

Central & Eastern Turkey, June-July 2011

In June-July 2011 our travel club <<http://maybank.tripod.com/MNTC/MNTC-info.htm>> undertook a three week visit to central and eastern Turkey. While our group had a mix of interests ranging from natural through cultural through historical, and half our time was spent investigating historic sites, the birders in our group were active daily, and many destinations were chosen primarily for their natural history (especially birding) interest.

In the course of our trip we made some small, and a couple of larger, discoveries, and as well can provide updates to some well-known Turkish birding hotspots.

The map of our complete natural history itinerary is available on-line through Google Maps, at: <<http://g.co/maps/fr6ux>>. You can import the map into Google Earth (using the KML file function) if you wish GPS coordinates for the locations. All sites mentioned in this report are on the Google map.

We began our trip with several days in the Capadoccia area, and found that some popular sites combined geology and history with decent birding, such as the Devrent, Ilhara, and Paşabağı Valleys. Our wonderful cultural guide, who is also a fervent nature photographer, suggested a brief diversion to Acıgöl Gölü, which was productive during a 90 minute exploration (**Cretzschmar's Bunting, Blue Rock-Thrush, Great Reed-Warbler**, many wheatears), and which I recommended to others.

We then headed south-east (Tekir Alabalik Restaurant and Trout Farm was a fine lunch stop, and birdy), to Kâhta, where we spent two nights. On 21 June we hiked to the summit of Nemrut Dağı, in time to watch the summer solstice sunrise. Notable birds near the mountain's summit included **Yellow-billed Cough, Horned Lark, Red-tailed Wheatear, Rufous-backed Rock-Thrush, Cinereous Bunting, Pale Rockfinch, and White-winged Snowfinch.**

Early on the morning of June 23 we drove to Birecik, and our first stop was at the North Birecik Marshes. We arrived early in the morning, and spent 4 hours here, the most productive birding site in the Birecik area. Almost the first birds we encountered were Iraqi Babblers, a troop of five. Other birds of note: 50+ Dead Sea Sparrows (especially common in the woods and gardens of the farms between the Marshes and the river), several **Graceful Prinia, 2 Pied Kingfishers, 3 Menetrie's Warbler, 20 Desert Finches, Black Francolin, and 8 Rufous-tailed Scrub-Robins.**

The South Birecik Marshes were much degraded, and not especially productive, and should be visited only if you have time to spare. I marked two access routes on our map, the one that has been described previously (along which **Dead Sea Sparrows** have been found), and the route we took, in error. On the cliffs east of the river, north of the main bridge, we found a colony of 50+ **Little Swifts**, and a number of free-flying **Bald Ibis**. We also visited the Bald Ibis Breeding Centre, but did not have time to bird there. The Director of the Centre was very knowledgeable and helpful regarding the birdlife of the Birecik areas. Had we a second morning we would have hiked the wadi behind the Centre.

We visited the Gulhane Tea Gardens, but were not successful in locating any owls. We had to be content with **White-spectacled Bulbul**. We lunched at the Zeugata Restaurant, along the shores of the Euphrates River, whose water level was very high, so no sand bars were exposed. The water levels fluctuate often and unpredictably, due to dams and irrigation upstream.

Late in the afternoon, en route to Şanlıurfa, we made a brief excursion into the Kızılkuyu Wildlife Improvement Area, where there are impressive expanses of desert scrub, and small herds of reintroduced **Persian Gazelles** (we saw three). We were hoping for See See Partridge, but had to be content with **Chukar**.

On June 26, en route to Tatvan, we stopped in the morning to hike the dirt road leading to the Hasuni Caves, which lie high on a cliff face overlooking the highway, close to the main road. The access dirt road is interesting both archeologically and birdwise (the road sign was knocked down at our 2011 visit, as the road was being widened to four lanes). We enjoyed a good variety of birds, including **See See Partridges and Persian Nuthatches**. Before stopping at our hotel we explored along the shoreline of Lake Van, and found productive marshes n.w. of Tatvan, that we have marked on our map as the West Van Marshes.

On the morning of June 28 we drove up and into Mount Nemrut, and have marked all our stops on the map. We saw no Velvet Scoters on the lake, and it is our understanding that there have been no sightings in a number of years. This site is very much worth a visit, though we found nothing untoward, but enjoyed **Ring Ouzel, Wood Lark**, six species of bunting, **Twite**, and **Fire-fronted Serin**. On the afternoon we took the boat to Akdamar Island in Lake Van, where we noted numbers of **Red-billed Choughs**.

On June 29 we explored Erçek Gölü. The well-known south roadside marshes were still productive, and held at least three pair of **White-headed Ducks**, and there were easy views of singing **Moustached and Paddyfield Warblers**. A warning: the road (D300) between Van and the Iranian border is being expanded to four lanes, and while the road construction had not yet impacted the marshes, I fear the worst. There may be a delay as the Van region rebuilds following the recent earthquakes, but the prognosis for the marshes is not good. The environment seems to take a back seat in Turkey when it comes to road (and dam) construction.

