sideritis scardica*, *Scabiosa rhodopensis*, *Campanula cervicaria*, *Hypericum montbretii*, *Verbascum humile*, and many species of orchids.

Quite different is the view of the Eastern Rhodopes – it is a mountain of jagged peaks, towering cliffs and sparsely vegetated, boulder-strewn slopes. The most spectacular bird residents there are the Griffon Vultures, inhabiting the crater of an ancient volcano. Cinerous and Egyptian Vultures, White-tailed and Imperial Eagles are also frequent visitors of the feeding tables. We will see many Black Storks feeding in the rivers and enjoy the colourful Rock Nut-hatch, Red-rumped Swallow, Blue Rock Trush.

Itinerary:



- Day 1 Arrival at Sofia Airport and transfer to the Pirin / Rila Mountains
- Day 2 Pirin National Park
- Day 3 Rila National Park
- Days 4&5 Kerkini lake in Northern Greece
- Days 6&7 Melnik area in the foothills of the Pirin and Slavyanka Mountains
- Day 8 Transfer to the Western Rhodopes
- Day 9 The Western Rhodopes
- Day 10 Transfer to the Eastern Rhodopes
- Day 11 The Eastern Rhodopes
- Day 12 Transfer to Sofia via Koprivshtitsa
- Day 13 Departure

A visit to the Vulture Conservation Centre, run by the BSPB and Neophron Tours is also planned.

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Kerkini Lake



Rozhen Monastery