Title **To view the original PDF of this World Birdwatch article,** click here. The Hellenic Ornithological Society (HOS, BirdLife in Greece) is one of the largest membership based conservation non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Greece. In order to monitor the many Important Bird Areas (IBAs) scattered around the country, HOS needs a network of volunteer ?eyes and ears? on the ground, to gather information and eventually act to protect sites. The involvement of local people in this process can build sustainability and continuity. The first publication on IBAs in Greece was produced in 1994; and an updated IBA inventory was completed in 2009. To date, 196 sites have been identified. The IBAs cover a total area of 3,218,183 ha; 97.8% are on land. They cover 24.4% of Greece?s land area, the fifth highest percentage within the 27 member countries of the European Union, after Sweden, Spain, Slovakia and Slovenia. Fifteen are found at the country?s borders; seven of these constitute united ecological units with IBAs of neighbouring countries. IBAs in Greece range from very small areas, such as the Alyki lagoon in Aigio (32 ha), while the largest, the Central Rodopi mountains and the Nestos Valley, is 134,795 ha. IBA size averages 15,956 ha. Of the 13 Regions in Greece, Central Macedonia and South Aegean are the ones with the most IBAs. The Ionian Islands (1%) and Attica-Athens (2%) have the fewest, although, ironically, most HOS volunteers come from the capital. The Greek IBA-Caretaker network was established in 2003. It comprises a network of individuals, coordinated by a staff member of HOS, which was created principally to monitor and safeguard IBAs and to provide local knowledge. In its simplest form, this involves visiting and reporting annually on habitat conditions in the IBAs, while updating site summaries using a common approach to monitoring. The ultimate objective is to increase ownership and responsibility and eventually to delegate some actions to these individuals, not only to reduce the load on HOS, but also to secure a more sustainable and direct conservation approach. Currently the Greek IBA Caretaker network comprises approximately 90 people, covering 60 sites. Only HOS members are officially entitled to become IBA-Caretakers. There are many site and species conservation initiatives across Greece, but very few of these use a network approach like this one. ?The concept of volunteering in Greece is still mostly linked to humanitarian causes, while its linkage to conservation is still embryonic ? hence the pioneering value of this project?, says Margarita Tzali, the HOS IBA-Caretaker network coordinator. ?While HOS uses volunteers in other projects, the IBA-Caretaker network is without doubt the most tight and active group of volunteers within the organisation.? Greek IBA-Caretakers engage in work at specific IBAs, or sometimes more than one IBA. While some are local to their sites, others are not. Many live in the main cities (Athens and Salonika), but for one reason or the other?natal roots, usual birdwatching spot, etc?have expressed great interest in particular sites, and clearly shown their desire to be the Caretaker. Caretakers sign an agreement with HOS covering their roles and responsibilities. They are asked to visit their IBA at least three times a year and commit to monitoring the area for a minimum of three years. They must send an annual report to HOS, using an established format reporting on the state, pressure and response at the IBA. All this information is sent to the IBA Caretaker network coordinator, in hard copy, or electronically. ?Some Caretakers find the standard site monitoring protocols difficult and technically complex?, says Margarita. ?This is tricky, because data collection and analysis should be done in a scientific manner, so that comparable monitoring indicators can be extrapolated. The challenge here is to make the monitoring protocols as user friendly as possible, using the training opportunities available. Unfortunately, sometimes data gathering is not systematic. However, lots of good data are being collected, and some have been used in the new IBA book for Greece.? Caretakers come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Most (two-thirds) are male, and most have a university degree or are university students. Most come from middle income backgrounds. Some are engaged in other projects and organisations, but most have joined to learn more about conservation. They are generally keen to develop their skills in conservation; most say that they value the technical and advisory support of HOS, as a ?prestigious and reliable scientific-based NGO?. However, Margarita says that they are a diverse group of individuals with differing experience and backgrounds. One of the main challenges in this type of project is to get the communication and coordination balance right, so that it offers something to everyone. There are two regular meetings a year, one in northern and one in southern Greece, to which all Caretakers are invited. Each is attended by 30 people on average. Best practice in IBA monitoring is discussed, conservation training is given (including field techniques and bird monitoring) and problems are analysed. These meetings are usually organised in one IBA over a weekend and hosted by a Caretaker, using his or her case studies for training purposes. These meetings are highly valued, as they provide an opportunity for Caretakers to interact, share experience and learn from one another. They are usually divided into two sub-meetings, for beginners and experienced Caretakers, so that the content and discussion is suited to the