Our biggest find was a “new” site at the n.e. corner of Erçek Gölü, at the village of Karagunduz. The unmarked (and inconspicuous) village access road is through the town of Erçek on route D300 on the eastern shore of Erçek Gölü. A kindly jandarma gave us directions, but I have marked the roads on the Google map.

The village of Karagunduz is the site of a remarkable concentration of waders and waterbirds, including thousands of **Greater Flamingos**, none of which were visible from the s.w. shore of the lake. We counted roughly 5000, with the aid of two newly constructed viewing towers built to help the village create and celebrate an annual autumn Flamingo festival. We also enjoyed 300 **Black-necked Grebes**, eight species of waterfowl (including **Garganey, Common Shelduck**, and more **White-headed Ducks**), and nine species of wader (including **Kittlitz’s Plover**). There are many reed beds, and a more thorough exploration of this corner of the lake

should result in more discoveries, perhaps including Moustached and Paddyfield Warblers, which may need a home if the road construction destroys the other marsh.

On June 30 we drove from Van to Doğubeyazıt. We stopped at the southern marsh of Bendimahi Deltasi. This wetland at the eastern-most end of Lake Van is now a protected area, with a year-round hunting ban. Trails are being constructed to permit access to the area. We did a fairly brief roadside stop, but were impressed by the number and variety of birds, including **White-headed Duck**, **Pied Avocets**, and our only **Gull-billed Terns** of the trip. En route to Çaldıran, perhaps 25 km north of Karahan, there was an extensive marsh north of the highway (route D975), where hundreds of **White-winged Terns** were actively foraging, and likely nesting. Once at Çaldıran we wound our way through the town, and with the assistance of some locals, eventually determined how to access the lava fields north of town. I have marked this route on the Google map, but the roads only show properly in Satellite view, not map view. We spent nearly two hours walking through the lava fields adjacent the paved road, and most of the group were eventually rewarded with brief views of **Mongolian Finch**, and there were **Tawny Pipits** as well.

Near Doğubeyazıt we stayed at the “best” of an unprepossessing selection of hotels, the Simir Hotel, east of the city on D100. Though the hotel was rundown, and also was the only hotel on our trip lacking WIFI, the meals were very fine, as were the views of Mount Ararat. A steep ridge rose s.w. of the hotel, and we enjoyed views of a pair of sub-adult **Lammergeier** flying and perched. It looks a suitable area for a future nest site.

On 1 July, Canada Day, we drove to the northern slopes of Mount Ararat. On an earlier trip one of our group, part of a German birding foray, discovered breeding Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters at the village of Aktaş. Our first task was retracing the route to Aktaş, and we ended up a bit east of the mark, in the village of Kırçıçeği, which turned out to be a fortuitous diversion, as we located a colony of **Blue-cheeked and European Bee-eaters** on the eastern edge of the village. We then undertook a remarkable journey along an unpaved road between Kırçıçeği and Aktaş, through the village of Yazlık, skirting the edge of lava fields to the south, with an extensive wetland to the north. This winding narrow road with sharp turns would be easily navigable in a car or van, but it was a challenge in our 48 passenger bus. Nevertheless, our driver successfully drove the route, and although we had limited time to bird this is clearly an area that would reward a more determined inspection. Once at Aktaş we lingered only long enough to determine that both species of bee-eater were present in small numbers, though we didn't seek the colony. All the villages, and the routes we drove in this area, are marked on the map.

Later that same afternoon we "discovered" marshes straddling either side of the road (Route D070) near Borluk, southeast of Kars. There was a significant colony of breeding Black-headed Gulls alongside many White-winged Terns. More rare were breeding pairs of **Tufted Ducks** (rare breeders in Turkey) and **White-headed Ducks**.

On July 2 we drove through the Black Sea Mountains from Kars to Hopa. On our descent to the Black Sea we were distressed to witness the destruction of the once-scenic valleys that lead to the sea – all the rivers are being dammed to create hydroelectric power, and there are currently

thousands (!) of such developments countrywide, but nowhere more evident than in the Black Sea Mountains. I predict this wilful uncontrolled construction will have an enormously detrimental impact on the environment within Turkey, and beyond its borders. And the birdlife will be affected as well.

Our last major destination was the high mountain village of Ayder, where we stayed several nights. We chartered 4WD vehicles in order to drive to higher elevations, to Avusor Yaylasi and Ayder Yaylasi (a yaylasi is a summer-season settlement for local farmers and herders). The roads to the Yaylasi are not accessible until the snow melts, which is a bit too late to view earlier breeding birds. The scenery was wonderful, but we were disappointed somewhat in our species list, though we were pleased at the number of **Green Warblers** in song, and a single **Mountain Chiffchaff** was welcome. We did not see any gallinaceous species, but that was likely due to fairly intense local hunting pressures, based on the number of expended shotgun shell casings we saw.

The full day-by-day bird checklist of our entire trip is available for download at: <http://tinyurl.com/ctx73qt>. We were pleased with our overall trip, and the birding experiences contained therein, and encourage anyone visiting central and eastern Turkey to try to explore new areas; there are more discoveries awaiting.

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