

Bird Sites of the OSME Region 5— Birdwatching in the Meriç delta in NW Turkey

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LOCATION OF THE MERIÇ DELTA

The Meriç delta is huge and lies along the westernmost land border between Greece and European Turkey, the Meriç river draining into the Aegean. The Greek section is better known as the Evros delta (Figure 1). It appears that few European birdwatchers have looked for birds on the Turkish side, however, the area is easy to explore and is only about 350 km west of Istanbul. Birdwatching opportunities are very good throughout the year, even on short visits. Here I suggest some parts to visit.

Any information about the birds of the delta is highly welcomed, *eg* by Doğa Derneği (www.dogadernegi.org) for conservation purposes. Threats, actual and potential, to the natural wealth of this site unfortunately are numerous. Excessive water use, eutrophication and pesticide pollution, all related to industrial agricultural practices, are main threats. Furthermore, the freshwater lakes are liable to silt up and suffer salt water intrusion in dry summers, a contributory cause being excessive water uptake by irrigation. These problems not only have affected the natural values of the area but are also implicated in the collapse

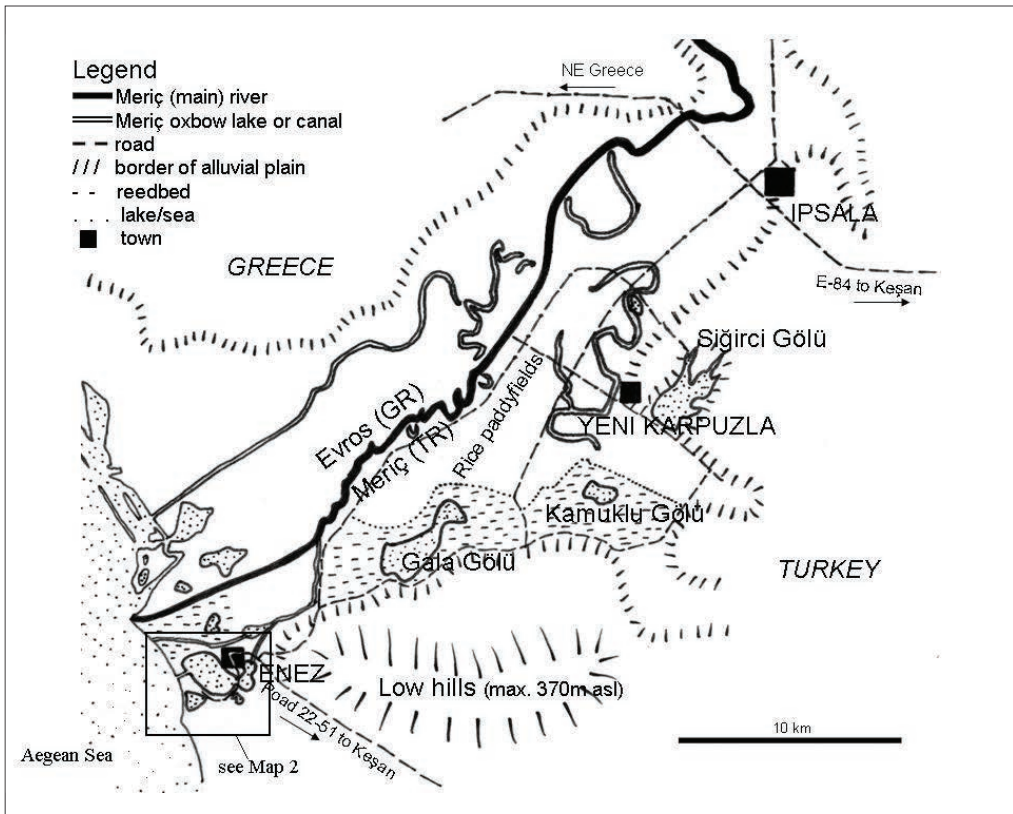


Figure 1. General map of the Meriç delta. © Olivier Dochy

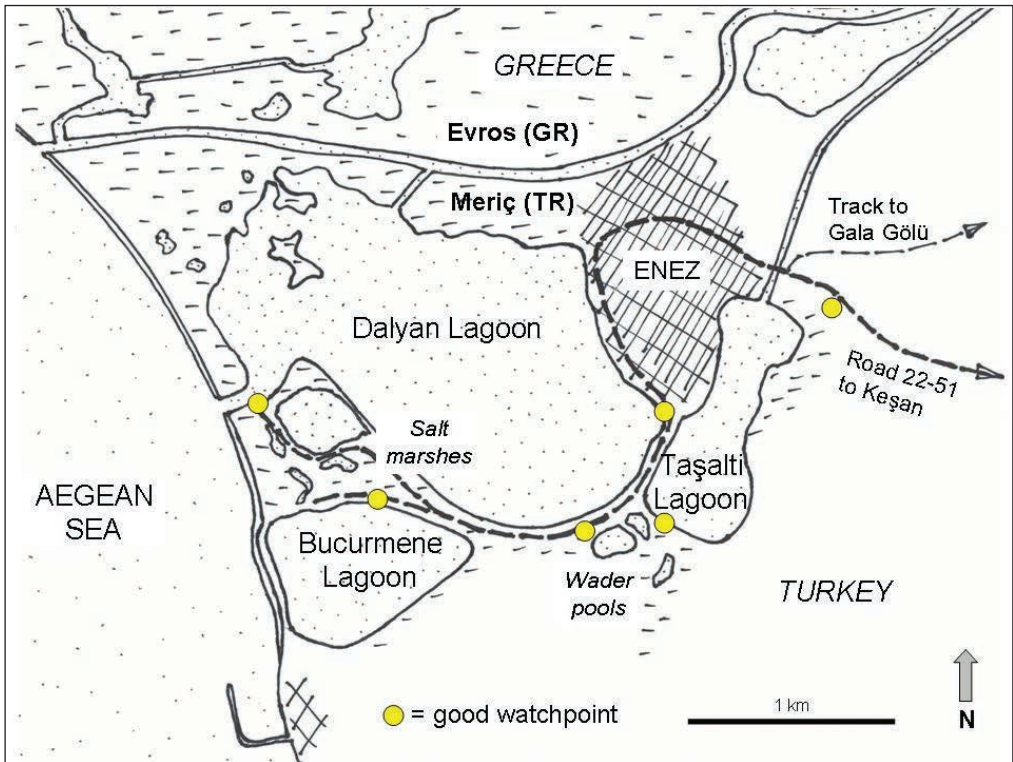


Figure 2. Map of the Meriç river mouth near the town of Enez, with birdwatching locations indicated (yellow circles). The road to the lagoons west of town is a dirt track. © Olivier Dochy

of the local fishing industry since the 1990s (www.birdlife.org, www.inweb.gr). As can be seen from websites such as www.enez.gov.tr and www.watersee.net and from my own experience, there is urgent need for active and effective conservation management on both sides of the border. On the Greek side intensive hunting pressure appears to be an additional problem (www.ornithologiki.gr).

