

BIRDWATCHING BREAKS TOUR

ARMENIA – SEPTEMBER 2002

This was our seventh tour to Armenia since 1999 and the first to visit in the autumn. So apart from the usual expectations of wonderful scenery, hospitable people and excellent birding there was a feeling that we were going into the unknown and there was much to be discovered. We found that there is much still not known about Armenian avifauna and there were a few surprises. Firstly it was a lot hotter than we expected with temperatures on most days from the mid twenties to the low thirties. The weather was settled with clear blue skies on most days. Of the hoped for species we were successful in finding Demoiselle Crane which had been one of my chief objectives. There were clear signs that the autumn migration was in progress on a large scale. Indeed many summer visitors had already left to be replaced by others moving through from the north and east. The high mountains still held an abundance of wild flowers and butterflies. Vasil Ananian was again an excellent leader with an unrivalled knowledge of Armenia and its birds. Once again our drivers were excellent and we marvelled afresh at the ability of the 4X4 bus to negotiate the steepest and rockiest slopes. The food was excellent, especially the picnics provided by Artur's wife and there was a memorable barbecue. The following account will I hope bring back some memories of a successful autumn exploration.

Day 1: Heathrow - Vienna - Yerevan.

The group assembled at Heathrow Airport Terminal 2 for our flight with Austrian Airways to Vienna and onto Yerevan in Armenia. The transfer at Vienna was lengthy with no opportunity for in-airport birding. The flight to Yerevan arrived on time early the next day with the usual bumpy landing. Customs and immigration were quickly passed and after an over long wait for baggage we met Artur and Vasil for the transfer to the Erebuni Hotel in central Yerevan.

Day 2: Armash Fishponds.

Daily total 80 New trip birds 80 Running total 80

Weather: Warm and sunny, 30°C.

After a very short sleep we met for breakfast and at 0930 left to visit Armash fishponds a bird-rich wetland to the south of Yerevan and next to the border with Turkey and Iran. The hotel car park had provided the usual views of Laughing Dove. The road to Armash passes by derelict industrial areas and farmland. It had a browner more burnt look than I remembered from the spring visit after months of hot summer sun. Just before Armash some roadside bird activity attracted our attention and we piled out of the bus for our first goodies of the trip. Nearby fields had attracted a couple of Collared Pratincoles and overhead power lines were occupied by perching bee-eaters, Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters! Sharing the power lines and roadside bushes were Roller, Red-backed Shrike, Lesser Grey Shrike and Ortolan Bunting amongst others. Soon we were turning into the entrance of the fishponds, past the gate and heading for the first pond. Armash covers a huge area and is right next to the border which here is formed by the Arax River. In the Autumn murk we could just make out

the looming bulk of biblical Mount Ararat. The first ponds at Armash abounded with wildfowl and fishing terns. Species observed included large numbers of Great-crested, Black-necked and Little Grebes, Pygmy Cormorants, Red-crested, and Common Pochards, Gadwall, Garganey and a few White-headed Ducks. White-winged and Whiskered Terns hunted for food whilst Purple Herons, Little Egrets and Squacco Herons flew to and from feeding areas and a single Glossy Ibis flew over. Little Bitterns zipped about in the reed-beds which also held a few warblers still. Reed Warblers were most numerous but Sedge, Paddyfield and Willow Warblers were also present. A shallow lagoon next to a drainage channel attracted a number of waders including Marsh, Green and Wood Sandpipers, Little Stint, Ruff, Avocet and Black-winged Stilts. There were a few Gull-billed Terns hawking over the pools, a couple of Slender-billed Gulls were seen and there was a single migrant Bluethroat on the track in front of the van. On the way out we stopped at some scrub by fields adjacent to the fish farm and obtained frustratingly brief views of Menetrie's Warbler. It was a tired but fairly contented group of birders that headed back to Yerevan to catch up on much needed sleep.

Day 3: Around Mount Aragats

Daily total 53 New trip birds 29 Running total 109

Weather: Warm and sunny, 25°C.

