

# EASTERN TURKEY, MAY 2010

by John Rayner



White-throated Robin (Photo courtesy of Pete Worthy)

## PREPARATION

Many birding groups have visited Eastern Turkey so the area is well documented but most birders travel a conventional circular route and take at least 14 days to fit in all the main sites. We had less time available but managed to see all our targets, including many special birds on the very limits of their range, by hiring a car on a one-way drop off basis. As this is not a common practise a detailed trip report has been prepared.

In the event this trip took a great deal of organisation. Hiring a car for 10 days on a one-way drop off basis proved to be something of a problem. Following the recent World recession, and consequent reduction in tourism, car hire companies across the board had cut their fleets considerably and we only found one company (Avis) who were prepared to offer anything larger than a Ford Focus, which was unsuitable for a team of 5. So, eventually, we picked up a 9-seater Volkswagen Caravelle (£158 each including all insurances and waivers) in Adana and dropped it off in Trabzon 10 days later with an additional 3482km (2150 miles) on the clock. We paid extra for 3 drivers (£12 each) and spreading the driving load over such a distance proved to be invaluable.

Flights were a little easier to organise using Pegasus Airlines from Stansted to Istanbul, then an internal flight to Adana (£202 each). But a further slight complication arose in that one member of the party wanted a pre-trip holiday in Istanbul with his wife. So it was that 4 members of the team (Neil Marshall, John Rayner, Doug Smith and Fred Wake) flew from Stansted to Istanbul on 20th May to meet Tony Armstrong who had flown out 3 days earlier.

## GENERAL INFORMATION

We all bought tourist visas at Sabiha Gocken airport, Istanbul (10 Euros). We navigated using the map that came with The Rough Guide and found it perfectly satisfactory. Although we covered high mileage in 10 days it never felt like we were sat in the car all day long. We did have a couple of dedicated long mileage days but still managed some brilliant birding on those days as well and, in the main, avoided night driving. The Turkish infrastructure is good with plenty of toll motorways (in the Mediterranean region) and with dual carriageways throughout. In particular there are on-going improvements to the dual carriageway from Gaziantep all the way to Cizre on the Iraqi border, which will speed up future trips considerably.

We took with us the standard site and field guides: Finding Birds in Eastern Turkey (Gosney), Birdwatchers' Guide to Turkey (Prion), Collins Bird Guide and photocopies of many trip reports, all of which are easily accessible on the internet.

There is a strong military presence in southeast and eastern Anatolia regions and clashes with the Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK) still occur. Although we passed through these areas and close by some sensitive borders (the main road actually runs alongside the Syrian border for some distance around Nusaybin) we only passed a few police or army check points. On every occasion we were waved through without hassle and in friendly fashion once we said "English" and "tourist". We followed advice when leaving Idil and avoided the many check points on the more direct route north. Instead we detoured northeast then northwest via Midyat, Batman and Siirt. We were moved on at an impromptu lunchtime stop near Midyat because it was too near a hill top listening post and we were watched through binoculars from a well disguised army fox hole built from lava at Serpmetas lava fields, then told to leave. One Turk found a novel way to disturb our roadside birding near Hotel Genesis, Sivrikaya by firing 10 rounds from the driver's window (thankfully into the air). However, we found Turkish people in general and Kurdish people in particular, to be extremely friendly and welcoming. Indeed the main problem was to get on with birding whilst politely refusing the many offers of tea (cay) or to share food. In eastern Anatolia very little English is spoken and we came across only a handful of western Europeans, mostly birders, outside of Istanbul. In many places people just stopped and stared as we were obviously quite a novelty.

The exchange rate during our stay was approximately 2.20TL / pound sterling. Fuel was very expensive, approximately 3.00 – 3.20TL per litre (an eye-watering £1.46/litre or £6.55/gallon for those still working in 'old money'). Bizarrely it seemed to get more expensive as we approached the borders of Turkey's oil rich neighbours, Syria, Iraq and Iran.

We all ate salads and ice-creams and no-one had 'Sultan's Revenge' but we always avoided tap water and used bottled water throughout (except at Ridos Spa where the tap water was probably purer than bottled). Apart from the ubiquitous kebabs (particularly good in Gaziantep) we also had fresh sea bream (chopra) and particularly liked to eat sutlac (a cold rice pudding sprinkled with crushed hazel nuts) on our frequent coffee stops.

Only a very few biting insects were encountered, mostly round the Euphrates. Although this is a low risk malaria zone taking Chloroquin is probably un-necessary at this time of year (although a course only costs £2 or so).

We had read a lot about vicious Anatolian sheepdogs and the general advice was to treat them as the locals do by hurling rocks at them. In the event we only came close to one huge dog whilst out of the vehicle, with the apt name of 'Baddi'. He was bigger than his shepherd boy owner and with the temperament of a pussy cat. However, our vehicle was chased a few times by less friendly individuals complete with punk-style, rusty, nail-studded wolf collars and we were glad we weren't out in the field when these were around!

There is little within this report on wildlife other than birds. The butterflies and alpine flora were simply stunning but we didn't have either the time or the expertise for fuller identifications.

I (John Rayner) provided most of the photographs and mention must be made of my bird photography - mediocre at best as I simply hand hold a Canon compact to my telescope and hope. Therefore, special thanks to Pete Worthy for allowing me to use his much better photographs to enhance this report.

### ACCOMODATION

We pre-booked accommodations in Istanbul and Adana to minimised hassle, as we had late-ish arrival times at both airports. Also we booked Basar Hassan to provide transport and guide up/down Demirkazik Mountain. This is not absolutely necessary as the Snowcocks were still putting on a show as we descended at 07.30. However, accommodation in this area is limited.

No other accommodation was booked in advance, the norm being about 40-50TL for a double room on a bed and breakfast basis (approx £9 - £11 each). We did notice that prices in general were about 20% dearer than the 2009 Rough Guide suggested but at many hotels prices were negotiable.

Despite apparently good signage we failed to find The Tourist Information Centre, at Isliki. This would have been the most convenient accommodation and there is an arrowed sign "Tourist Information Centre 3 kilometres" in Isliki village but the trail then went cold. Perhaps we would have done better in daylight. (Stop press. We just heard of another group who had similar problems a week after us).

We found hotels in Van to be much more expensive than the 2009 Rough Guide suggested. Lake Van is a bit of a tourist area though.

The cheapest night was at Ishak Pasha close to the Iranian border, "Murat Camping and Hotel" (15TL per person with breakfast 8TL) It is basic but in a superb location and thus recommended.

Hotel Genesis is 5k North of Sivrikaya in the next village of Camlik (N.B. At least 1 trip report erroneously states it is 5k south of Sivrikaya). It is well positioned for Caucasian Grouse and has Green Warblers in the woods at the back. However, it was still closed in May and did not open till 1st June. Its sister hotel, The Ridos Thermal Hotel and Spa, is 21k further north at Isikdere. This is very plush but we negotiated a reasonable rate of 92TL p.p.p.n. for a mini-suite on a bed, breakfast and evening meal basis. This equated to £42 B, B & E and, with sumptuous food, this was far a better rate than one could get for an English equivalent.

The Rough Guide suggests that some budget hotels in Trabzon may double as brothels. We are not suggesting this is the case with Hotel Elegante but they don't appear to have many rooms other than singles with double beds (!) and two or three likely 'Natashas' did visit the restaurant. We were well out of it on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor! This hotel is very convenient for the airport and gave us an excellent last night meal in its restaurant.

#### ITINERY (All hotel rates per person)

**20 May.** Departed Stansted 12.50. (Pegasus Airlines). Arrived Istanbul (Sabiha Goken) 18.25. Night: Marmara Guesthouse, Istanbul (34Euro B&B).

**21 May.** Sight-seeing Istanbul. Evening flight (Pegasus) Depart Istanbul 19.40. Pegasus 126 arrived Adana 21.00. Pick up Avis VW Caravelle. Night: Hotel Mercan, Adana (20TL B&B).