The Meriç/Evros delta is listed as two adjacent Important Bird Areas (IBA) (BirdLife International 2005, Heath & Evans 2000), the respective designations being TR001 and GR006. In the Meriç delta, 2369 ha of TR001 are designated as a Nature Reserve and 7000 ha as SİT, a protected area defined under the 1983 national Law on Protection of Cultural and Natural Assets. In the Evros delta, some 4600 ha of GR006 are designated a Wildlife Refuge, 9267 ha are a RAMSAR Site and 9218 ha as a Special Protection Area. Little ornithological information for visitors appears to be available, or at least widely distributed, about the Turkish part of the delta, and I was unable to find any useful trip reports. In mid April 2006 and at the end of April and early May 2007, I was in a group of Belgian birdwatchers visiting the Meriç delta. I hope that our experiences can help birdwatchers and conservationists alike.

NATURAL HABITATS IN THE MERIÇ DELTA

The delta is a broad floodplain, about 10 km wide, of which half is in Greece, the other half in Turkey. On the Turkish side, most of the area was once covered with floodplain (gallery) forests and marshes. The forest has nearly completely vanished as has much of the marshland, which has become paddyfields, producing about 25% of all Turkish rice. However, at the southern edge of the floodplain, large natural marsh areas containing extensive

reedbeds still remain, such as the lakes Gala Gölü and Pamuklu Gölü. The floodplain fills every year but inconsistently so, depending on precipitation upstream as far as the Bulgarian mountains. In spring 2006, the Bulgarian mountains had received enough snow to thoroughly inundate the plain in April, but the next year there was no inundation, with only the lakes holding water.

