

# SPATIA WILDLIFE

## Trip Report

### Birding Turkey – a birdwatching trip 10<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> May 2012

compiled by Dimitar Petrakiev



This was the 5<sup>th</sup> successful Spatia Wildlife trip to Turkey in the last 3 years and was attended by Mr. Neil Sherman and Mrs. Denice Caulfield from Suffolk, UK, and Mr. Miguel Demeulemeester from Belgium, with Mr. Dimitar Petrakiev, as a leader, from Bulgaria.

**Day 1 – 10<sup>th</sup> May** As Miguel arrived later in the evening the day before, we have decided to do a short trip to Seyhan reservoir to the North of Adana. The weather was wet and gloomy, but despite that we managed to see one *Temminck's stint* and three *Kentish*

*plovers* in one of the canals. The picnic areas along the shore looked deserted and birdless and we tried the parks on the other side of the road, which produced several *Eastern Olivaceous warblers*, *Red-backed shrikes* and a pair of *Willow warblers*. On the way to the airport we stopped to see a flock of *Black-headed buntings*, which were Miguel's first lifers for the trip.

TA flight arrived on time and we headed west to Tasucu for a three-night stay. After arrival we had some time to scan Tasucu bay from our balconies and Miguel spotted two *Arctic skuas* harassing a group of gulls near the fishing installations in the west side of the bay – a bird that is not very common in that part of the Mediterranean.

**Day 2 – 11<sup>th</sup> May** As we opted for more leisurely start today we arranged breakfast for 7.30 and the pre-breakfast scanning of the bay produced more arctic experience in Turkey – a *Kittiwake*, resting on the harbor pylon!

After breakfast where we saw one *Auduin's gull* from the terrace, we made our way to the famous Goksu delta. At an accidental stop to see *Little bittern* and our first *Rufous-bush chat*, *Eleonora's falcon* made a brief but enjoyable appearance – nice adult dark morph.

We carried on to the hide in the west side of Akgolü and shortly after we had a nice view of a *Purple swamp hen*, two distant *Ferruginous ducks* and black and *White-winged black turns* in the north part of the lagoon. Miguel saw two *Bitterns* flying and *Bearded tits* were heard and we had good views of *Graceful prinias*. The distant raptors after being checked with scopes turned out to be 7 *Short-toed eagles* and a flock of 18 *Honey buzzards*. On the way back to the car two *Black francolins* male and female appeared on a small dune trumpeting loudly.



*Spur-wing plover at Goksu Delta*

It was time to move on and we drove around the southwest shores of the lagoon scanning for waders and passerines. At a small pond we stopped to check the suspiciously big looking whitish wader in the far corner, but it quickly disappeared, before we see it, maybe flushed by the *Golden Jackal* that came out of the bushes. *Montague's harrier* made brief appearance and a *Barred warbler* was seen in a bush. At the approach of the South hide there were many *Spur-winged plovers* and *Ruddy shelducks* announced their presence with noisy calls. 5 *Greenshanks* were present in the small pools along the way and a single *Ruff*. As we drove along *Short-toed larks* called and we stopped to see them. The broken tower overlooking the brackish lagoon to the south looked birdless, but as we approached two *Stone curlews* were flushed. There was a group of distant *Slender-billed gulls*, 4 *Common terns*, *Grey plovers* and two lonely *Flamingoes* in the brackish waters. As we saw some gulls and terns in a distant sandy bank we decided to get closer views of them, Miguel produced his memorable phrase, which became the highlight of the trip – "I bet my money that these are *Broad-billed sandpipers*". As the stakes were set high we had to find a way to those distant waders and eventually we were granted with fantastic views of three of these and also one *Bar-tailed* and one *Black-tailed godwits* standing next to each other for a good comparison.

We had lunch in the shades of abounded building spotting butterflies and keeping an eye on the *Baltic gulls* in the next pool.

After lunch we approached the group of gulls and terns seen previously and there were *Slender-billed gulls* in nice summer plumage along with *Gull-billed terns*, *Sandwich and Whiskered terns* and few *Kentish* and two *Little ringed plovers*.

We carried on east and in the next pools there were seven *Little stints*, one *Ruff* and one *Ringed plover*. We decided to check the fields around the river Goksu. There was not much apart from a few *Black-headed buntings* and *Crested larks*, but suddenly a *Mongoose* crossed the road!

On the way back we decided to check again for the *Marbled duck* on the place where it's been previously seen, but we had no luck this time.