On the second day we went on a circular route to the north and west of Yerevan through an area of high mountain steppe and low rocky hills. The object was to find some of the migrating raptors that favour such habitat on passage. So we headed north from Yerevan steadily climbing all the time. Before too long wheatears by the side of the road brought us to a halt and we spent the next hour profitably exploring an area of dry rocky hillsides with areas of cultivation and small orchards. There were a number of wheatears including several Finsch's, Isabelline and Northern. Pascal found another which looked different, it was a young male Pied Wheatear supposedly a very scarce species in Armenia but probably overlooked. The same area had groups of Corn Buntings and Tree Sparrows with at least 25 European Bee-eaters on overhead wires and Lesser Grey and Red-backed Shrikes on prominent rocky outcrops. After chasing an elusive Hoopoe we boarded the bus and headed for our next stop. Opposite Mt. Ara (2576m) we spotted a large raptor in a roadside field and stopped for a better view. It was a Long-legged Buzzard the first of at least 25 for the day. A careful 'scope scan gave other raptors, the first of several Great Spotted Eagles, again a relatively scarce bird in Armenia. There were also Kestrels, Common Buzzard and several Black Kites. Further on we turned off east to explore a track going to a nearby reservoir. This took us through an area favoured by passing Montagu's Harriers. The rocks nearby had Rock Sparrow and there were very many Yellow Wagtails on the areas near flocks of sheep and cattle. From our lunch stop overlooking the reservoir we could see a distant flock of White-winged Terns over the water. Overhead were 3 Steppe Buzzards and Lesser Spotted Eagle. The route took us in a long anti-clockwise loop around Mt. Aragats (4090m), Armenia's highest mountain which was in view for much of the day. A stop at the highest point en route to the north gave us some migrant waders on an area of high wet grassland, Wood Sandpipers and Ruff with yet more Great Spotted Eagles overhead. Past this area we turned onto a long dusty and very bumpy un-metalled road to the west. Here a pause by an area of cultivation gave more L-L Buzzards and a distant view of a large eagle

which clinched its ID when it turned and showed us a white irregular band on the underwing coverts, a young Steppe Eagle. Beyond Arteek the road improved again and we passed through an area of arid low rocky hills. On the way we stopped to look at a small reservoir near the road and were amazed to find a compact flock of Red-necked Phalaropes actively feeding on the surface of the water. The reservoir also held a couple of Green Sandpipers and the first Northern Shovelers of the trip. As the light failed a large falcon crossed in front of the bus and brought us to a rapid halt. It steadily disappeared into the distance, not giving a good enough view for an identification. Nearby a female wheatear caught our attention, it was another Pied Wheatear! There was now insufficient light for birding so we completed our journey with a discussion of the day's birds at the evening log-call. We retired early for an early start the next day to go to Pambak Mountains.

Day 4: Pambak Mountains and Lake Sevan

Daily total 88 New trip birds 27 Running total 136

Weather: Low, misty cloud on tops, 15°C, variable winds.

An early departure before dawn took us from Yerevan to the derelict-looking industrial town. We eventually stopped at some buildings from a nearby, now disused gold-mine, where shepherds spend the summer producing cheese from their herds. This 'village' is the start point for the route up to the Pambak ridge and here we switched vehicles for the trip in the 4X4 on the shepherd's track. Breakfast was taken in front of the rundown shepherd's buildings. Red-fronted Serin was heard flying over and White-throated Dipper was seen on the fast-flowing stream. Black Redstarts were flitting around the buildings and there were Crag Martins overhead. Eurasian Jay and Robin were seen on the wooded slopes nearby. The hour long drive to the top took us through rugged mountain scenery and alpine meadows and past further shepherds' buildings. Whinchat and Stonechat were seen on the way up with Water Pipits and Horned Larks flying up as the bus approached the top. On the far side of the mountain misty cloud cloaked the slopes making the viewing conditions difficult. In spite of this views of a male Caucasian Grouse were obtained as it glided across the slope to disappear into the mist. During a short-lived and partial clearing of the mist a male bird on the path gave reasonable views with a shy female peering from behind boulders. Even on the top of the mountain in the mist the sound of European Bee-eaters could be heard passing over. On the way back down the mountain vegetation near a shepherd's hut contained several Marsh warblers and a juvenile Common Rosefinch. Back at the bottom of the track two Golden eagles were soaring over the valley and a Rock Nuthatch was calling nearby. The next stage of our journey took us to Lake Sevan, still at a high elevation of nearly 2000m. During a lakeside lunch a mixed tit flock passed and redstart was seen in trees also holding a couple of Great Spotted Woodpeckers. Out on the lake at least 30 Black-necked Grebes could be seen. The Lake had risen following spring rain and the grassland along the edge was flooded. South of Cape Noratoos this gave a long stretch of habitat suitable for waterfowl, waders, gulls and herons. We drove south along the foreshore past large flocks of Ruddy Shelduck with many Garganey, Pintail, Teal, Gadwall and Red-crested Pochard. On shallow pools hundreds of waders fed, Green, Curlew and Wood Sandpipers, Little Stint, Black-winged Stilt, Greenshank, Redshank and many plovers. Behind them at the waters edge were Grey, Purple and Squacco Herons with graceful Great White and Little Egrets. The western shore of Lake Sevan was alive with