Near the river mouth, the tamarisk-covered marshland extends into the salt marshes towards the Aegean sea—the marshes contain many lagoons, large and small, around the town of Enez (Figure 2). To the south of the delta there is a hilly area, mostly covered by broadleaved forests on the steepest hillsides, the rest being semi-open Mediterranean scrub grazed by various kinds of livestock. We didn't visit the true remnant forest, but such patches are probably worth exploring for forest birds and breeding raptors. In April, all these habitats, save the bare paddyfields, are very rich in bird life, but we concentrated on the Gala Gölü marshes inland and the Enez lagoons at the coast. Typical habitats are at Plates 1–6.

BIRDS OF THE MERİÇ DELTA

Useful data on the site can be obtained from Birdlife International (2005). The numbers in Table 1, extracted from Heath & Evans (2000), give an indication of how rich this site is. I suggest you also check these websites: www.cevreorman.gov.tr (in Turkish) and www.birdwatchingtourturkey.com.

Of course, the Greek side has a very similar bird community, making the delta one of the best birdwatching areas in Europe. Our own observations on 21 and 22 April 2006 and on 30 April to 1 May 2007 in the Gala Gölü area included these maxima (2006/2007): Great White Pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus* (60/2), Pygmy Cormorant *Phalacrocorax pygmeus* (20/50), Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea* (50/50), Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides* (20/75), Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia* (5/5), Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus* (42/250), Black Stork *Ciconia*

Table 1. Important species and their numbers in the Meriç delta (Heath & Evans 2000).

Species	Season	Year	Max
Mute Swan <i>Cygnus olor</i>	Non-breeding	1999	8900
Whooper Swan <i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	Non-breeding	1998	1200
Eurasian Teal <i>Anas crecca</i>	Non-breeding	1999	12400
Common Pochard <i>Aythya ferina</i>	Non-breeding	1996	15528
Glossy Ibis <i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	Breeding	-	100
Eurasian Spoonbill <i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	Breeding	-	40
Little Bittern <i>Ixobrychus minutus</i>	Breeding	-	50
Black-crowned Night Heron <i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	Breeding	-	200
Squacco Heron <i>Ardeola ralloides</i>	Breeding	1997	300
Purple Heron <i>Ardea purpurea</i>	Breeding	1997	100
Great Egret <i>Ardea alba</i>	Non-breeding	1993	260
Little Egret <i>Egretta garzetta</i>	Breeding	1994	470
Dalmatian Pelican <i>Pelecanus crispus</i>	Non-breeding	1998	610
Pygmy Cormorant <i>Phalacrocorax pygmeus</i>	Non-breeding	1998	20000
Great Cormorant <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	Non-breeding	1999	9300
Greater Spotted Eagle <i>Aquila clanga</i>	Non-breeding	1989	10
Eurasian Coot <i>Fulica atra</i>	Non-breeding	1999	31300
Black-winged Stilt <i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	Breeding	1994	350
Collared Pratincole <i>Glareola pratincola</i>	Breeding	1994	200
Little Gull <i>Larus minutus</i>	Passage	-	700
Little Tern <i>Sternula albifrons</i>	Breeding	-	200
Whiskered Tern <i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>	Breeding	1993	500



Plate 1. Reed and inundated agricultural habitat at Gala Gölü, Meriç delta, Turkey, looking west, 2006 © Olivier Dochy



Plate 2. Same area as Plate 1 but no inundations, 2007 © Olivier Dochy



Plate 3. Wetland habitat at Gala Gölü, Meriç delta, Turkey, 2007 © Koen Lepla



Plate 4. Grazed scrub habitat, Gala Gölü, Meriç delta, Turkey, looking east, 2006 © Olivier Dochy



Plate 5. Small-scale fishing activities in water courses near inundated rice fields, Meriç delta, Turkey, 2006 © Koen Vandepitte



