

AZERBAIJAN

12-19 APRIL 2012



Linus Karlsson
Johan Joëlsson
Daniel Yttermalm
& Tomas Axén Haraldsson (author)

Mustapha Frontier Birding

Syria 2009

Azerbaijan 2012

? 2014

With a location in the far southeastern part of the Western Palearctic, bordered by the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus and a stones` throw from Central Asia it is remarkable that Azerbaijan has stayed a seemingly well kept secret among the international birding community. In recent years, since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, it seems only a small group of German birders/researchers and a handful of organized group trips have visited this exciting country. We are, as far as we know, the first Swedish birders to visit Azerbaijan.

Our enormous gratitude goes to Kai Gauger for all his help and advice in planning this trip.

Planning and route

We started discussing a possible birding trip to Azerbaijan during August 2010. A trip report had caught our eyes and when two of us bought the book *Birdwatching in Azerbaijan – a guide to nature and landscape* by Schmidt, Gauger & Agayeva, we were stuck. The blog www.birdingaze.blogspot.com did not help in the matter, it seemed such an outstanding birding destination teeming with species that north European birders dream about.

We wanted to cover *different habitats* – steppe, wetlands, the Caspian coast and the Caucasus – and had one week to use. Even though it is a small country it is remarkably diverse and visiting all good bird areas would not be possible. With Caucasus and the steppe as “musts” and the bottleneck migration site Besh Barmag seemingly awesome, we decided on a rough plan to stay in the eastern parts of the country. See Itinerary below.

When to go is another delicate matter to decide on. During the winter period (early November till March) there is a good chance of finding Asian species like Great Black-headed Gull, White-winged Lark and Pine Bunting and see tens of thousands of Little Bustards and waterfowl. From late Spring, say mid-May, most of the exciting breeding species – Shikra, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, Paddyfield and Green Warbler for example - seem to have arrived. So we argued that these are known facts and, despite the obvious attraction with these periods, opted for the little-known period of mid-April. We hoped for both rich migration and some early-arrived breeders, hopes that partly were fulfilled and partly not. The Caucasus might have too much snow before this time and later in spring several species move to even higher altitudes. Our two days in the mountains did indeed prove to be one of the absolute highlights of the trip.

See short analysis of our result in the end of the report.



Dawn breaks at our camp in the coastal scrubs at Besh Barmag – a “bottle neck” migration site where the Caucasus almost reaches the Caspian Sea. Photo Tomas Axén Haraldsson.

Logistics and costs

It takes some preparation for a successful trip in Azerbaijan. As a visitor with tourist visa you need a so-called Letter of Invitation to start with. This can be obtained in various ways, we had a recommended tour operator (Caspian Tour) in Baku to do this for a cost of 30 USD per person. Then we applied for the visa at the embassy here in Stockholm which cost 700 SEK (about 70 euro). You also seem to need to book your national park visits in advance, showing the voucher given to you by the tour operator. We paid 4 AZN (about four euro) per person for Shirvan Nationalpark and ended up getting our outrageous 67 USD (!!) per person for Shahdag Nationalpark (covering most of the attractive areas at Xinaliq and Laza) refunded since we couldn't get into the park due to military presence and sensitive border areas with Russia (or Dagestan to be more precise, sensitivity understood..)

* We opted for Austrian Air as our carrier, with a very convenient morning flight from Stockholm via Vienna to Baku in about seven hours with just less than an hour on the ground in Vienna. Price just over 3700 SEK (about 370 euro) felt very acceptable. Turkish Airlines also had good connections but with 12+ hours in Istanbul.

* A jeep is very much recommended for getting around to the birding sites, we used the same tour operator for this and were very happy with their service. A 2007 Prado Landcruiser was very comfortable and the price, about 100 euro per day, was acceptable also for four persons to share. The jeep worked fine except the headlights that went out the third day and a flat tire in Quba.

Mustapha Frontier Birding

* We stayed in tent during four nights and had accommodation the other three as follows: Hotel Masalli in Masalli, simple but clean and spacious four person room at 50 AZN (about 50 euro) for all of us. Charming homestay with Yusuf in Xinaliq at 90 AZN for all of us including meals. Otel Oskar in Quba, good standard but small at 50 AZN for us all.



