

SOUTHERN ITALY & NORTHERN GREECE

9 - 23 OCTOBER 2021

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We wanted to do a combined bird- and mammaltrip in October, and after some deliberation we decided to go to southern Italy, northern Greece and North Macedonia. None of these places seems to be very high up on most mammalwatchers wish-to-go-list. But for Italy we had a good reason, the newly split (by some) Cantabrian Black Squirrel and a slim chance for Crested Porcupine. In Greece Lake Kerkini is a famous bird destination, and North Macedonia – why not, haven't been there and the border is very close to Lake Kerkini. In the end we skipped the last country and stayed in Greece instead. Due to a lot of raining the week before we arrived in Greece the roads were very bad and to go to a country outside EU where we probably did not have permission to take the Greek rental car did not seem to be a good idea.

SOUTHERN ITALY

We landed in Naples and got the rental car from SurPrice Car Rentals outside the airport. Our hotel was situated on Vesuvius and should take around half an hour to drive to. But maps.me took us through most of central Naples on small roads and it took ages to drive just one km. Three hours later we reached our destination and there was no time to explore the volcano before it got dark. Rather tired after a too early morning we preferred a good sleep to be fit for coming nightdrives. Not so easy when it happened to be a bachelor party with karaoke at our hotel just that night.

After an interesting guided tour in Pompeii next morning, mostly in rain, we headed south along the coast. Our goal for the day was Sapri, a very nice little town, where **Variable (Finlayson's) Squirrel** has been introduced. When driving through small Capitello a few km before Sapri we found the squirrel beside the road on an electric wire. Managed to get some pictures before it disappeared in a tree. Despite walking around some hours in Sapri we did not find another one. I believe they are easier during summer when people visit the outdoor cafés. A nightdrive on a small road outside Sapri gave almost nothing. Lars had a short glimpse of a **Eurasian Badger** on the road when I scanned the hillside with the thermal scope.

The next two nights we had booked a hotel outside a small town, Francavilla Marittima, in the huge Pollino National Park. Admittedly the hotel Agriturismo B&B La Funicolare had a good breakfast but cannot be recommended to mammal watchers. After having booked we got a message that it had to be quiet after 24:00, and they had a gate that was closed at night. We told them we should be late and we were the only guests so it was ok but we found it best to be back at midnight.

At 7:30 pm we drove the short way to town for dinner. Just before the first buildings there was a bridge over some disturbed land. A rather big animal appeared at the roadside but went quickly out of sight at the end of the bridge. A badger or a porcupine? We jumped out of the car and I caught a tenth of a second glimpse from behind but could not tell what it was. The larger animal was gone but there were some **Brown Rats** around.

The second night I wanted to watch the rodents again so we stopped at the same bridge. We heard some rustle in the thickets and looked down, and there was in fact a **Crested Porcupine**! Probably it was the same animal as the day before and when we took a look at the place in daylight the next day, we found a big digged hole so maybe it lives there. It disappeared in the bush too fast so no photos.

Both nights we took a small road to the right just after passing through the town. Mostly plantations and some fields and very little traffic so easy to stop at the roadside. First night we had three **Red Foxes** and a **Western European Hedgehog**, second night six foxes, one hedgehog and a few **Kuhl's Pipistrelle**. With the thermal scope we saw some small rodents in the fields but we could not find them with the torch.

We spent the day in the mountains northwest of Francavilla Marittima searching for Cantabrian Black Squirrel. Through a researcher, we had received suggestions for three sites that would be good for the squirrel. We visited all of them, and after had been birding for an hour at the first site we heard the squirrel call and find it high up in a Cypress. A beautiful **Cantabrian Black Squirrel**. We were not allowed to reveal the given localities, for what reason I don't know, but I can say that all three were public areas with picnic tables and some coniferous forest.

All in all, we saw eight species of mammals in five full days but it was a surprisingly low density of them. For example, despite a lot of deer warning signs we did not see a single deer. Even the birdwatching was rather poor. The last day we birded in some wetlands and nature reserves outside Naples and were appalled that they looked like garbage dumps.