The final stop at the west watch tower didn't produce anything new, but as we were going back to the car Miguel saw another two not very common birds on this trip – *Yelcouan shearwaters*.

**Day 3 – 12<sup>th</sup> May** Today after breakfast we decided to pay a visit to the North watchtower to check for *Mustached warbler*. We didn't have to wait long until first one gave very good views in the reeds just across the canal and several others were heard and briefly seen further back in the reeds.

The rest of the day was spent in the hills of Uzunchaburch. On the way up the gorge we stopped briefly to see the alpine swifts in the gorge as well as two *Western rock nuthatches* and one *Crezchmar's bunting*. At the cemetery after the village of Imamli *Rupel's warbler* was heard and then it gave good views from top of a tree. Shortly after we saw our first sombre tit. We climbed to top of the hill to check for raptors. Several black-eared wheatears were in the area and two more *Rupel's warblers*. At the top *Eleonora's falcon* came flying from the west and two *Olive-tree warblers* were singing from the bushes in the bottom of the ravine, but we decided that we should get closer views of them further on.



*Uzunchaburch*

Our next stop was after the village of Kesliturkmenli where orphean warbler sang and was briefly seen after we got of the car. *Olive-tree warbler* was singing but was difficult to see in the thick vegetation. *Rupel's warblers* were singing from almost every third bush in the area. *Blue rock thrush* was singing from top of the rocks above us and more *Rock nuthatches* were seen. After we saw three *Olive-tree warblers*, but none of us were satisfied with the views, we decided to move on further up in the more open areas near Uzunchaburch. On the way up we stopped for lunch at the picnic site where *Kruper's nuthatches* were nesting in the nest boxes around. Two *Lesser-spotted woodpeckers* were seen and the regular *Masked shrike* was hunting from the pine trees. At the archeological site we decided to pursue the so far elusive *Olive-tree warblers* and eventually after chasing one in the local orchard we were granted with excellent view of one bird that was too close for the scopes. On the way back we stopped to enjoy two *Western rock nuthatches* close to their nest.

After this we returned to Lades motel for a deserved rest and nice dinner out on the terrace.





*Krüper's Nuthatch*

**Day 4 – 13<sup>th</sup> May** Today we were leaving Tasucu and heading to the mountains of Demirkazik, but the plan for the day was to visit Tuzla lagoon to the south of Adana. Along the journey we had the regular *Laughing doves* and *White-spectacled bulbuls*. Before reaching Tuzla we stopped at the old fish farms of Tabklar to see *White-breasted kingfisher* and *pied kingfisher*. *Common kingfisher* was heard. Several *Little terns* were hunting and at the new rice fields there were 30 *Collared pratincoles*, two *Wood sandpipers* and one *Black-tailed godwit*. Just before Tuzla Denice spotted our first *Lesser grey shrike* for the trip and 3 more were seen later. At Tuzla there were the regular *Kentish plovers* and few *Curlew sandpipers* and 4 *Dunlins*. *Common* and *Whiskered terns* were flying around. After nice picnic at the lagoon we decided to check the east side. From a small dune we enjoyed views of *Slender billed gulls*, *Black headed* and 40 *Med gulls*, one *Caspian tern*, *Lesser black backed gull*, two *Gargany* and one *Auduin's gull*. Two gulls with narrow ring on the bills gave us a ground for discussion but were finally decided as sub-adult *Caspian gulls*. *Red throated pipit* was heard from the nearby beach and a *Mongoose* was trying to make it's way to the big flock of 500 feeding *Flamingoes*, but didn't seemed to like the option to swim to them and eventually went away. Then Miguel said again his memorable phrase – I bet my money that this is *Greater sand plover*, referring to the small rufous blob in the heat haze. And indeed it was – feeding in the distant east part of the lagoon. We went round some dunes to get a better view and it did show up very well. The rest of the afternoon was spent in the journey to the village of Chukurbag where our hospitable host Hasan welcomed us in his pension. There was quite a big difference in the temperature here and we decided to have dinner inside by the warm stove. After filling the bird list in we were ready for bed as tomorrow was going to be an early start.



