

# BirdLife Denmark twenty years in Prespa

**The Prespa lakes on the borders between Greece, Albania and the FYR of Macedonia are one of the finest bird areas in Europe. Nearly 1000 pairs of Dalmatian pelican breed here – the largest colony in the world. The Danish Ornithological Society (DOF) - BirdLife Denmark - has for more than 20 years been co-operating with other partners, including Greek nature organizations, to protect the nature of Prespa. The latest result is an attractive nature guide in English and Greek.**

By *Jørgen Stubgaard*, DOF's International Committee

Since 1991, the Society for the Protection of Prespa (SPP) has been the driving force in the protection of this unique natural area in the north-western corner of Greece, on the borders with Albania and the FYR of Macedonia. DOF – with the support of the Aage V. Jensen Charity Foundation – has been an active member from the very beginning, together with seven Greek NGOs, one French NGO and one English NGO. (See SPP's homepage [www.spp.gr](http://www.spp.gr)).

Most of the Greek section of Prespa, with Lake Mikri Prespa and Lake Megali Prespa, is a national park and internationally protected (Ramsar Convention, EU Bird Directive, NATURA 2000, etc.). The area is unique in Europe due to the diversity of its flora and fauna species and its many cultural vestiges. More than 1500 plant species have been registered, and 172 of Greece's 234 species of butterfly can be seen in Prespa. Among the more than 160 species of breeding birds figure two pelican species, including the world's largest colony of Dalmatian pelican, six species of heron, glossy ibis and two species of cormorant, one of them being the pygmy cormorant. There are nine endemic species of fish in Prespa, and of the 60 species of mammals, no less than 26 are bats.

## **PRESPA WALKING GUIDE**

The book is available in both an English and Greek edition. The 200 richly illustrated pages describe 14 walks in the national park. There are chapters on geology, flora, birds, butterflies, other fauna, settlement history, cultural monuments, traditional architecture, agriculture and tourism, nature protection and the restoration of the wet meadows. Four brand new maps (1:25,000) can also be used for scientific purposes (nature monitoring). The GPS positions of each of the individual information points on the routes are marked on the map.

The book project started in 2006 and in the editorial group we have been able to draw on the knowledge of some of the leading experts in Greece. But apart from the many hours of work in the field and meetings to discuss planning, most of the editing has been done over the internet, involving Greece, Denmark and England, home of the chief editor Kevin Standring (who has worked for many years for the RSPB).

Publication of the book and the map has only been possible thanks to a generous donation from the Aage V. Jensen Charity Foundation. The Foundation has previously also supported the setting up of an information center in Prespa, workshops in nature interpretation, study visits to Denmark, and two other publications about Prespa, namely *Prespa. A story for man and nature* (1996) and *The book of pelicans* (2002), both written by the biologist Dr. Giorgos Catsadorakis. He was one of the founders of DOF's sister organisation in Greece, the Hellenic Ornithological Society, and in 2001 he and the SPP's director, the biologist Myrsini Malakou, were awarded the prestigious international Goldman Environmental Prize for Europe for their many years of research and conservation work in Prespa.

## **CO-OPERATION ACROSS BORDERS**

The *Prespa Walking Guide* should also be seen as a pilot project in relation to other Greek national parks and especially the Transboundary Prespa Park, which is a trilateral development and nature conservation project between Greece, Albania and the FYR of Macedonia for the whole of the Prespa basin. The project began in February 2000 with a visit to Prespa of the Prime Ministers of all three countries and with the SPP as the driving force and secretariat. In November 2009, in Prespa, the Prime Ministers again confirmed the co-operation and in February 2010, at the same place, the Ministers for the Environment of all three countries signed the new agreement together with EU's Commissioner for the Environment. The agreement was then confirmed on 23rd May 2011 by both the European Parliament and EU's Council of Ministers. (Read more about this on [www.spp.gr](http://www.spp.gr)).

## **DOF AND DN WERE INVOLVED FROM THE START**

The history of DOF in Prespa started as long ago as 1988, when the then Director for Denmark's Nature Conservation Society (DN), David Rehling, was Vice-President for the European Environmental Bureau in Brussels. EEB's Greek President, Professor Michael J. Scoullou, asked for international help for Prespa, as its nature and birdlife were threatened by continued drainage and cultivation - despite the area's status as a national park. Rehling therefore approached the Aage V. Jensen Charity Foundation and the visionary President of DOF and the Bird Protection Foundation, Lorenz Ferdinand. The idea was to buy up the threatened wetlands at Lake Mikri Prespa.