**22 May.** Early start. Drove west on motorway past Tarsus & Mersin to Demircili. Goksu Delta till mid morning. Lunch Goksu Delta then in afternoon drove north (mostly motorway) to Cukurbag village for Demirkazik mountain. Birded lower gorge till dusk. Night Oz Safak Pension with Basar Safak (30 Euro B,B&E)

**23 May.** Up at 03.30 for car ride up Demerkazik Mountain (2150m). Walked down gorge for lunch. Birded Cukurbag and lower to mid levels of Demerkazik till late pm. Long drive on motorway to Gaziantep. Failed to find Accommodation 'Tourist Information Centre' in Isliki. Night Hotel Ayintap, Gaziantep (20TL B&B).

**24 May.** Early morning on new quarry road, Durnalik then lunch on track up from village store in the Isikli. In afternoon drove 1 hour east to Birecik for 2 night stay. Birded Gravel Works lagoons and visited Gulhame Tea Gardens. Night Hotel Mirkalem (noisy. 22.50TL room only).

**25 May.** Early start to bird Bald Ibis Centre wadi. Late breakfast then visited pistachio fields. Chill-out lunch in Eski Halfeti on Euphrates barrage (35 k north of Birecik). Late afternoon back to Birecik birding SE banks of Euphrates and re-visited Gravel Works Lagoons. 2<sup>nd</sup> Night Hotel Mirkalem.

**26 May.** Long driving east (much on m/way and current major road improvements should make this easier in future). Drove next to Syrian border before cutting NE to Idil reservoir for Red-wattled Lapwing. Then headed NW/NE via Midyat, Batman and Skiirt to Bitlis. Night Hotel Diderban, Bitlis (25TL B&B).

**27 May.** Early start for Nemrut Dag (extinct volcanic crater). Then anti clockwise around southern and eastern fringes of Lake Van. Failed to find suitable accommodation in Van so back to Hotel Tusba, Edremit (50TL B&B)

**28 May.** Edremit Marshes, Lake Ercek and Bendimahe Marshes. Serpmetas Lava Fields. Birded Tendurek Gecidi Pass (2644m) and drove close to Iranian border with views of Mount Ararat then via Dogubayazit to Ishak Pasha Palace. Night Murat Camping and Hotel in an excellent location just below palace. (15TL room only).

**29 May.** Birded slopes above Ishak Pasha till noon then long drive west via Agri, Eleskirt, Ezerum. Birded Gelinkaya. Drove north over various passes (Sac, Agziacik, Ovitdagi Gecidi) to Hotel Genesis near Sivrikaya - Closed till 1<sup>st</sup> June! Drove north 21k to expensive (but excellent!) Ridos Hotel, Ikizdere (Negotiated 92TL for a mini-suite and sumptuous food).

**30 May.** Drove 2k south of Sivrikaya to bird alpine slopes there. South to Ispir and River Coruh Valley. Visited Hotel Genesis woodland. 2<sup>nd</sup> Night Ridos Hotel, Ikizdere.

**31 May.** Early start to bird Sivrikaya, Hotel Genesis woodland. Drove northwest to Black Sea coast near Rize, then west to Trabzon and south to Sumela Monastery. Returned car to Avis at Trabzon Airport (+3482k). Night Hotel Elegante, Trabzon (good restaurant and convenient for airport). (50TL B&B for a single)

**1st Jun.** Depart Trabzon at 06.00 arrived Istanbul 07.45. Depart Istanbul 10.20 arrived Stansted 12.10







Above: Hagia Sophia, Istanbul

A few other birds were seen including the only Shag (*ssp. desmarestii*) of the trip at Galata Bridge but birding hadn't really started yet. Later, after a 1 hour evening flight to Adana, we picked up our hire car and found our down town hotel.

**22nd May.** After an early breakfast we hit the road - but west, not east. Good toll motorways, passing Tarsus and Mersin, soon had us at Demircili graveyard, a favourite birding site from many trip reports. Here in the pine woods opposite, we scored quickly with White-spectacled Bulbul, Cretzschmar's Bunting, Ruppell's Warbler, Sombre Tit and nesting Kruper's Nuthatches.



Above: Pine woods, Demircili

Having hit all the targets we moved on and ate our picnic lunch in a tower hide overlooking Goksu Delta. A time-waster in retrospect at the wrong time of day. Heat haze hampered duck identification and the best we could find were 2 White Pelicans, a female Red-crested Pochard, a Black Francolin perched out singing and many Graceful Prinias and Zitting Cisticolas



Above: Tower hide, Goksu Delta



Above: Black Francolin, Gosku Delta (photograph courtesy of Pete Worthy)

Time to move, again using the excellent motorway system, to head north to Cukurbag. Here we were met by our guide Basar Hassan and even managed a couple of hours birding till dusk up the lower parts of the gorge at Demerazik mountain, finding our first Red-fronted Serins, Rock Sparrows and Rock Bunting. Back for a relaxed evening meal with Basar and his family then to bed with alarms set for a ridiculous hour.

**23rd May.** Alarms set for 03.15 and we trundled up Demerkazik Mountain in relays of 3 in an old oil-burning Lada Riva. At 2150 metres the temperature was a not unpleasant 6 degrees and just after dawn we found our first Caspian Snowcocks. Up to 11 were seen as they put on a great display, sometimes as close as 200m.



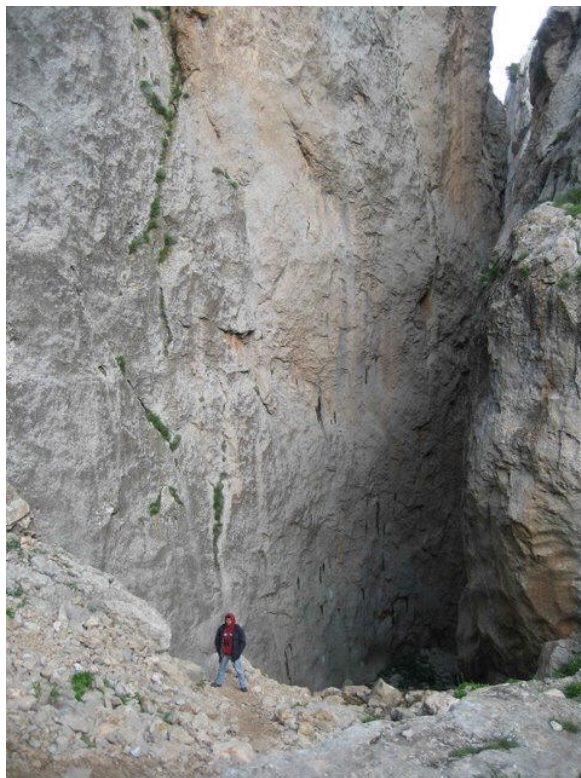


Above: Caspian Snowcock, Demerkazik



Above: Red-fronted Serin, Demerazik Gorge (photograph courtesy of Pete Worthy)

The supporting cast included Red-fronted Serins, Snowfinches and Alpine Accentors with a group of Ibex climbing nimbly on the near vertical crags above but Radde's Accentor remained elusive. We were assured they would be found on the descent down the gorge but no sign of them today - this bird was to become a problem later in the trip! In fact we saw very little during the descent of the gorge, which is narrow, steep-sided and a little hands-on in places. With hindsight we would probably have had better birding by walking back down the driveable track. We returned to Oz Safak Pension for a late breakfast then out again on dirt roads around Cukurbag seeking Crimson-winged Finches and White-throated Robins. The many Black-eared Wheatears here included a small number of Finsch's Wheatears.



Above: Demerkazik Gorge entrance



Above: Descent of Demerkazik Gorge (it's not all like this!)





Above: White-throated Robin, Cukurbag (photograph courtesy of Pete Worthy)



Above: Black-eared Wheatear (photograph courtesy of Pete Worthy)

We eventually departed Oz Safak at 16.10 for a quite long drive east to the end of the motorway at Gaziantep. Despite decent signage we had great difficulty finding our preferred accommodation, 'The Tourist Information Centre' at Isikli so had to back track and ended up at a hotel in Gaziantep. (N.B. Other groups have also recently failed to find this accommodation in Isikli).

**24th May.** Another early start and we were soon in superb habitat just off the new quarry road at Durnalik. This road runs parallel to the valley as shown in Gosney's guide and gives easier access. It was an excellent area for both Western and Eastern Rock Nuthatches. Upcher's Warblers, Black-headed and Cinereous Buntings were reasonably plentiful and we found both Syrian Woodpecker and Eastern Orphean Warbler nesting. A Chukar wandered by but Pale Rock Sparrows didn't show.