participants. The main communication tool is email and an email account is a requirement for joining the network. The mailing list is used as a communication tool between volunteers, as well as between the coordinator (and HOS generally) and the volunteers. Interestingly, Margarita thinks that ?personalised communication by phone or email motivates them and makes things move, much more than general emails to all. The mailing list is used mainly for general announcements and communication between volunteers?. There is a section about the IBA Caretaker network on the HOS website www.ornithologiki.gr/ caretakers. Caretakers have access to a dedicated portal, which includes an interactive map that offers the opportunity to find out about other Caretakers at other IBAs, a calendar where all the events and network actions are shown and all the information necessary to monitor the IBA, take action, and organise public awareness activities. A twice-yearly newsletter contains articles and information on the work of the Caretaker network. Even though the project has managed to create a core group of volunteers, growth is very slow. Many Caretakers join each year, but leave when they do not find what they expect. As happens with any volunteer initiative, the initial enthusiasm of participants often dwindles over time. One of the coordinator?s challenges is to keep everybody motivated; in the case of university students, an additional challenge is to keep them engaged after they leave university to look for a job, as they often move across the country. However, many who leave the network continue their work at the IBAs as individuals or as members of other NGOs or local groups. ?At least it is good to know that they have been trained through the project and remain in the core of people that support HOS when needed?, says Margarita. Until now the Greek Caretaker network has been entirely based on individuals. Now there are plans to start exploring working with local groups, to have more impact at local level, particularly at policy and advocacy level. HOS will probably need to identify local coordinators, something that currently exists only in the Epirus region. While HOS has been able to get funding for projects to survey, designate and monitor some IBAs, the IBA-Caretaker network itself has always been funded by HOS core budget. ?IBA monitoring is a recurrent job that needs to be done for ever and is therefore not timebound or as tempting as projects that can offer immediate results?, says Margarita. This fundraising gap is one of the major limiting factors in the effectiveness and development of IBA-Caretaker networks, and one of the most difficult challenges European BirdLife Partners face. Although the general feeling is that the Caretakers are still not as proactive in taking the lead as they could be, the Greek IBA-Caretaker network has already been responsible for some outstanding conservation successes, as the accompanying examples show. **Case Study 1 - GR048 Lake Kastoria, Northern Greece** IBA Caretaker Christos Toskos says*:* ?The Society for the Environmental Protection of Kastoria was founded in 2000, to address environmental protection in the Prefecture of Kastoria. We thought that we should work with nationwide organisations such as HOS, so when we learned that HOS was starting the Caretaker network, some of us decided to participate. ?Over the past ten years we have achieved significant results in protection of the environment and raising public awareness. Residents now contact us immediately when a threat to the environment is detected. In this way, among other successes, we managed to remove an illegal jetty near Dispilio, to cancel the construction of an airfield in the wet meadows near Xiropotamos and to re-route the stretch of the Egnatia motorway which was planned to pass through the lakeside forest. We should emphasise the significant help from HOS we have had in these efforts. ?One of the trigger species at the IBA is Pygmy Cormorant, with a breeding population of 10?20 pairs in 1998. In spring 2007 it was observed that, a new breeding colony with 42 nesting pairs had started to form on the trees near the beach of the town of Kastoria, which is a winter roosting area for Pygmy Cormorants. To protect this colony, the Society for the Environmental Protection of Kastoria and HOS managed to obtain a decision from the Prefecture of Kastoria to define the area with buoys and to ban fishing there during the breeding season. Currently, the breeding population of Pygmy Cormorant in Lake Kastoria is 180?200 pairs in two colonies.? **Case Study 2 - GR155 Mikres Kyklades island complex** IBA Caretaker Giannis Gavalas says: ?Twenty years ago I left Athens with my family and returned to the place where my grandfather was born. I am a teacher of mathematics and work in the Gymnasium of Heraklion. I have been working with and for birds for the last 13 years. ?Among the moments I cherish, the mating of Griffon Vultures would stand out, as well as observations of Cinereous Vultures in 1999, and of three Griffon Vultures ringed in Croatia, one of which eventually joined the local group and nested here. A bad moment was when I found a poisoned Griffon Vulture that died in my hands before I could send it for treatment. ?My main achievements as a Caretaker on the island of Irakleia, in collaboration with the community, are the ending of the lease to shepherds on the islets of Mikros and Megalos Avelas, where seabirds and Eleonora?s Falcons nest, as well as the creation of a wildlife refuge covering half the island, including the mountain where up to three pairs of Griffon Vultures and one pair of Bonelli?s Eagle nest. Due to their awareness of bird protection, many residents inform me of injured birds or unusual findings.? **Written by José Tavares**