The Foundations delegated Lorenz Ferdinand, the Vice-President of the Nature Conservation Society Flemming Thorning-Lund and the Bird Protection Foundation's biologist Uffe Gjøl Sørensen to visit the area. They discovered that it is expensive and complicated to purchase land in Greece, but especially that the idea of foreign capital being used to buy up land in a remote and isolated corner of Greece would hardly be met with enthusiasm on the part of the local population. The best way to make progress would be to get the Greek NGOs to work together to protect the area.

On several ensuing visits, this trio had a decisive communicative role in a process in which the Greek NGOs started working together for the conservation of Prespa. In the difficult initial phases, the experiences gained in Denmark were very welcome, Uffe Gjøl Sørensen relates today. For a Greek, it was in fact a new experience to hear about co-operation between green organizations, and the fact that the considerable voluntary work carried out by enthusiastic members was a decisive factor compelled great respect. As Gjøl Sørensen had moreover visited Prespa in 1987 as a consultant for the EU Commission in connection with the implementation of the Bird Directive, a network had already been established to the key persons in Greece, amongst others to Thymio Papayannis, President of the SPP since 2004.

## **LUC HOFFMANN AND PRESPA**

Another key person concerned with Prespa and the SPP, whom DOF also contacted at that time, is the internationally known pioneer in nature conservation and biologist, Dr. Luc Hoffmann, who lives in Switzerland. He had already visited Prespa in 1970 together with a team from the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Hoffmann, now 89, who was President for the SPP 1991-2003, played an essential role in establishing the IUCN, WWF, IWRB (now Wetlands International) and in drawing up the Ramsar Convention. Hoffmann himself and his research station, Tour du Valat

([www.tourduvalat.org](http://www.tourduvalat.org)) in the Camargue (France) are central in the work at Prespa, too. Contributions from Luc Hoffmann's family foundation, MAVA ([www.mava-foundation.org](http://www.mava-foundation.org)) have from the start been crucial for the development and the daily running of the SPP, which is a fully professional organisation with a yearly budget of over 1 million euros.

### **100 HECTARES OF WET MEADOWS**

Although the idea of buying up the land was soon abandoned, the SPP has nonetheless succeeded in restoring over 100 ha of wet meadows at Lake Mikri Prespa thanks to a purposeful effort. This was made possible through agreements with the municipality and local farmers, and in 2002-07 within the framework of a successful EU LIFE project (designated as one of 5 "Best of the Best" LIFE Nature Projects 2007-2008). And the results did not fail to materialize. The glossy ibis has recently returned as a breeding bird, and it is now expected that the spoonbill will become re-established. The first two birds were seen in the spring of 2011. The nature management work involves, incidentally, both water buffaloes and machinery. Co-operation with an Albanian NGO resulted in the first wet meadows in the Albanian section of the lake in 2010. The wet meadows in Prespa do not just benefit waterbirds but also spawning fish. A new three-year LIFE+ project to impart information about fish and fishery in Prespa started in October 2010.

### **EXCHANGE OF EXPERIENCE**

The SPP and DOF/Bird Protection Foundation still exchange experiences on the management of wetlands. Since 2001, when the author of this article succeeded Lorenz Ferdinand in the SPP committee, co-operation has, however, mainly been concentrated on awareness-raising of natural and cultural history in the form of nature interpretation, environmental education and development of sustainable ecotourism. The *Prespa Walking Guide* is an example of this. In the course of the years, the Bird Protection Foundation's biologist Søren Ferdinand Hansen, and the nature interpreters Anders Tvevad and Allan Gudio Nielsen, amongst others, have been active in the Prespa co-operation.

DOF Travel (the committee that arranges tours for DOF members) has arranged tours to Prespa in 2005 and 2006, and another is forthcoming in May 2012. If one wishes to visit Prespa independently, one can fly to Thessaloniki and hire a car. It can be a good idea to take the opportunity to visit Lake Kerkini, another excellent bird site north of Thessaloniki on the Bulgarian border. On [www.spp.gr](http://www.spp.gr) one can subscribe to receive SPP's newsletters free of charge.

Editor's note: Since 2001, nature interpreter Jørgen Stubgaard has represented DOF on the SPP's committee and has been a member of the editorial group working on the *Prespa Walking Guide*. He has been a member of DOF's International Committee for many years and from 1976 to 2001 was a member of DOF's Executive Committee, where one of his posts was as President of the society's Public Relations Committee.

(Translated from Danish by *Joy Klein*).