Above: Eastern Rock Nuthatch (photograph courtesy of Pete Worthy)



Above: Cinereous Bunting, Durnalik





Above: Black-headed Bunting, Durnalik

We continued the search for Pale Rock Sparrow and eventually turned down a track on the left hand side just after a small quarry on the approach road to the main quarry. This proved successful with Pale Rock Sparrow, Rufous Bush Chat and Bimaculated Lark all added to the growing list. Back in Isikli village we bought provisions but didn't notice 'The Tourist Information Centre' even in daylight. We parked down by the side of the village stores and walked up an obvious valley. Here we found our target, the recently split Kurdish (Red-tailed) Wheatear *Oenanthe xanthopyrma*, a family party no less, with both parents feeding 2 juveniles. We also found a Cardinal here, Europe's largest fritillary and one of the easier butterflies to identify.



Above: Cardinal, Isikli

Mid afternoon we called back to Gaziantep to pick up luggage then set out for the short 50 minute hop to Birecik to check in at the Merkalim Motel by the bridge over the Euphrates. We exchanged information here with other birders then immediately went out to the nearby Gravel Works lagoons on the northwest bank for an excellent couple of hours birding. The list here was long but goodies included many Squacco Herons, Little Bitterns and Pygmy Cormorants, a party of Bald Ibis from the nearby breeding programme, our only Moustached Warblers of the trip, Pied Kingfishers, Dead Sea Sparrows and last but not least 4 Iraq Babblers, right on the edge of their restricted range.



Above: Gravel Works Lagoons, Birecik



Above: Bald Ibis, Birecik



Above: Pygmy Cormorants, Birecik (photograph courtesy of Pete Worthy)



There was still time to drive over the Euphrates Bridge to visit the famous Gulhame Tea Gardens. It was obvious to the staff we were birders but best to play it cool here and first order some tea. Eventually one of the waiters pointed up a nearby tree and there was a Pale (Bruce's) Scops Owl in full view. Although the light was fading this was a good time to watch as it roused itself from daytime roosting and finally flew at 19.42. So we returned to the noisy Merkalm Motel, which is also a trucker's café and lorry/coach stop. The night was punctuated by loud music and tannoy messages plus, for some bizarre reason, someone moving furniture on the floor above all night long.



Above: Pale Scops Owl, Birecik

**25th May.** As we couldn't sleep we were out early and walked up the Bald Ibis Centre wadi. Here we easily found Menetries' Warbler but it took quite a while to flush a See-see Partridge that had come down to drink. A better option was to take one of the tracks to the top of the wadi and scan the grassy plateaus. Here we found another See-see singing from a distant rocky perch. During last night's exchange of information we had been tipped off where to look for Yellow-throated Sparrow (Chestnut-winged Petronia). We had no luck on our visit but there was compensation in the form of a passing Lesser-spotted Eagle with a nesting colony of Little Swifts on the cliffs in Birecik. We had a full breakfast at Merkalm café then easily found Yellow-throated Sparrow at another site down by an Oto petrol station (2nd right turn north of Ibis centre).



Right: See-see Partridge habitat



Above: Yellow-throated Sparrow (Chestnut-winged Petronia), Birecik

It was getting hot so, driving through extensive pistachio groves, we had a chill-out lunch break 40km to the north at the picturesque Eski Halfeti where many small villages were submerged after the damming of the Euphrates. Then back to Birecik to try our luck on the southeast side of the river. Much the same birds here as last night with the addition of a family party of Ferruginous Ducks and a male Garganey. Two Yellow-throated Sparrows, away from the pistachio fields, were a surprise here. A nice relaxing meal on the banks of the Euphrates capped a splendid day. A second night at the Merkalim Motel - and they were still moving the furniture around upstairs into the small hours!!



Above: Transporting pistachios, Birecik





Above: Eski Halfeti



Above: Evening by River Euphrates, Birecik

**27th May.** It was to be a long driving day today but first sutlac and coffee at the motel. We were on the road for 06.15 and drove east through almost continuous road construction work as the motorway was being extended. Much of the traffic seemed to consist of car transporters taking new cars to Cizre then into Iraq. We passed the towns of Sanliurfa, Viransehir and Kaziltepe then drove alongside the Syrian border for a while before turning northeast to Idil reservoir. The speciality here is Red-wattled Lapwing at one of its very few breeding sites in the Western Palearctic. Any future visitors are recommended to walk anti-clockwise round the perimeter of the reservoir to reach the first inlet, hot work as the temperature had risen to 33 degrees. Here we found a Red-wattled Lapwing apparently defending territory and, as there was probably a female on a nest nearby, we soon left the birds in peace. There were an assortment of commoner waders around the reservoir plus singles of Red-crested Pochard and Slender-billed Gull and a young, unidentified rodent, possibly a Jird (Gerbil).





Above: Red-wattled Lapwing, Idil



Above: Unidentified rodent, Idil

Most trip reports advise against the direct route north from Idil as this area has a heavy military presence with lots of time consuming check-points. Instead we chose a more circuitous route via Midyat, Batman and Siirt but we were still moved on by the police whilst attempting a roadside food stop on the D380, apparently we were too close to a hilltop listening post. Eventually we reached the historic town of Bitlis at around 20.00 after a long driving day of 698km / 436 miles.

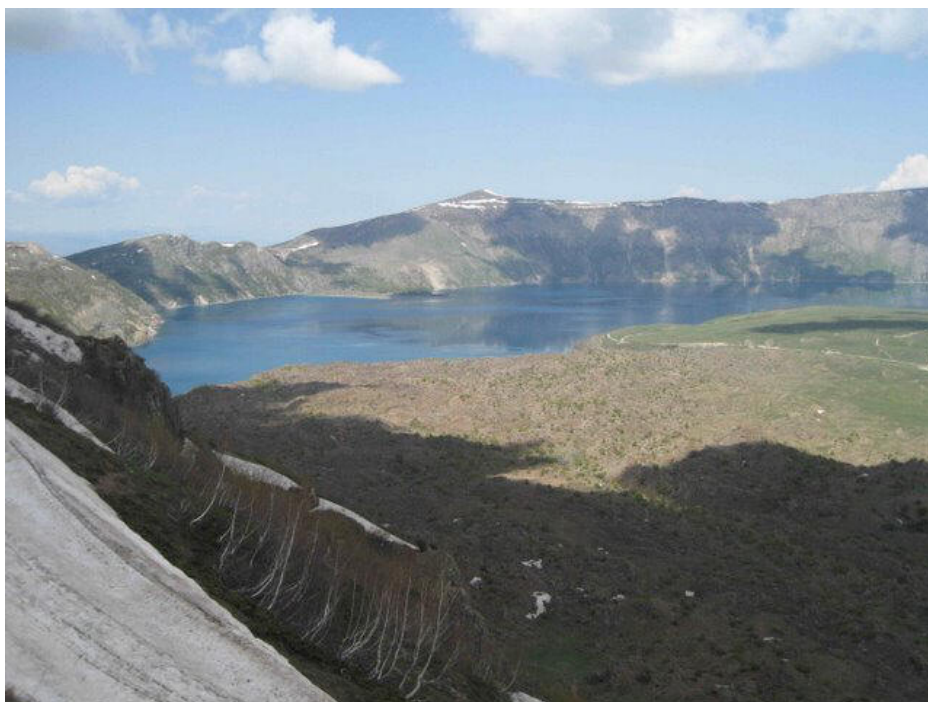
**27th May.** We took a pre-breakfast walk around Bitlis under imposing castle walls then, after breakfast, drove the short distance of 20km to Nemrut Dagi Crater near Tatvan. First we birded the lower fields where larks abounded and a Spur-thighed Tortoise crawled across the road, then we found our way up to the crater rim.