waterbirds. We estimated up to 5000 Armenian Gulls were seen along this stretch of lake. We headed to a village where we were to stay with villagers in their houses. Tomorrow we have a full day in this delightful area.

Day 5: Southern Lake Sevan

Daily total 84 New trip birds 18 Running total 154

Weather: Sunny and warm, 28°C.

After a substantial breakfast provided by our extremely hospitable hosts we looked at the foreshore immediately next to our accommodation and found more waders on the pools on the beach. Mountain Chiffchaffs flitted calling through the thorn scrub and two large migrating flocks of Purple Herons passed overhead. As we headed south-east two Hobbies were being chased by a Sparrowhawk. We were going towards an area at Gilli that used to be covered by a shallow lake prolific with birdlife. Sadly it was now drained for peat extraction and farmland. It was this area through which Demoiselle Cranes passed on migration and occasionally stopped off. The foreshore and lake was unfortunately much disturbed by fishermen. There were more Black-necked Grebes and some distant flocks of ducks. I suddenly spotted a dark familiar shape flying along the shore, a skua! We had excellent close-up views of a Pomarine Skua as it passed close-by in both directions. Driving to former L. Gilli we asked a shepherd if he had seen any cranes. He replied that he had seen the first three days before and that some had roosted on the marsh the previous evening. Just then we caught sight of an extremely distant flock (50+) of cranes moving away from us several kilometres away. Trying to mark the spot we drove round and searched fruitlessly for an hour or so. Abandoning the unequal task we determined to return in the evening for another try. During the rest of the day we visited the shore about 20km to the north-west. This time the lake was undisturbed and there were large numbers of waterbirds. Similar species were seen here but in addition there were over 40 Great Black-headed Gulls, many of them adults and amongst the waders we saw a group of Black-winged Pratincoles. Other new waders for the trip included Black-tailed Godwits and a Ruddy Turnstone. Driving back to Gilli in the evening we found a suitable vantage point and started scanning. In the evening light there were many harriers to be seen quartering the fields and open ground. Most were Montagu's but there were also Marsh and two Pallid Harriers, our first of the trip. After much scanning I eventually found three large grey distant blobs, standing about a kilometre away. It was a family group of Demoiselle Cranes, 2 adults and a juvenile. We watched as they walked slowly about bending down and feeding. At one point workers in the fields came too close and they flew for a few hundred metres. A magnificent sight to end the day.

Day 6: Sulema Pass

Daily total 76 New trip birds 11 Running total 165

Weather: Warm and sunny, 24-28°C.

We were travelling today over the Sulema (or Selim) Pass (2410m) towards our next overnight stop at Yeghegnadzor at the foot of Mt. Teksar. Before leaving we took a final look at the Lake and then took a farewell of our hosts Arsen and his charming wife and children. The road over the pass went through an area of high grassland.