*Aladaglar Mountains*

**Day 5 – 14<sup>th</sup> May.** Although the weather didn't look very promising at 3.30 we were up and ready to go on the famous tractor ride that was going to take us at 2250m to see the specialty bird of this area - *Caspian snowcock*. On the way up we picked up a group of 4 Italians and 3 Belgians and our increased international party carried on. We couldn't believe our luck, when the sun rose and the clouds disappeared just as we reached our destination. The *Snow cocks* were already calling, but it took some time to get the first one in the scopes, thanks to Hassan. Soon after more birds showed up and when the sun went up higher the other local specialties started to show up – *Rades* and *Alpine accentors*, *Crimson-crimson-winged finches*, *Wallcreeper*, *Snow finches* were everywhere and *Shore larks* of the local race *penicilata* were not far too. Both races *ochruros* and *semirufous* of *Black redstart* were seen and at least three *Chuckar* partridges were present in the area as well as numerous *Alpine choughs*. Two big flocks of *Bezoir ibex* were spotted from the plateau too. On the way down we opted to walk half the way back and that produced a small colony of *Rock sparrows*, several *Rock buntings*, *Long-legged buzzard* and in the lower parts above the ski lodge *Isabeline wheatears* and a stunning male *White-throated robin*.

The weather deteriorated and we went back to the pension for late breakfast and short rest. In the afternoon we decided to check for *Bimaculated larks* on the road to Celallar and we were rewarded with good views of 5 birds, while *Golden eagle* was soaring in the distance. As the rain came quickly we had to retreat in the pension for one hour and then headed to Emli gorge. On the way Neil called for bird of prey on the right and it appeared to be a *Booted eagle*, followed by another *Long-legged buzzard*. As we were parking the car in the beginning of the gorge Neil shouted – *Lammergeyer* and we just saw it going



over the ridge, but soon it came back for a full circle above our heads. In the gorge we had *Rock sparrows*, *Rock buntings*, *Red-billed choughs* and finally *Red-fronted serins* called and two were seen briefly in flight. We decided to go further for better view, accompanied by two friendly but fiercely looking Sheppard's dogs with sharp spikes on their collars, having fun with one poor cow. As we were walking the *Serins* called again and this time we nailed them with good scope views while two scops owls called from the nearby rocks. *Golden eagle* appeared again, mobbed by *Red-billed choughs*. It was time to go back to the pension, where some chose to have early night, while other paid a visit to the neighboring Belgians for sweet talks and birding stories.



*Watching Caspian Snowcocks at 2250m*

**Day 6 – 15<sup>th</sup> May** After early breakfast, we left the mountains and headed east towards Gaziantep. Just before we reached the main road we made a brief stop to have one last view of the magnificent Aladaglar. Small colony of *Rock sparrows* were seen by the road and *Mistle thrush* was singing from a treetop. Suddenly several raptors appeared out of the blue – *Black kite*, a pair of *Booted eagles*, nice *Steppe buzzard* and *Egyptian vulture* followed by a *Sparrowhawk*. Further down we encountered flock of *White storks*, carefully counted to 68 by Miguel.

For lunch we decided on picnic in the hills around Gaziantep, which was very nice as we had our first *Cinereous bunting*, just as we stopped the car, several *Black-eared wheatears*, around four *White-throated robins*, one of them nice pale morph male and several *Rufous bush chats*. Having heard some distant *Upcher's warblers* we decided to try and get some decent views of them, but despite our efforts the several birds we saw were not very cooperative. We moved on to the next valley near the village of Durnalik and on the way we had one *Tawny pipit*. At Durnalik *Upcher's warblers* were singing again and one was found in the scope, but we still needed more satisfactory views and

decided to leave this task for tomorrow. As we climbed up the valley, we stopped to enjoy *Eastern rock nuthatch* by its nest, which Denice and Neil found not far from the road. Other birds in the area were – *Cretzschmar's bunting*, *Rufous bush chat*, *White-throated robin*, *Eastern orphean warbler*, *Kestrel* and *Long-legged buzzard*.

In the late afternoon we checked in at our hotel in the center of Gaziantep and assembled for dinner in the famous Imam Cagdi kebab house where we had one of the best kebabs in Turkey and undoubtedly the best baklava in the world.



*Cinerious Bunting*

**Day 7 – 16<sup>th</sup> May.** We left Gaziantep early as we were planning a morning excursion to the hills above Isikli for the local Kurdish wheatears and hoping for better views of *Upcher's warbler*. Just after the village we had *Black-eared wheatears*, *Sombre tits*, *Eastern rock nuthatches*, *White-fronted robins*, *rock sparrows*, *Cretzschmar's bunting*, *Kestrel* and one *Marsh warbler*. Higher up the gorge we saw female *Kurdish wheatear* carrying food to the nest. We waited for some time to see the male, but it seemed only one bird was present in the area. In the so called moonscape *Cinereous buntings* and *Black-eared wheatears* were everywhere and at the orchards on top we finally went into the *Upcher's warblers* heavens. Everyone from the group had several very good views of this lively *Hippolais warbler*.