Above: Spur-thighed Tortoise, Lark Fields, Nemrut Dagı

Just before the crater rim a large, rapidly melting bank of snow was washing through the track so we parked and walked up a trail towards Mount Nemrut summit. Here, as advised in 'Gosney', we scanned the cliff faces and scree slopes below but no sign of Radde's Accentor, although we did see many Alpine Accentors, Snowfinches and Shorelarks. An alternative approach was required so we managed to drive past the snow melt and into the crater itself, a beautiful setting with an azure blue mirror lake which holds a breeding population of Velvet Scoter. We then drove down a smaller side track to place ourselves underneath the same cliffs and scree slopes, a much more likely habitat with scattered scrub. Here a Radde's Accentor eventually showed itself to one team member only and the rest had to make do with the supporting cast of Woodlarks, Rock Thrushes and Ortolan Buntings. For the first time we were getting behind our planned schedule and this wasn't helped by getting the vehicle stuck on trying to re-negotiate the snow melt. In the end it was a passing group of Kurds that got us out after a conversation that didn't get much further than "Manchester United", "Newcastle United", "Galatasaray", "Besiktas".



Above: Inside Nemrut Dagı Crater



Above: OK! Nemrut Dagı



Above: Stuck! Nemrut Dagı

We finally left Nemrut Dagı at 15.30 to drive through Tatvan along the south shores of the vast Lake Van. Here we saw our first Armenian Gulls and Ruddy Shelducks and eventually we headed for Van, the main town in the area. However, prices in Van seemed much higher than our 2009 edition of The Rough guide suggested and overall we had a bad time here. We got lost for over an hour in traffic frenzy, failed to find a decent priced hotel and nearly knocked over a suicidal pedestrian. Van must have lots to offer but we didn't like the place and so retraced our route back to Edremit and found a nice hotel on the shores of Lake Van close to Edremit Marshes.



**28th May.** Some of the group woke early and visited Edremit Marshes before breakfast. Here we found more Armenian Gulls and a couple of pairs of White-headed Duck. After breakfast we drove past Van Hills in order to reach Lake Ercek. Van Hills is one site for Grey-necked Bunting but, after studying various trip reports, it appeared that they could be quite difficult to locate. Given our constraints on time, and the fact that Ishak Pasha seemed a much more reliable site, we decided to give Van Hills a miss. Lake Ercek is a saline lake with difficult access but, by driving down a track just north of Ercek village, we ended up at a dead end in a farm yard. The bemused farmer and his family were very accommodating however and we had adequate if fairly distant views of the lake. Close enough to see Ruddy and Common Shelducks, Black-winged Stilts and Velvet Scoters on the lake, whilst the farm held Black-headed Wagtails (*ssp. feldegg*) and Isabelline Wheatears. A roadside marsh opposite the lake held more White-headed Ducks and the nearby fields hosted large flocks of Rose-coloured Starlings with males displaying on wires above. Continuing our route anti-clockwise around Lake Van we reached Bendimahe Marshes where we had closer views of Armenian Gull and Ruddy Shelduck and a small group of bright plumaged female Red-necked Phalaropes. Near Bendimahe River, down a track towards a blue watch tower, we found Lesser Short-toed Larks displaying.



Above: Black-headed Wagtail, Lake Ercek



Above: Introducing a Kurdish farmer to birding (Lake Ercek in background)



Above: Rose-coloured Starling display, Lake Ercek



Above: Male Ruddy Shelduck, Bendimahe Marsh



Above: Adult Armenian Gull, Lake Van



Time to go and passing a road sign for Iran, we made another coffee/sutlac stop in Caldiran. It was only a short hop from here to the 'lunar landscape' lava fields at Serpmetas, a vast area of jagged, broken lava with many large cracks and fissures to be negotiated. After a series of sunny, blue sky days the weather here turned cloudy and windy with slight drizzle. The terrain was very difficult underfoot and this, together with the poor weather, hampered our search for the target bird, Mongolian Finch. We gave it a good go and found Tawny Pipit, Snowfinch and Crimson-winged Finch before we were spotted by the military (from a well camouflaged lava-built shelter) and were moved on. We were not too despondent because information gleaned in Birecik suggested Mongolian Finches were easy at Ishak Pasha (Ha!)



Above: The ankle-breaking lava fields at Serpmetas

In nearby flooded fields we witnessed a magnificent group of c40 White-winged Black Terns fishing accompanied by a single Gull-billed Tern. Onward, and as we came within a few kilometres of the Iranian border we thought checkpoint security might be tighter but we were waved through in friendly fashion. At the summit of Tendurek Gecidi (2644m, 8725ft) we passed through another lava field 'lunar landscape' and, ever hopeful, stopped for another search. This time we were successful but not with Mongolian Finch. No less than two pairs of Radde's Accentors decided to give themselves up and we were treated to point blank views of one pair repeatedly carrying food for their young into a nest site.

Dropping down the pass we came to our closest approach to Iran and were treated to stunning views of Mount Ararat, Turkey's highest mountain (5165m, 16786ft) before passing through Dogubayazit and on to Ishak Pasha Palace.



Above: Route to Iran

Before we reached the palace however, we screeched to a stop at the shout of 'large raptor' and were soon 'scoping a pair of Lammergeiers circling the crags. Having secured our accommodation at Murat Camping and Hotel, no more than 200m below the palace, we quickly turned our thoughts again to Mongolian Finch. A birder at Birecik had told us exactly where he had found them only two days previously. We hit the spot and soon discovered our prediction that Grey-necked Buntings were easy here, was accurate. Another (or same) couple of Lammergeiers came in to roost as did a party of Red-fronted Serins at the upper car park, but no Mongolian Finches yet again. Two chances down and only one more chance tomorrow morning!

**29th May.** Ishak Pasha Palace is in a stunningly beautiful location perched on a remote mountain top. We were up early yet again but the weather wasn't helping - cloudy, rainy and cool. Out onto the scree slopes above the palace and below the Lammergeier crags but the going was difficult and we came away empty handed. Grey-necked Buntings were easy enough with at least 4 individuals plus a similar number of Ortolan Buntings, a family party of Isabelline Wheatears and 2-4 Twite of the Asiatic form ssp. *brevirostris* (a potential split). A party of Italian birders had searched these same slopes all of the previous day for Mongolian Finch without success. It wasn't looking good! Back to Murat Camping for breakfast, to regroup and dry off then out again to the same slopes, which most reports mention are the likeliest place for these birds, for our fourth and final search. The weather was improving when, at last, 3 of us were afforded good, close flight views of a single male Mongolian Finch, quite a relief! This was a Saturday and locals were out in force so no surprise, as we neared the palace, to be invited to join a large group of Kurds for tea and cherries - excellent craic with hardly a word of a common language!



Above: Ishak Pasha Palace





Above: Ortolan Bunting, Ishak Pasha



Above: The search for Mongolian Finch. (Scree slopes on right hand side)

We eventually moved on at 12.30 and, as we had to make the Pontic Alps by evening, this was in our pre-tour itinerary as our 2nd dedicated driving day. The roads were not as good as we hoped with much re-construction work going on (this was a recurring theme throughout our tour with huge re-development of roads everywhere). Passing through Agri and Eleskirt we crossed Sac Gecide (2200m) and a mid afternoon coffee/sutlac stop gave us a calling Quail. By-passing Erzurum we eventually reached Gelinkaya village in the late afternoon. Gelinkaya is a pleasant spot with riverside meadows full of Orchids. Mountain Chiffchaffs were easily found singing their rapid-fire song and Cetti's Warblers abounded, but we couldn't locate a Semi-collared Flycatcher anywhere.



Above: Gelinkaya orchid meadows

We eventually tore ourselves away from Gelinkaya and crossed Agziacik Gecidi (2300m, 7260ft) before reaching Ispir as darkness fell. We had a decision to make now, stay in Ispir or push on over an even higher pass, Ovitdagi Gecidi, to the preferred Hotel Genesis near Sivrikaya. We chose the latter. Details of the exact location of Hotel Genesis are given in the preamble but suffice it to say that when we eventually arrived it was closed till 1st June. We were advised to try the Hotel Ridos, 21k further north near Isikdere. This is a great hotel but quite expensive. We didn't care as it was a late check-in and we had driven 612km / 382 miles in the day.

**30th May.** Out early with a packed breakfast and back to Sivrikaya. We parked up 2km south of the village and almost immediately found 2 Caucasian Grouse, a pair standing out prominently as they fed on the snow patches and amongst Rhododendron scrub. The views were fairly distant, not dissimilar to 'scoping the Black Grouse lek at World's End for those who have been there. Later, this pair was joined by 2 more males and a territorial dispute ensued, with much posturing. Meanwhile Water Pipits song-flighted just behind us, the sun shone and the scenery was breathtaking.