Variable (Finlayson's) Squirrel

Photo LP



Cantabrian Black Squirrel

Photo LP



Western European Hedgehog

Photo AE



Crested Porcupine site

Species list Southern Italy

1 Western European Hedgehog *Erinaceus europaeus*

Two seen along a small road outside Francavilla Marittima in the southeastern part of Pollino National Park.

2 Cantabrian Black Squirrel (Eurasian Red Squirrel) *Sciurus meridionalis* (*S. vulgaris*)

One in a picnic spot in the mountains northwest of Francavilla Marittima. Not everyone has recognised it as a full species yet.

3 Variabel Squirrel (Finlayson's Squirrel) *Callosciurus finlaysonii*

On an electric wire in the small place Capitello a few km north of Sapri. 40.07651, 15.555635
This species introduced from southeast Asia has its only European occurrence in a short distance along the coast in southern Italy.

4 Crested Porcupine *Hystrix cristata*

50 m west of the center of Francavilla Marittima on the right side of a bridge. Probably twice. 39.813185, 16.394859 The highlight of the days in Italy!

5 Brown Rat *Rattus norvegicus*

A few at the porcupine site.

6 Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*

A total of nine along the same road as the hedgehogs.

7 Eurasian Badger *Meles meles*

Only seen by Lars when driving a small road to the garbage dump outside Sapri.

8 Kuhl's Pipistrelle *Pipistrellus kuhlii*

A few hunting around some road lights close to the "Hedgehog Road".

NORTHERN GREECE

We took the flight from Naples to Thessaloniki and landed late in the evening. We got the rental car from Gold Car the next morning. Since we had decided to spend the rest of the time in Greece, we suddenly had a lot more time to explore the country. We did not know anything about mammalwatching in the northern part of Greece except that jackals would be common around Lake Kerkini. After a stupid and ill-considered journey south to Volos and the peninsula where Monk Seal had been seen, and which ended with two days unnecessary driving without seeing anything except for some common birds, we headed towards Prespa Lakes on the border to Albania and North Macedonia.

Outside Kastoria we stayed one night in Pansion Zafeiriou, a small boutique hotel which provided great value for money. After dinner we tried road EO15 north for a night drive. This worked out pretty well with 1 **Hazel Dormouse**, 3 **Edible Dormouse**, 2 **Wood Mouse**, 1 **Roe Deer** and 3 **European Hare**. A lot more rodents were seen in the thermal scope but not identified.

The next two days were spent around the two Prespa Lakes. We stayed overnight in the village Psarades that turned out to be a tourist place with small restaurants and boat trips on the larger Prespa Lake. The night drive downhill from the village gave 2 **Roe Deer**, 9 hares and 2 **Nathusius's Pipistrelle**. Late at night in the village there were 2 **Red Fox**, 1 **European Badger**, 1 **Stone Marten** and a hare. In the morning we saw two **Roe Deer** from the village so except for the bats everything was seen inside the village. When birding between the two Prespa Lakes next morning four **Wild Boar** came running out of the vegetation.

This northwestern corner of Greece seems to be a good place for bears according to all the warnings on road signs.

From Prespa Lakes we took road E65/E86 eastwards and found Small Hotel in Veve suitable for one night. During a short night drive in the surroundings, we saw 1 **Roe Deer**, 1 fox and 2 hares. In Veve itself there was a **Nathusius's Pipistrelle**.

We allowed time for many stops during the next day's transport to Lake Kerkini. An interesting cat on the roadside caught our eyes just outside Drosato. We stopped and found it hiding under some vegetation in the ditch. After a minute or two it ran away but later it crossed the road and walked in a field before it started to hunt some insects. It was incredible skinny and the head was rather small but the colour and the tail was perfect for a **European Wildcat**.

In Dojran Lake a **Coypu** rested on a log while another one was swimming by, and in Platanakia a **Eurasian Red Squirrel** crossed the road.

