Northern Greece, 01. - 15. 06.2009

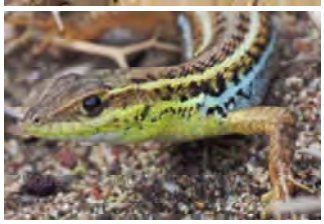
For the two weeks of our trip to Northern Greece we had scheduled five stations: the Ossa mountains, the Metsovo area, subsequently some days at the coast of Parga, afterwards the Vikos National Park and finally the Konitsa area.

Nice beach at Kokkino Nero at the wooded eastern slopes of Mount Ossa

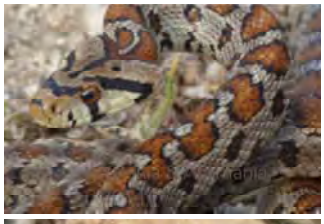
During our trip we saw great mountain ranges with a remarkable flora and a rich herpetofauna – combined with summer temperatures and a (mostly) blue sky: the perfect ingredients for a wonderful trip! Although this time, there was no “must-have” reptile species on our list, our report is somehow “lizard-focused”.

Ossa

Our first station, the Ossa mountains, can be reached from Thessaloniki airport in 2 hours. Although only 1900 m high and not very extensive, this mountain range combines very different landscapes: the eastern shores to the Aegean Sea are green and densely wooded, the western slopes are extremely arid. The high altitude areas consist of karstified limestone. Hence, these mountains show a rich flora and fauna.



At the seashore we found Typhlops vermicularis and



Lacerta trilineata trilineata

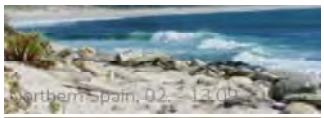
In the forest we came across this Podarcis erhardii riveti with remarkable pattern. We noticed Podarcis erhardii and Podarcis muralis at several places in the Ossa Mountains, in the Vikos-National Park and in the Smolikas area. Sometimes it was difficult to distinguish between these species. We didn't find any geographical separation – P. erhardii at low altitudes and P. muralis at high altitudes – either.

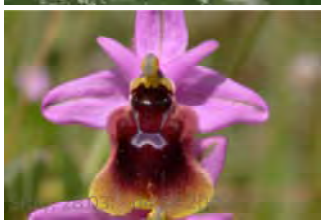
We had a beautiful but exhausting hike from the village of Spilia to the Mount Ossa. Later on, we realized that now there is an asphalt road (which didn't exist in our map) up to the Kissavou-refuge. From there, it is not far to the Ossa peak. We hoped to find Lacerta viridis in the peak area but the weather was stormy up there, so we weren't lucky.

The high altitudes of Ossa are sparsely vegetated but anyhow rich in species.

At an altitude of 1400 m Ablepharus kitaibellii was very abundant. We noticed them sun-basking on stones.

Here, we also came across this female Anguis graeca and...





...Zamenis situla – the cloudy eyes show that this specimen was about to shed its skin

Descending from Ossa, we came across this adult Testudo marginata and subsequently...

...a juvenile specimen

Amata kruegeri

Parnassius mnemosyne on Astragalus angustifolius

The Western foothills of Ossa – in this dry habitat we found numerous species, e.g.:

Pelophylax kurtmuelleri in a cattle watering tank

Nemoptera sinuata

A fierce grasshopper: Saga hellenica

Metsovo

Leaving Ossa, we passed Larissa and Meteora and finally arrived at Metsovo which is a good starting point for trips to the Pindos, the Katara-Pass and the Peristeri mountains. The village with its ski resort is a popular destination for greek tourists and quite busy. However, we had a good time during our stay. The Katara-area has a remarkable flora but we had to realize that our knowledge about the greek mountain flora is rather limited...

View to Metsovo from the Katara-Pass

A typical plant of the Katara area: Campanula hawkinsiana

Dactylorhiza kalopissii with dotted lip

At lower altitudes in the Pindos mountains: Iris sintenisii

Time and again tortoises (Testudo hermanni) were crossing the roads

We took the extremely dangerous – although asphalted – road with numerous rockfalls from Metsovo towards the village of Haliki in the mountains. Up there, we were rewarded by wonderful orchid meadows with Cephalanthera longifolia, Coeloglossum viride, Dactylorhiza sambucina, Orchis pinetorum and Orchis ustulata. At an altitude of 1600 m we found a pond with five amphibian species: Pelophylax sp., Bombina variegata, Hyla arborea, Mesotriton alpestris and probably Triturus macedonikus. Our way home was an adventure, as a thunderstorm turned the road into a muddy torrent.

Between Metsovo and Haliki

Dactylorhiza sambucina

A pale variant of Orchis pinetorum

Podarcis muralis

Bombina variegata

Hyla arborea

One of our most beautiful hikes led us to the lonely Peristeri mountains. At the high altitudes of that range Lacerta agilis bosnica occurs – after intensive search we finally found those lizards. At lower altitudes Lacerta viridis viridis was common but very shy and difficult to photograph – we finally managed to take a snapshot of a specimen sitting on the road.