Above: Searching for Caucasian Grouse, Sivrikaya



We slowly re-crossed Ovitdagi Gecidi (2600m, 8581ft) where a pair of Alpine Accentors fed and then slowly birded our way down to Ispir. Continuing our search for Semi-collared Flycatcher we drove down the River Coruh valley, with yet more extensive road works. The birding was pleasant enough with loads of Marsh Warblers, Mountains Chiffchaffs, Syrian Woodpeckers and even Brown Bear tracks in the mud - but no Semi-collared Fly.



Above: Black-veined Whites, Coruh Valley

Having failed on the flycatcher we had one last target, Green Warbler, either a sub-species of Greenish Warbler or a full species according to choice of your taxonomy. The woodland behind Hotel Genesis was a dependable site but during our late afternoon visit we heard nothing. We did pick up a couple of interesting songs phrases by the roadside a few kilometres to the north of Hotel Genesis but proceedings were brought to abrupt end when a brain-dead motorist let off 10 rounds of pistol shot as he passed us in his car. So, we returned to the Hotel Ridos for some for luxurious gluttony.

**31st May.** An early return to Hotel Genesis and this time no mistakes. A Green Warbler was quickly found singing its distinctive song from the top of a conifer, a repetitive and ringing “tee-ter-er, tee-ter-er, tee-ter-er, tee-o”. Once learnt we heard other birds in the near vicinity. Visually it was so bright green and yellow it resembled a small Wood Warbler, surely the splitters are right this time? The correct track is easily found 50m north of Hotel Genesis on the east side of the road.



Above: Beginning of the Green Warbler track near Hotel Genesis

We then tried Sivrikaya again and found a singing Common Rosefinch but no grouse on this occasion in a very brief scan. We departed Isikdere at 10.15 passing a Steppe Buzzard (*ssp vulpinus*) and made our way north through extensive tea plantations to hit the Black Sea coast near Rize. Unusually we now had time on our hands and, after grilling Gulls (Yellow-legged and Caspian) on the Black Sea, we passed through Trabzon and then travelled a short distance south to Sumela Monastery.



Above: Adult Yellow-legged Gulls, Black Sea



Above: 1<sup>st</sup> Summer Caspian Gull, Black Sea





Above: 2<sup>nd</sup> Summer Caspian Gull, Black Sea

Not only is Sumela Monastery a good birding site but the 13th century building, perched halfway up a cliff, is well worth a look in its own right. It is a shame about the Turkish, Greek, Russian, American and English graffiti that deface the ancient wall paintings. As The Rough Guide says, “proving that idiocy is international”. Here we easily found at least 6 Green Warblers giving classic tri-syllabic calls (tiu-u-ee) and our only Blackcap.



Above: Sumela Monastery



Above: Sumela Monastery

All that remained was to return our hire car to Trabzon airport and arrange the short, early-hours taxi transfer from our hotel.

**1st June.** Flights from Trabzon (06.00) and Istanbul (10.40) were on time and uneventful and we were back in the UK at 12.00 local time.

#### LAST THOUGHTS

We packed an awful lot into our 10 days car hire but with a one-way drop off and a couple of long driving days this route is perfectly feasible. Indeed we hardly did any night driving and, although we always got up early when necessary and birded till dusk, the trip took on a fairly relaxed holiday atmosphere at times. The people we met in Turkey really couldn't have been friendlier and any pre-tour concerns regarding our proximity to sensitive borders, military checkpoints, PKK and even sheepdogs all appeared worse on paper than on the ground.

We found all of our targets (except Semi-collared Flycatcher) and enjoyed some exceptional birding, seeing a total of over 200 species.

Some acknowledgements are appropriate. Chris Worthy provided some excellent photographs. Tony Armstrong put together a difficult itinerary, which seemed almost impossible at times and also booked accommodation at Demerkazik and Adana. Doug Smith booked the hotel in Istanbul and the flights. I sourced and booked the one-way car hire with Avis when the trip was of the brink of cancellation through lack of suitable transport. Last but not least, Tony, Doug and Neil drove long miles with great patience and accomplishment. We had a superb trip and thoroughly recommend Eastern Turkey as a birding destination.

**John Rayner, June 2010**

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## SYSTEMATIC LIST

- Little Grebe** : *Tachybaptus ruficollis* Gravel Works lagoons, Birecik (4), Euphrates, Birecik (1), roadside marsh, Lake Ercek (3),
- Great Crested Grebe** : *Podiceps cristatus* Lake Van, Bendimahe (8)
- Black-necked Grebe** : *Podiceps nigricollis* Lake Van, Bendimahe (2)
- Yelkouan Shearwater** : *Puffinus yelkouan* Istanbul, many 100s mostly moving from Black Sea and down the Bosphorus
- White Pelican** : *Pelecanus onocrotalus* Goksu Delta(2) only in distance through heat haze
- Great Cormorant** : *Phalacrocorax carbo* Istanbul, a few around Bosphorus. Near Rize, scattered along Black Sea coast.
- European Shag** : *Phalacrocorax aristotelis* Istanbul, Galata Bridge (*ssp. desmarestii*)
- Pygmy Cormorant** : *Phalacrocorax pygmaeus* Birecik, Gravel works lagoons and on the Euphrates (groups of up to 40)
- Grey Heron** : *Ardea cinerea* 4 at Istanbul and 1 at Idil reservoir
- Little Egret** : *Egretta garzetta* Singles at Halfeti and Lake Van. Scattered around Birecik area (6)
- Squacco Heron** : *Ardeola ralloides* Birecik (c20 daily) the commonest heron here
- Black-crowned Night-Heron** : *Nycticorax nycticorax* Birecik, up to 10 noted daily here
- Little Bittern** : *Ixobrychus minutus* Birecik, max of 6 daily
- White Stork** : *Ciconia ciconia* Demirkazik, c80 moving north at 6pm above village of Yeltavan then 8 on 26th. Small numbers of birds nesting on pylons east of Sanliurfa
- Bald Ibis (Waldraap)** : *Geronticus eremita* Birecik, 6 feeding at Gravel Works lagoons on 24th with 9-15 present on 25th. From the release programme.
- Ruddy Shelduck** : *Tadorna ferruginea* 8 At Ercek Golu and 2 pairs on Van Golu near Tatvan and Bendimahe.
- Common Shelduck** : *Tadorna tadorna* At least 4 at Ercek Golu in distant haze then Bendimahe, 1 pair.
- Mallard** : *Anas platyrhynchos* At least 3 at roadside marsh, Ercek Golu 3 Gelinkya village were the only ones seen.
- Garganey** : *Anas querquedula* 1 male at Birecik and 2 Bendimahe
- Northern Shoveler** : *Anas clypeata* A pair at Bendimahe were the only ones seen.
- Red-crested Pochard** : *Netta rufina* Goksu Delta, 1 female with many other unidentified duck in distance through heat haze. Idil Reservoir, 1 male
- Common Pochard** : *Aythya ferina* A single drake at Edremit Marshes and c16 on roadside marsh, Ercek Golu
- Ferruginous Duck** : *Aythya nyroca* Birecik, 14 including a pair with 4 young on south-east banks of Euphrates
- Velvet Scoter** : *Melanitta fusca* Ercek Golu, At least 4 in distant haze
- White-headed Duck** : *Oxyura leucocephala* 2 females, 3 drakes on Edremit Marshes and a pair at roadside marsh, Ercek Golu

**Honey Buzzard** : *Pernis apivorus* Rumeli Kavargi, a pair over hill behind village. Then 1 at Demircili.

**Black Kite** : *Milvus migrans* Erzurum, 1 over the E80 near Erzurum the only one of trip

**Lammergeier** : *Gypaetus barbatus* 2 adults at 17.50 from road below Ishak Pasha then 2 including a juvenile going to roost on high crags above Ishak Pasha.