Plate 6. Habitat near Enez at Bucurmene lagoon, Meriç delta, Turkey, 2006 © Roland Vannieuwenhuyze

nigra (2/1), Mute Swan *Cygnus olor* (470/8), Garganey *Anas querquedula* (230/0), Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca* (2/25), Short-toed Snake Eagle *Circus gallicus* (1/0), White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* (2/2, breeding), Lesser Spotted Eagle *Aquila pomarina* (0/1), Collared Pratincole *Glareola pratincola* (20+/0), at least 2000 Little Gulls *Larus minutus* in a continuous migration stream in a NE direction in 2006, only 6 in 2007, Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne caspia* (6/15), Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon nilotica* (25/5), Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybrida* (50+/150+), White-winged Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus* (15/40), Spur-winged Lapwing *Vanellus spinosus* (0/2 on lake sandbar) and Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus* (0/40). Other species included Isabelline *Oenanthe isabellina* and Black-eared *O. hispanica* Wheatears (both common), Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius*, Eastern Orphean Warbler *Sylvia crassirostris*, Northern Raven *Corvus corax*, Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis*

(hundreds on active migration), Lesser Grey Shrike *Lanius minor* (1 in 2007) and Ortolan Bunting *Emberiza hortulana* (6/3).

In the Enez lagoon area on the same dates we saw a few Black-necked *Podiceps nigricollis* and Great Crested *P. cristatus* Grebes, Great Bittern *Botaurus stellaris* (1 heard in 2006), Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus* (0/250), Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons* (1ad/0), Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna* (15/8) and 13 species of waders including Little Stint *Calidris minuta* (5/100), Curlew Sandpiper *C. ferruginea* (15/400), Dunlin *C. alpina* (0/10), Pied Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta* (10/2), Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus* (4 breeding in 2006), Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola* (1/9), Marsh Sandpiper *Tringa stagnatilis* (15/0) and Spotted Redshank *T. erythropus* (3/1). Spur-winged Lapwing was not encountered in 2006, but in 2007 we found 7 birds at 3 locations around the lagoons (3–4 breeding pairs, judging by alarm calls). Also, we recorded Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei* (1/0), Mediterranean Gull *L. melanocephalus* (colony of c2000 birds in 2006, but although no breeding evidence in 2007, 5000 roosted on Dalyan lagoon at night), Gull-billed Tern (3/1), Little Gull (50/0), Little Tern *Sternula albifrons* (6/10), Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* (colony of c200 birds in 2006, but only 20 birds around in 2007), Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra* and Skylark *Alauda arvensis* (in saltmarsh). With more time to explore this huge area, our bird list would have been much longer. A few species are illustrated at Plates 7–12.

Specialities such as Lesser White-fronted Goose *Anser erythropus* and Red-breasted Goose *Branta ruficollis* (winter) and Greater Spotted Eagle *Aquila clanga* might well be around (even Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris*?), and so might almost any imaginable migrant . . . The numbers of cormorants and pelicans we observed were rather low. Is this due to the depleted fish populations in the lakes? Especially for the pelicans, this delta has always been an important migration stopover site, because suitable lakes are scarce and very much needed for these large birds. Urgent action backed by research seems needed to remedy the situation. For a detailed list of all butterflies (Lepidoptera), dragonflies (Odonata), amphibians (Amphibia) and other wildlife, check our trip reports (detailed below).

WHERE TO GO

See Google Earth for good detailed satellite maps, but for general guidance, see Figures 1 and 2.

Gala Gölü and surroundings (mid-western part)

When you arrive at Enez from the south, you come to a bridge just before the city. Turn right before the bridge and then right again. This road will take you to Gala Gölü. To avoid official sensitivities, it is best not to stop here or to use binoculars and cameras before passing the military border area. Follow the north side of the low hills that border the alluvial plains on the dirt road. Shortly you will see the immense reed beds of Gala Gölü (Figure 1). At many places it is possible to walk up the slope of the hills to overlook the marshes in excellent light conditions (the sun is behind you). The slopes are grazing pastures intermixed with scrub and are teeming with songbirds, reptiles, dragonflies and butterflies. If you continue along this road as far as you can go, you will finally reach Pamuklu Gölü, which is also part of the National Park. In between, there is a minor road leading north through the reedbeds. In neither year did we succeed in reaching Pamuklu Gölü, because this route passes very interesting habitats holding so many birds that we never finished exploring it! Keep an eye out for raptors over the forested hills too, and for migrating birds following the valley.