Once away from villages we started to look for birds. The first of very many Long-legged Buzzards was seen, as was a very brief view of a distant Lammergeier. A Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush as the first for the trip. On the top there were Horned Larks and Lesser Spotted Eagle. There were many migrants moving through including hirundines, Roller and Hoopoe. Raptors included several Kestrels, Short-toed Eagle, Black Kite and more Lesser Spotted Eagles. Once over the pass we stopped at an extremely ancient Caravanserai once shelter to trains of pack animals and their traders moving through the mountains. At one vantage point we looked towards distant Mt. Teksar and saw many raptors spiralling over the mountains. There were our first vultures of the trip, at least 11 Griffons and two Black Vultures with a Steppe Eagle, Golden Eagle and a probable Imperial Eagle. Near the Caravanserai an immaculate male Pallid Harrier briefly showed itself above a nearby hill. Further down the valley excellent views were obtained of Persian or Eastern Rock Nuthatch and a Male Blue Rock Thrush. Finally we reached Yeghegnadzor after a fascinating day over the high passes.

Day 7: Mount Teksar

Daily total 49 New trip birds 8 Running total 173

Weather: Warm and sunny although cooler at higher altitude, 24-28°C.

An early start found us heading towards Mt. Teksar (~2800m). A bird/large bat seen flying through the pre-dawn dark caused much debate and reached no solution. The tracks up to Teksar are rutted and narrow winding through fields of wild flowers and grazing livestock. Little was seen until quite near the top and we were out of the bus in time to see the sunrise behind the Little Caucasus Range. We started to search the slopes and gullies for birds. Alpine Accentor was seen on rocks nearby and on about the third gully David and Pascal were lucky enough to get a brief but good view of three Caspian snowcocks flying away down the rocky gully. In spite of long wait that was the only view we were to have and there was only a distant burst of calling by the birds as consolation. As dawn broke Eurasian Golden Oriole, Great Tit and Common Swift were seen. From the high ridge three adult Lammergeiers gave excellent views as they flew past at eye-height. Other birds seen on the top include a flock of young Red-fronted Serins, several Ring Ouzels, Lesser Kestrel and Rock Bunting. Further down the mountain we stopped at the 14th-C church before continuing our drive back to Yeghegnadzor for the night. A typical day after Caspian Snowcock, one of Armenia's most highly sought after birds and one of the most difficult to see. The day ended with 2 Syrian Woodpeckers on a telegraph pole by the house and a flock of Lesser Kestrels passing through.

Day 8: Armash Fishfarm and Vedi Hills

Daily total 92 New trip birds 6 Running total 179

Weather: Hot and sunny, 28-30°C.

Breakfast at 0800 hours before saying goodbye to our hostess in Yeghegnadzor. The road to Armash provided Black-eared Wheatear, several Rock Buntings, Blue Rock Thrush and several Lesser Kestrels on the wires. Stopping on the way in to Armash by the fields and scrub we were rewarded with slightly better views of the Menetrie's Warbler and several Ortolan Buntings. A large flock of several hundred Rose-

coloured Starlings were on the wires, most were juveniles with just a few adults in evidence. The first White Storks for the trip were in a nearby field. Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters were still in evidence but far fewer than on our visit a week earlier. The mixture of waterfowl was much as was seen a week earlier with the addition of a small group of Marbled Ducks flushed from the edge of the wader pools. A similar mix of waders was present but also several Temminck's Stint. On one of the lagoons a few Ferruginous Ducks could be seen, which only Vasil had seen the week previously. After a brief lunch we headed towards Vedi Hills, eager to see if Mongolian Finch was still present. The gorge was as hot as usual but with fewer birds in evidence than in the spring. Finsch's and Isabelline Wheatear were seen and then a short finch-like call alerted us to some birds gathering to drink at the spring. They were Mongolian Finches but in an unfamiliar plumage, obviously moulting from their breeding or juvenile plumage. There were about 15 present, clearly the result of more than one breeding pair. We watched them for some time and then the lengthening shadows and our impending homeward flight called us away and we returned to Yerevan at the end of another fascinating trip to a greatly under-watched country.

Roy Beddard, Birdwatching Breaks, September 2002.

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