**Short-toed Eagle** : *Circaetus gallicus* Serpmetas, 1 over lava field

**Marsh Harrier** : *Circus aeruginosus* 1 near Bitlis then 6/8 at Bendimahe and 3 Ercek Golu

**Sparrowhawk** : *Accipiter nisus* 1 at Demirkazik the only one of trip

**Steppe Buzzard** : *Buteo buteo* 1 at Sivrikaya (*ssp. vulpinus*)

**Long-legged Buzzard** : *Buteo rufinus* First 1 at Demirkazik then seen on 6 dates eastwards from here in 1's and 2's.

**Lesser Spotted Eagle** : *Aquila pomarina* Birecik, 1 mobbed by Kestrels over pistachio orchards to north of town

**Golden Eagle** : *Aquila chrysaetos* 2 during walk down gorge at Demirkazik and 1 above Coruh valley, Ispir.

**Booted Eagle** : *Aquila pennatus* 2 above Coruh valley, Ispir

**Lesser Kestrel** *Falco naumannii* 2 off cliffs at Ishak Paha in late afternoon session

**Kestrel** : *Falco tinnunculus* 2's and 3's seen daily

**Eleonora's Falcon** : *Falco eleonora* 1 over Topkapi Palace gardens on 18th May then 1 over Euphrates at Birecik on 24th May

**Hobby** : *Falco subbuteo* 3 calling and chasing in Coruh Valley, Ispir

**Peregrine Falcon** : *Falco peregrinus* 1-3 noted at Demirkazik and at Ishak Pasha (Saker not eliminated at latter)

**Caucasian Grouse** : *Tetrao mlokosiewiczii* 2 male and 1 female feeding on snow patches and in rhododendron scrub then 2 males displaying (on slopes 2km south of Sivrikaya village)

**Caspian Snowcock** : *Tetraogallus caspius* At 2150m on Demirkazik Dagı c11 put on quite a show from 05.30 - 07.30. Calling and posing for photographs at 200m closest.

**Chukar** : *Alectoris chukar* Durnalik (c4), Ishak Pasha (2)

**See-see Partridge** : *Ammoperdix griseogularis* 1 flushed from the wadi near Ibis Centre, Birecik, then 1 perched distantly calling from pile of stones on plateau above, others heard

**Black Francolin** : *Francolinus francolinus* 1 male singing from top of bush at Goksu Delta

**Quail** : *Coturnix coturnix* 1 heard at roadside stop in high plateau area en route to Erzurum

**Moorhen** : *Gallinula chloropus* Gravel works lagoons, Birecik (c6) and Bendimahe (1)

**Coot** : *Fulica atra* Gravel works lagoons and SE banks of Euphrates, Birecik (flocks of c40)

**Oystercatcher** : *Haematopus ostralegus* A singleton only at Bendimahe

**Black-winged Stilt** : *Himantopus himantopus* 12 at Idil Reservoir, 2 on roadside pool, Idil then c20 at Ercek Golu and Bendimahe



**Avocet** : *Recurvirostra avosetta* Only at Bendimahe (2)

**Northern Lapwing** : *Vanellus vanellus* c4 pairs breeding at Edremit Marshes then 1 on 29th at roadside stop

**Red-wattled Lapwing** : *Vanellus indicus* 1 bird holding territory at Idil reservoir with vocal distraction flight suggesting another sitting nearby

**Ringed Plover** : *Charadrius hiaticula* Idil Reservoir (4)

**Little Ringed Plover** : *Charadrius dubius* At least 2 pairs nesting on beach at Edremit Marshes.

**Redshank** : *Tringa tetanus* A total of c10 (breeding) at Edremit Marshes.

**Greenshank** : *Tringa nebularia* Heard only at Idil Reservoir whilst our attention was elsewhere searching for Red-wattled Lapwing.

**Green Sandpiper** : *Tringa ochropus* Idil Reservoir, (6)

**Wood Sandpiper** : *Tringa glareola* Idil Reservoir (7)

**Common Sandpiper** : *Actitis hypoleucos* Idil Reservoir (2) then 1 on Black Sea coast.

**Ruff** : *Philomachus pugnax* Idil Reservoir (5), Bendimahe (1), Black Sea coast (1).

**Red-necked Phalarope** : *Phalaropus lobatus* 3 seen from road on edge of marsh at Bendimahe

**Yellow-legged Gull** : *Larus michahellis* Istanbul, common around Bosphorous. Also noted on both Mediterranean and Black Sea coasts.

**Caspian Gull** : *Larus cachinnans* c20 along Black Sea coast but 100's of distant gulls went unidentified

**Armenian Gull** : *Larus armenicus* 100+ daily around Van Golu with smaller numbers roadside on 29th

**Black-headed Gull** : *Larus ridibundus* Idil Reservoir (1) and Bendimahe (4)

**Slender-billed Gull** : *Larus genei* Idil Reservoir (1) and Bendimahe (3/4)

**Gull-billed Tern** : *Gelochelidon nilotica* Gravel works lagoons, Birecik (3) and on flooded meadows on approach to lava fields, Serpmetas (1)

**Common Tern** : *Sterna hirundo* On Euphrates at Eski Halfeti (16) then Idil Reservoir (5)

**Little Tern** : *Sternula albifrons* Idil Reservoir, 2 here were a surprise

**Whiskered Tern** : *Chlidonias hybrida* 2 over roadside pools seen from E80 near Agri

**White-winged Black Tern** : *Chlidonias leucopterus* c40 over flooded river N. of Caldiran on approach to lava fields.

**Rock Dove** : *Columba livia* The genuine article plentiful on walk down Demerkazik gorge, with feral birds every day.

**Wood Pigeon** : *Columba palumbus* 8 at Bendimahe were the only birds of the trip.

**Turtle Dove** : *Streptopelia turtur* 6 in orchard then on track at Durnalik

**Collared-Dove** : *Streptopelia decaocto* Small numbers in Istanbul and then daily from Birecik to Tatvan. Probably overlooked elsewhere

**Laughing Dove** : *Streptopelia senegalensis* Istanbul, c20 around city, c10 en route Adana - Goksu Delta, 2 or 3 around Oz Safak Pension, Demirkazik, c8 around Birecik and small numbers around Van Golu.

**Alexandrine Parakeet** : *Psittacula eupatria* Several pairs noted around Topkapi and Gulhane Park, Istanbul on 18th but only 1 at Topkapi on 21st.

**Ring-necked Parakeet** : *Psittacula krameri* c6 around Topkapi Palace

**Cuckoo** : *Cuculus canorus* Heard during walk down Demirkazik Gorge, Nemrut Dagı and Ishak Pasha (where calls resonating around valley). Up to 3 seen at Ishak Pasha including a rufous morph female.

**Pale Scops Owl** : *Otus brucei* 1 in full view at Gulhane Tea Gardens, Birecik.

**Little Owl** : *Athene noctua* 2 en route in late afternoon at Zilyaret en route to Bitlis

**Nightjar** : *Caprimulgus europaeus* 1 hunting moths in the lights at Adana Airport

**Alpine Swift** : *Tachymarptis melba* Low number gatherings noted at dusk in Istanbul and thereafter on 8 dates with a maximum of c40 nesting in cliffs at Ishak Pasha

**Common Swift** : *Apus apus* Noted every day with a maximum of c150 circling Bitlis Castle.

**Little Swift** : *Apus affinis* A small nesting colony of c20 on cliffs near to Bald Ibis centre. One of the few colonies in Turkey

**Pied Kingfisher** : *Ceryle rudis* Gravel works lagoons (3) and on the Euphrates, Birecik

**Bee-eater** : *Merops apiaster* A small breeding colony in north-west gravel works, Birecik then 1-4 noted daily in east.

**Roller** : *Coracias garrulous* Scattered sightings around Birecik area (up to 8 here) then 2 on pylons on 29th at roadside picnic stop.

**Hoopoe** : *Upupa epops* First at Cukurbag then 1-4 daily thereafter.

**Lesser Spotted Woodpecker** : *Dendrocopos minor* 2 around Demircili graveyard

**Syrian Woodpecker** : *Dendrocopos syriacus* 1 flew across road in lower valley near Demirkazik village. A pair at nest hole, Durnalik and 3, including 2 males in dispute, Coruh valley, Ispir.

**Green Woodpecker** : *Picus viridis* Heard near Gelinkya village and 1 seen Coruh Valley, Ispir.

**Calandra Lark** : *Melanocorypha calandra* 1 at Bendimahe the only sighting.

**Bimaculated Lark** : *Melanocorypha bimaculata* 1 on the LHS track off quarry road, Durnalik. 8 on grassy fields below volcano, Nemrut Dagı, (some in song flight). 1-2 Ercek Golu.