Limnaio Guesthouse in Chrysochorafa, on the eastern side of Lake Kerkini, was booked for three nights. The place is a must for birdwatchers as Niki is English speaking, has a lot of information about where to find different birds and offer boat trips on the lake. The days were spent visiting different locations for birding in the vicinity, and all three nights on the small road just beside the lake on the eastern side and on other small roads nearby. We found **Coypus** in a couple of dams, a **Northern White-breasted Hedgehog** close to the lake and a lot of small rodents we believe were **Macedonian Mouse** along the lake road. **Golden Jackals** were heard a couple of times, foxes were around as were different bats, and in the fields some small rodents only seen in the thermal scope.

We found Greece to be a much better area for mammalwatching than we had thought before the trip, and enjoyed the night drives a lot. Also birdwatching was fun with some good species and many individuals.



Hazel Dormouse

Photo LP



Edible Dormouse

Photo LP



Coypu

Photo AE



Eurasian Red Squirrel

Photo LP



European Wildcat

Photo LP



Wild Boar

Photo LP



Northern White-breasted Hedgehog

Photo LP



Dalmatian Pelican *Pelecanus crispus* Lake Kerkini

Photo LP



Balkan Emerald Lizard *Lacerta trilineata* Aetovouni quarry, Kerkini

Photo AE



Fire Salamander *Salamandra salamandra* Belles Mountains

Photo AE

Species list Northern Greece

1 Northern White-breasted Hedgehog *Erinaceus roumanicus*

One along the road beside the eastern side of Lake Kerkini.

2 European Hare *Lepus europaeus*

13 around Prespa Lakes, 2 around Veve.

3 Coypu *Myocastor coypus*

Two in Dojran Lake, at least three in small dams on the eastern side of Lake Kerkini.

4 Eurasian Red Squirrel *Sciurus vulgaris*

One crossing the road in Platanakia, one jumping around on the road in Belles Mountains.

5 Hazel Dormouse *Muscardinus avellanarius*

One along road EO15 north of Kastoria close to the Edible Dormouse spot.

6 Edible Dormouse *Glis glis*

Three seen well, a few only in the thermal scope along road EO15 north of Kastoria.

40.582251, 21.195982

7 Long-tailed Field Mouse (Wood Mouse) *Apodemus sylvaticus*

Several in one place along road EO15 north of Kastoria

8 Macedonian Mouse *Mus macedonicus*

Probably this species in bushes beside the small road along the eastern side of Lake Kerkini.

Many of them but difficult to see as they hid directly when turned on the flashlight.

9 European Wildcat *Felis silvestris*

Outside Drosato. We were a little suspicious if it was a pure Wildcat and not a hybrid but comments on Facebook group Mammalwatching Europe found it to be real. 41.172208, 22.78566 Another cat was seen only in the thermal scope in a place beside Lake Kerkini where there was said to be a litter of Wildcats.

10 Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*

A total of eight seen around Prespa Lakes, Veve and Lake Kerkini.

11 Stone Marten *Martes foina*

One at the harbour in Psarades, Prespa Lakes.

12 Eurasian Badger *Meles meles*

One in Psarades, Prespa Lakes.

13 Wild Boar *Sus scrofa*

A group of four between the two Prespa Lakes. 40.809542, 21.069811 One in Lake Kerkini.

14 European Roe deer *Capreolus capreolus*

At least eight seen around Prespa Lakes, Veve and Lake Kerkini.

15 Noctule *Nyctalus noctula*

One seen flying in Lake Kerkini. Detected with Echometer Touch 2 and according to size and behaviour it was this species.

16 Kuhl's Pipistrelle *Pipistrellus kuhlii*

Two seen flying around our hotel in Thessaloniki. Detected with Echometer Touch 2 several times and were probably this species.

17 Nathusius's Pipistrelle *Pipistrellus nathusii*

Detected with Echometer Touch 2 many times and seen in Prespa Lakes, Veve and Lake Kerkini. Seems to be very common, often in towns.

18 Soprano Pipistrelle *Pipistrellus pygmaeus*

Many flying around over the water at the little temple along the small road beside Lake Kerkini.

(Golden Jackal *Canis aureus*)

Only heard. Once around Lake Kerkini and once when driving small roads outside Chrysochorafa.

(Bats)

Some other bats were detected with the Echometer and sometimes seen but as this observations is not really reliable unless the sonograms are analyzed we only counted common species we saw well and there size, habitat, behavior and the detector agreed.

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