Mount Peristeri – habitat of...

Lacerta agilis bosnica: male

A female

Another male

Crocus veluchensis flourishing in beneath of a snowfield

Male Lacerta viridis viridis at Metsovo

Parga

After our stay in the mountains we spent two days at the beach of Parga – with a little bit of herping in the surrounding wetlands. At summer temperatures our herping activities were limited to the morning hours and the evening.

The islets off the coast of Parga

Extensive wetlands in the area of Parga: home of

Natrix natrix persa...

...and Natrix tessellata

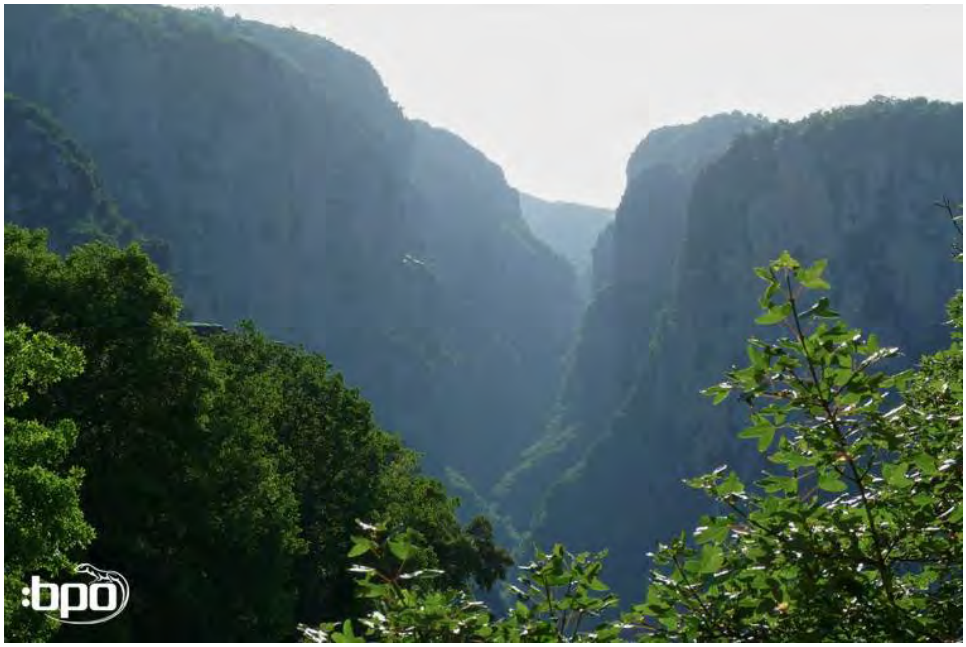
Pelophylax sp (ridibundus or epeiroticus)

Emys orbicularis hellenica

In Greece, Lacerta trilineata major can only be found at the west coast

Vikos National Park

After some hot days at the sea we longed for the moderate climate in the Vikos National Park. But meanwhile, the summer had also started in the mountains. So our hiking tours were not too extensive.



Morning sun in the Vikos gorge

Algyroides nigropunctatus

Podarcis erhardii

Himantoglossum caprinum

Ophrys epirotica

Ophrys cerastes: note the hairless inner sides of the lateral lobes, separating this species from O. oestrifera

View from the Astraka refuge to the Timfi Mountains: A good place for spring flowers like...

...Armeria rumelica and

Saxifraga marginata

Assembling of Libythea celtis at the shore of the Voidomatis river

Apatura metis

Konitsa and Smolikas

Konitsa is a good starting point for trips to the Smolikas: it's a busy place with some hotels and a basic infrastructure with shops and filling stations. The area beyond is sparsely populated with endless forests and mountain ranges – for us this is one of the highlights in Greece. Due to the completion of the motorway across the Pindos, there is now hardly any traffic on the quite scenic route (E90) from Konitsa to Siatista. Hence, we really enjoyed our excursion in that area.

The village of Konitsa at the western foothills of the Smolikas range

View from the southern slopes of Smolikas to the Timfi mountains

Geranium versicolor

Marshy meadow with Dactylorhiza saccifera and other Dactylorhiza species

Dactylorhiza baumanniana

Orchis coriophora

Lacerta viridis

Rana graeca

Cordulegaster heros

Pinguicula crystallina hirtiflora

Lilium albanicum: a botanical highlight of that area

Epilog: Chalkidiki

With regard to our return flight from Thessaloniki we spent our last day at a beach hotel near Gerakini on the Chalkidiki (40 minutes from the airport): Our last day for herping!

Lacerta viridis (meridionalis?)

Podarcis erhardii

Psakoudia beach: home of

...Lacerta viridis meridionalis and...

...Testudo graeca

A juvenile Testudo graeca

Bufo viridis

Mediodactylus kotschyi visiting our hotel at night

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