**Short-toed Lark** : *Calandrella brachydactyla* c12 on fields outside Cukurbag village appeared to be the nominate species and c8 in grassland below Nemrut Dagı volcano (in song flight here).

**Lesser Short-toed Lark** : *Calandrella rufescens* At least 5 in dry fields near Bendimahe village included males both in song flight and display on the ground, females unimpressed!

**Crested Lark** : *Galerida cristata* Widespread from Goksu Delta (c20) to and Idil Reservoir (c30) but not recorded after 27th May.

**Woodlark** : *Lullula arborea* Nemrut Dagı (3) by tracks inside crater then a single noted Ishak Pasha

**Skylark** : *Alauda arvensis* c3 in song flight over fields before lava fields, Serpemetas

**Horned Lark** : *Eremophila alpestris* Ssp. penicillata widespread in mountains e.g. Demirkazik (8) along track above football pitch. Nemrut Dagı (15) on track to summit. Tendurek Gecidi, small numbers.



**Sand Martin** : *Riparia riparia* Numerous, widespread and recorded almost daily through to Pontic mountains e.g. Goksu Delta (c20), Gravel Works lagoons, Birecik (c100) and a huge nesting colony (100s) on approach road to lava fields, Serpmetas

**Crag Martin** : *Ptyonoprogne rupestris* Fairly common in suitable mountain habitat and noted on 6 dates

**Barn Swallow** : *Hirundo rustica* Noted daily from Istanbul through to the Black Sea

Coast

**Red-rumped Swallow** : *Cecropis daurica* Goksu Delta (c10), Durnalik area (2) and Eski Halfeti (4) were the only records

**House Martin** : *Delichon urbicum* First in Istanbul and thereafter seen on 5 dates. Best count was at Sumela Monastery (c40)

**White Wagtail** : *Motacilla alba* Widespread and common

**Yellow Wagtail** : *Motacilla flava* Widespread with some stunning 'Black-headed Wagtails' ssp. *feldegg* noted, especially in Van area.

**Grey Wagtail** : *Motacilla cinerea* 1 Near Bitlis mosque, 1 in Ispir centre and 1 in lower valley below Sumela Monastery.

**Tawny Pipit** : *Anthus campestris* Small numbers at lava fields (4), Serpmetas, Nemrut Dagı (c10) and Bendimahe (1).

**Water Pipit** : *Anthus spinoletta*. Many in song flight along Ovitdagı Gecidi but not noted anywhere else.

**White-spectacled Bulbul** : *Pycnonotus xanthopygos* 2s at Dermicili graveyard area, Durnalik and Birecik.

**Goldcrest** : *Regulus regulus* A singleton at Hotel Genesis woodland, Sivrikaya, others heard here and Sumela Monastery.

**Dipper** : *Cinclus cinclus* 1 or 2 on 30th and 31st May on approach road to Hotel Ridos, Isikdere.

**Wren** : *Troglodytes troglodytes* 4 on walk down Demirkazik gorge and then heard elsewhere e.g. in Sivrikaya and Sumela Monastery areas.

**Alpine Accentor** : *Prunella collaris* Demirkazik (A minimum of 3), Nemrut Dagı (8) on crags below track to summit, Sivrikaya (2) at Ovitdagı summit.

**Radde's Accentor** : *Prunella ocularis* 1 at foot of scree in Nemrut Dagı crater then 4 on lava fields at Tendurek Gecidi summit en route to Dogubayazit including a pair carrying food for young. We found this to be a skulker and easily missed.

**Rock Thrush** : *Monticola saxatilis* Nemrut Dagı, 1 singing on track to summit and another inside crater. At least 3 on Tendurek Gecidi lava fields.

**Blue Rock Thrush** : *Monticola solitarius* 13 Individuals on 6 days in the mountains included c4 at Demerkazik.

**Ring Ouzel** : *Turdus torquatus* 2 heard 'chacking' in Nemrut Dagı crater led to the discovery of our first Radde's Accentor.

**Blackbird** : *Turdus merula* Noted on 5 days but most prominent in Pontic Alps

**Song Thrush** : *Turdus philomelos* 1 seen briefly at Hotel Genesis, others heard

**Zitting Cisticola** : *Cisticola juncidis* Common at Goksu Delta and Birecik (c10 each site)

**Graceful Prinia** : *Prinia gracilis* Goksu Delta c8 singing, Birecik Gravel works lagoons (c12, fairly common).

**Cetti's Warbler** : *Cettia cetti* Heard on 6 dates in a wide range of altitudes and particularly plentiful at Gelinkaya, but only seen at Birecik

**Moustached Warbler** : *Acrocephalus melanopogon* Singles at Birecik on both days at Gravel Works lagoons.

**Reed Warbler** : *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* c10 at Birecik on both days at Gravel Works lagoons (*ssp. fuscus*)

**Marsh Warbler** : *Acrocephalus palustris* 2 seen and more heard along Coruh River valley, Ispir.

**Great Reed Warbler** : *Acrocephalus arundinaceus* Gravel works lagoons Birecik, (3 seen, many more heard) 1 mobbed by 2 Reed Warblers here. Also Edremit Marshes (c6).

**Eastern Olivaceous Warbler** : *Hippolais pallida* Low numbers recorded at Goksu Delta, Cukurbag, Birecik and Coruh Valley, Ispir (e.g. 3 along River Coruh valley but more heard)

**Upcher's Warbler** : *Hippolais languida* Rather easy at Durnalik with c12 in the area.

**Olive-tree Warbler** : *Hippolais olivetorum* Topkapi gardens Istanbul (2), Rumeli Kavargi (3) and also noted singing late evening at Birecik. More widespread than 'Birds of Turkey' indicates.

**Mountain Chiffchaff** : *Phylloscopus sindianus* Immediately picked up by distinctive song at Gelinkya village (c4) and at Coruh valley, Ispir (4), but more heard than seen.

**Green Warbler** : *Phylloscopus trochiloides ssp. nitidus* 2 heard near picnic/tuvalet area approx 1k north of Hotel Genesis, Sivrikaya on 30th May and 1 at Hotel Genesis next day singing from top of conifer above small stream. A repetitive ringing "tee-ter-er tee-ter-er tee-ter-er tee-o". Also at Sumela Monastery where lots heard and 6 seen both around monastery and in lower valley (call a sharp tri-syllabic 'tiu-u-ee'). Visually, similar to a small Wood Warbler.

**Blackcap** : *Sylvia atricapilla* 1 in Sumela Monastery gardens.

**Whitethroat** : *Sylvia communis* 1 Ishak Pasha by 2nd car park above the palace. 1 Gelinkya village, in roadside scrub.

**Lesser Whitethroat** : *Sylvia curruca* Surprisingly common in Demirkazik area and also around Birecik.

**Orphean Warbler** : *Sylvia crassirostris* 1 singing loudly on track beyond Cukurbag village (by first bridge) and a nest building pair at Durnalik.

**Ruppell's Warbler** : *Sylvia rueppellii* 1 male near Demircili graveyard

**Menetries's Warbler** : *Sylvia mystacea* A minimum of 9 seen in wadi next to Bald Ibis centre, Birecik.

**European Robin** : *Erithacus rubecula* Only seen in woodland at Sumela Monastery although heard elsewhere in Pontics.

**Nightingale** : *Luscinia megarhynchos* Gelinkya village, 1 seen by river.

**White-throated Robin** : *Irania gutturalis* 2 by track beyond Cukurbag (by first bridge) and 2 on left hand side track off the quarry road, Durnalik.

**Rufous-tailed Scrub-Robin** : *Cercotrichas galactotes* Singles at Durnalik, Isikli and Birecik but no doubt overlooked elsewhere. Rather washed-out individuals, *ssp syriacus*.

**Black Redstart** : *Phoenicurus ochruros* *Ssp ochruros* with orange red belly. Widespread and common. Noted on 7 dates with a max of c20 in Demerkazik area.

**Whinchat** : *Saxicola rubetra* 1 male outside village Sivrikaya.



**Northern Wheatear** : *Oenanthe oenanthe* Surprisingly widespread and common, noted on 7 dates with maxima of 10 at Demirkazik and 8 Nemrut Dagı.