After picnic lunch in the area we headed to Birecik. As we had plenty of time we decided to stop at the small reservoir near Nizip. There were many *Rollers*, *Bee-eaters*, *Calandra larks* and numerous *Turtle doves* and few *Yellow-throated sparrows* in the orchards before the reservoir and not much in the water – two *Black winged stilts* and *Wood sandpiper*. This was the moment we should have called it off and head for beers on the terrace of hotel Acar in Birecik, but the fate and our desire to see something more in the reservoir got us stuck in the sticky mud just two meters from the safety of the road. The



next hour was spent in all sorts of efforts and ideas for getting us out, but the result was the bus was sinking even deeper. Next move was to try our interpreters' skills. The Turks are always willing to help and thankfully, the only other people in the area knew a guy with a tractor. While waiting, we spent some time talking about the weather, the good neighbors and what on earth were we doing here...Not long after our savior came and pulled us out.

Birecik was not far and soon we were checked in and enjoying *Pigmy cormorants* and *Night herons* flying over Euphrates from our balconies.



*Yellow-throated sparrow*

**Day 8 – 17<sup>th</sup> May** After mutual decision we went on a pre-breakfast walk to the gravel pits to check for *Iraq babblers*. While getting there Neil pointed out how amazing is to be able to watch one of the worlds rarest birds from your balcony – this morning we all have had several flocks of bald ibises flying up and down the river. At the gravel pits we saw *Little bitterns*, *Squacco herons*, thousands of *Sand martins* nesting in the sand banks. *Dead see sparrows* were very noisy, especially one family couple in its nest. Soon we saw our first *Menetries's warbler* and four *Iraq Babblers* – two adults and two juvenile - finally came into view. Two flocks of *Rose-colored starlings* flew by when we were getting back to the car.

We went back to the hotel for breakfast and then went to the gravel pits to the south. As there was not much there we decided to pay a visit to the local tea garden and its regular visitor – *Pale scops owl*. The owner was very kind to direct us to the usual roosting spot and we had really good views of the owl in full daylight. After having a cup of leisurely tea, we went to the villages east of Birecik to look for *Pale rock sparrow* and possibly *See-see partridge*. At that moment it was getting really hot, but in the area there were

some *Yellow-throated sparrows* and we stopped the car by a small wadi as we heard *Pale rock sparrow* calling. Soon it was in Miguel's scope and everyone had good views.

We went back to Birecik for lunch – in the famous Kiyi restaurant on the west bank of Euphrates.

In the afternoon we visited the Bald ibis centre and then headed to the hills above Birecik, where in the late afternoon we had one *Lesser kestrel* and close to the village of Akpinar we saw two *See-see partridges* – male and female. *Lesser and Greater short-toed larks* were present in the area and we had also three *Desert finches* on a wire on the way back. Just before Birecik we had two more *See-see partridges*. Before going back to the hotel we stopped at the cliffs to see the *Little swifts* going out for evening meal.



*Iraq Babler*

**Day 9 – 18<sup>th</sup> May** Having seen all our target species for this trip, today we decided to try the steppe habitats around the village of Kocoren for *Sand grouse* and *Cream-colored courser*. We didn't have any luck with these, but saw many *Lesser and Greater short toed larks* and *Tawny pipit* was seen too. Two *Goitered gazelles* were running in the steppes away from the bus and the *Finches' wheatears* were very common. There were also 2 *Desert finches* and at least seven *See-see partridges* were seen.

We went back to Birecik for lunch and in the afternoon made our way to Halfeti, but it was very windy, with thunder storm coming on the horizon we decided to go back, when we saw two *Sand grouse* flying across the road towards the river, but they were a bit too far and against the light to say for sure which species they were, so they were excluded from the list.





*See-See Partridge*

**Day 10 – 19<sup>th</sup> May** After early breakfast in hotel, we said goodbye to the friendly staff and drove to Adana for the TA flights back home. We said goodbye to each other and everyone headed their own ways – some to England, some to Belgium and some took the long way to Bulgaria.

Total birds seen during the trip was 215 of which 7 were only heard.