Plate 7. Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea*, Gala Gölü, 2007
© Koen Lepla



Plate 8. Spur-winged Lapwing *Vanellus spinosus*, Enez 2007 © Koen Lepla



Plate 9. Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea* flock, Enez 2007 © Koen Lepla

Enez area (western part)

Near Enez, there are more bird-rich lagoons. Drive into the town (over the bridge mentioned above), follow the main road and you'll arrive at the town centre. Continue on this main road, which turns left beyond the main square. You then reach the Bucurmene (brackish water) and Taşalti lagoons (salt water) and Dalyan lake (fresh water). To search out where the birds are, you can drive along the road or walk a little further through the salt marshes (Figure 2). The pools south of Taşalti lagoon are especially good for resting waders. We found Spur-winged Lapwing here and also at the pools between Dalyan lake and Bucurmene lagoon. There are probably many mosquitoes here on warm evenings, so take insect repellent. You can easily spend a day just around here checking all lagoons and their shores.

To the east of the village of Yeni Karpuzla, there is a fairly large dam lake, Siğirci Gölü (Figure 1). The lake shores are mostly bare and at first sight don't look very interesting for



Plate 10. Mediterranean Gull *Larus melanocephalus* flock, Tasalti lagoon, near Enez 2007 © Koen Leppla

marsh birds, but it could be worth checking for waterfowl in winter, or if you have spare time in any other season.

TRANSPORT

Moving around is easiest by 4WD. We had a minibus, but a normal car would cope if the tracks are dry, but during rainy weather or for some time after, the muddier tracks should be considered impassable without 4WD—the very interesting track on the south side of Gala Gölü is in this category. There are no detailed printed maps available as far as we know, but there are internet sources with detailed satellite photographs (for personal use only) that mostly show every path in the area. You can follow links from the BirdLife website. If you can obtain authorised prints of satellite maps, you will find they are simply the best help you can get, useful for informing your notes as you can distinguish every single tree on them! For other directions we used the map ‘Marmara Bölgesi’ (Marmara region map, 1:375 000) from Mapmedia (fairly easy to find in Turkey itself). It mentions most of the small villages and gives good indications of directions, but you will need some ‘intuition’ in town centres. Where you most need a map is when you are leaving Istanbul after your arrival in Turkey to navigate the spaghetti of highways.

Access to the delta area is possible via two main centres: either from the west through Enez for the western half of the delta, or from the east through the border town of Ipsala, negotiating the villages bordering the delta, especially Yeni Karpuzla, to visit the paddy-fields, dam lakes and scattered marshy areas. There are currently extensive large-scale drainage and flood-control works that have rendered some minor roads impassable, such as the direct route from Yeni Karpuzla to Enez. As these works progress, different areas will be affected and so you should check with local people before planning your day. At present, to reach Enez from Ipsala even if time is short, it is advisable to detour via Keşan and from there take road 22–51 to the west (86 km in total).



Plate 11. Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybrida* flock, Gala Gölü 2007 © Koen Lepla



Plate 12. Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris*, Enez dunes 2007 © Koen Lepla

WHERE TO STAY

We stayed at Ipsala, the border town just before entering Greece. There is only one hotel, Sebat Otel (sebatotel@ttnet.net.tr, tel. (+90) (0) (284) 616 15 61). The receptionist did speak some English. We paid c9 € /person /night, but without breakfast (15 TL). For birdwatchers, a nice attraction is surely the c25 Lesser Kestrels *Falco naumanni* breeding on the hotel and nearby buildings! Shops abound in Ipsala for your daily picnic goodies and drinks. Most shops in Turkey are open by 7am and close at 9pm or even later. The town of Enez at the river mouth has a simple hotel at the town centre (Hotel Ege, tel. (0-284)811 60 86, sim-itimo@hotmail.com). Staying here would save you a long drive westwards in the morning.

BORDER POLICE

This is a sensitive border area between Greece and Turkey, with many military installations and police controls. You are not allowed to drive along border tracks or to take photographs here, but on most other roads you can roam freely.

FURTHER INFORMATION

We made a detailed report of our trip in April 2006 when we also explored the interesting and nearby Gallipoli peninsula. This report and the 2007 extension are available through www.osme.org.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We wish to thank Ozkan Uner for his useful information about where to go. I would also like to thank the other members of the trip crew for their exploration spirit and good laughs: Johan Debuck, Wim Declercq, Regy Goemaere, Ignaas Robbe, Koen Lepla, Ludo Momerency, Koen Vandepitte and Roland Vannieuwenhuyze.

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