**Finsch's Wheatear** : *Oenanthe finschii* Demirkazik (3) and at Isikli on track by village store (1)

**Black-eared Wheatear** : *Oenanthe hispanica* Ssp. *melanoleuca* widespread. E.g. Demircili, around the graveyard area, Cukurbag, nesting by first bridge (track beyond Cukurbag village), Isikli, family party and Serpmetas, small numbers at lava fields.

**Kurdish Wheatear** : *Oenanthe xanthopyrma* A family party of 4 plus another female in side valley (with pylons) at Isikli. Often regarded as a separate species (split from Red-tailed Wheatear *O. chrysopygia*). We noted much confusion in lit. and trip reports with nomenclature.

**Isabelline Wheatear** : *Oenanthe isabellina* Quite common in right habitat at Nemrut Dagı and Ishak Pasha with double figure counts including family parties.

**Iraq Babbler** : *Turdoides altirostris* A recent colonist to this the only site in Western Palearctic. Up to 6 noted in mixed reed/shrub areas of north-west flooded gravel pits at Birecik.

**Sombre Tit** : *Poecile lugubris* c4 in pine woodland opposite Dermicili graveyard, at least 2 pairs in the Durnalik area, 2 outside Isikli village.

**Coal Tit** : *Parus ater* Small numbers in coniferous woodland at Hotel Genesis, Sivrikaya and Sumela Monastery.

**Great Tit** : *Parus major* Noted at Istanbul and then on most days except between Birecik and Tatvan.

**Blue Tit** : *Cyanistes caeruleus* Coruh valley, Ispir (3), Ridos Hotel, Isikdere (2)

**Kruper's Nuthatch** : *Sitta krueperi* c4 in pine woodland opposite Dermicili graveyard including a pair with food entering nest hole near 'pump house 15'.

**Western Rock Nuthatch** : *Sitta neumayer* Widespread. Maximum count in the Durnalik/ Isikli area (15-20) but also found at Dermekazik, Nemrut Dagı, Tendurek Gecedi and Ishak Pasha.

**Eastern Rock Nuthatch** : *Sitta tephronota* c6 in the Durnalik/ Isikli area, some carrying food, and also heard at Birecik. Very distinctive.

**Golden Oriole** : *Oriolus oriolus* The only bird of the trip was heard at Eski Halfeti by the Euphrates.

**Red-backed Shrike** : *Lanius collurio* Surprisingly few. 1 Topkapi gardens, Istanbul and 1 Cukurbag were the only definite sightings.

**Masked Shrike** : *Lanius nubicus* 1 roadside at Goksu Delta then 1 on 23rd from E90.

**Woodchat Shrike** : *Lanius senator* Sporadic. A concentration at Durnalik with 4-6 seen, the only other being 1 near Ercek Golu. Probably overlooked.

**Jay** : *Garrulus glandarius* Common in Pine woods, Demircili (*ssp. anatoliae*) and in Pontics (*ssp. atricapillus*).

**Magpie** : *Pica pica* Noted most days except between Birecik and Bitlis.

**Red-billed Chough** : *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax* 32 near Yelatan village, c80 in the Demirkazik area especially in fields beyond Cukurbag and lower numbers at Ishak Pasha.

**Yellow-billed Chough** : *Pyrrhocorax graculus* c12 in the area of Demirkazik Mountain and gorge.

**Jackdaw** : *Corvus monedula* Noted most days, some birds in east showing more frosted silver on nape and white flashes on sides of neck, possibly *ssp. soemmeringii*).

**Rook** : *Corvus frugilegus* c20 around dump near Nemrut Dagı then noted in Van Golu area and c80 daily in Pontics.

**Hooded Crow** : *Corvus cornix* Seen in double figure counts on almost every day.

**Common Raven** : *Corvus corax* 3 at Ovitdagı Pass, Sivrikaya, (and 1 on 31st). Overlooked.

**Rose-coloured Starling** : *Pastor roseus* Several flocks totaling c200 on approach road to Ercek Golu included some nice displaying males.

**European Starling** : *Sturnus vulgaris* Widespread, noted every day

**House Sparrow** : *Passer domesticus* Common around Istanbul, then seen in double figures on every other day.

**Dead Sea Sparrow** : *Passer moabiticus* Only noted in small numbers at Birecik.

**Tree Sparrow** : *Passer montanus* Double figure count in Lower Gorge, Demirkazık and Durnalık then smaller flocks in Coruh Valley, Ispir.

**Yellow-throated Sparrow** (Chestnut-shouldered Petronia) : *Petronia xanthocollis* c6 in Pistachio fields, Birecik (on road by Oto petrol station, north of Bald Ibis centre) and 2 on south-east banks of Euphrates, Birecik.

**Rock Sparrow** : *Petronia petronia* A small roost in lower gorge, Demirkazık with many seen here on 23rd and then prominent at Durnalık/Isikli, Birecik and Ispir.

**Pale Rock Sparrow** : *Carpospiza brachydactyla* 1 on track beyond quarry, Durnalık and then 2 in side valley (with pylons) at Isikli.

**Snowfinch** : *Montifringilla nivalis* Numerous at Demirkazık (c25) then Nemrut Dagı (6), Serpmetas Lava field (c4) and on Ovitdagı Gecedi. *Ssp leucura* is much paler on upper parts than nominate form.

**Chaffinch** : *Fringilla coelebs* Noted at Istanbul, Demirkazık, Tatvan and Sivrikaya

**Common Rosefinch** : *Carpodacus erythrinus* Sivrikaya, an immature male in song.

**Greenfinch** : *Carduelis chloris* Heard only at Sivrikaya

**Goldfinch** : *Carduelis carduelis* Low numbers noted Demircili, Ercek Golu and Ishak Pasha. (*Ssp niediecki*).

**Twite** : *Carduelis flavirostris* Ishak Pasha (2) on slopes above the palace (Asian Twite *ssp. brevirostris* looking remarkably pale).

**Linnet** : *Carduelis cannabina* Demirkazık, quite common here. Also at Isikli, Nemrut Dagı, Serpmetas and Ishak Pasha (*Ssp bella* 'Turkestan Linnet' - larger paler with unstreaked white rump. A possible split).

**Red-fronted Serin** : *Serinus pusillus* c.10 at close range in Demerkazık gorge, thereafter smaller numbers seen at Nemrut Dagı, Tendurek Gecedi and Ishak Pasha. A little beauty.

**Serin** : *Serinus serinus* 2 outside Isikli village and 3 in pines at Hotel Genesis

**Crimson-winged Finch** : *Rhodopechys sanguineus* A perched singleton emerged as low cloud cleared on Demirkazık Magı, with 3 more later on new road near football pitch. A pair at lava fields, Serpmetas. (This dark-throated form *ssp. sanguineus* is a possible split from Atlas Mountains taxa *ssp. alienus*).

**Mongolian Finch** : *Bucanetes mongolicus* 1 male seen well in flight after much searching. (After dipping at Serpmetas in windy conditions it took 3 more sessions here to connect, hard work).

**Desert Finch** : *Rhodospiza obsoleta* 2 seen briefly by roadside at Durnalık.



**Rock Bunting** : *Emberiza cia*     Single birds noted on 7 dates from Demerkazik, Nemrut Dagi, Ishak Pasha and Pontics.

**Grey-necked Bunting** : *Emberiza buchanani*     2 late on 28th May at Ishak Pasha, then c4 the next day on the slopes above the palace during the Mongolian Finch search.

**Cinereous Bunting** : *Emberiza cineracea*     Good numbers found in the Durnalik area (c20)

**Ortolan Bunting** : *Emberiza hortulana*     At Nemrut Dagi with a female on track to the summit with some singing males inside the crater. Also at c6 Ishak Pasha.

**Cretzschmar's Bunting** : *Emberiza caesia*     c4 at Dermicili graveyard

**Black-headed Bunting** : *Emberiza melanocephala*     Widespread with single figure counts noted on 7 dates.

**Reed Bunting** : *Emberiza schoeniclus*     Only 1 seen at Edremit Marshes (*ssp. reiseri*).

**Corn Bunting** : *Emberiza calandra*     Fairly widespread with singing birds on 6 dates.