Male Red-fronted Serin in the village of Laza, one of many attractive species in the Caucasus. Photo Johan Joelsson.

Itinerary

- April 12 arrival Baku at 5pm, drive to Shirvan Nationalpark (120km). Night in tent.
- April 13 in Shirvan until late afternoon, then drive to Masalli (130km). Night at Hotel Masalli.
- April 14 until lunch at Kizil Agach, afternoon in the Talish Mountains and evening drive to Gobustan (190km). Night in tent.
- April 15 Gobustan until lunch, afternoon drive to Besh Barmag (150km) and evening there. Night in tent.
- April 16 Besh Barmag until early afternoon, then drive to Xinaliq (120km). Night at “homestay”.
- April 17 whole day trek in Xinaliq, late afternoon drive to Quba (50km). Night at Otel Oskar.
- April 18 drive to Laza (70km) and until early afternoon there, then drive to Besh Barmag (120km). Night in tent.

Mustapha Frontier Birding

April 19 until late morning in Besh Barmag, then drive to Baku (90km). Flight to Sweden at 6pm.

We drove for a few hours each day and found it rather hassle-free. Traffic was calm outside the towns and cities and even there it was manageable if you have experience from driving in the region. We were only stopped at one (1) police checkpoint and waved off after two minutes. No military checkpoints or hassles either. The only real problem area was the Caucasus and the areas around Xinaliq where newly constructed military outposts and the likewise newly appointed Shahdag Nationalpark seem to coincide/collide – we were not let in despite having permits, too sensitive border areas. Road quality was ok on the main roads and from bumpy to terrible on the countryside. Petrol was cheap with about 0.5 AZN/liter. 4WD/jeep is much recommended.



Immature Imperial Eagle at the raptor-rich area Besh Barmag. Actual migration, however, we saw very little of. Photo Johan Joelsson.

Trip diary

April 12

Three of us took off from Stockholm in the early morning and our fourth companion met up during our short stop in Vienna. We landed on time at 5pm in a pleasantly sunny and 25C Baku and found the visa and luggage procedure very simple and fast. On the parking lot our logistics partner met up, mr Haji Imanli from Caspian Tour, and we loaded a nice-looking Prado Landcruiser. Johan proved to be an able driver in the chaotic and dense evening traffic in downtown Baku but with good map-reading and him behind the wheels we made it out south on the highway towards Salyan.

Our first birding stop, eager as we were to get out in the field, proved less than successful. The so-called Red Lake is a small reed surrounded lake in the sprawling outskirts of the town and rather

Mustapha Frontier Birding

unattractive among wastelands and construction site. We found some *Black-winged Stilts*, two *Black Kites* and an unexpected flock of *Mute Swans* passing overhead, then we headed off again. In rather good time we made it down to the entrance of the Shirvan Nationalpark and decided to stay the night there. After some discussions with the wardens, telephone calls and showing our permit, we were let inside and pitched our camp at the visitors' house. Several *Scop's Owls* were calling and the evening was warm and moist. One of the wardens joined us to a nearby roadside restaurant where we had a great meal of grilled *shaslik* and also bought some supplies for the field.

April 13

We awoke by Mother Nature, represented by calling *Black Francolins*, at about 7am and went for a short pre-breakfast walk. *Menetriés Warblers* were evident and also several *Corn Buntings* and flocks of *Spanish Sparrows*. The kestrels were a bit confusing at first until we found out there were both *Lesser* and *Common Kestrels* in the area, and flocks of Lesser's were seen throughout the day. We had a simple breakfast with a *Penduline Tit* and a *Pallid/Montague's* "ringtail" harrier passing by.



Green and flat – the steppe in Shirvan Nationalpark. Photo Tomas Axén Haraldsson.

An officer from the park administration, mr Hikmet, joined us and said that visitors need a guide and he would show us the main areas and tracks in the park. He was happy with his 10AZN fee and went back after just pointing us in the right direction... Once we were out on the flat steppe interesting birds started showing: *Calandra* and *Lesser Short-toed Larks* on the sky, a *Woodchat Shrike*, several "ringtail" harriers in the distance, many *Isabelline Wheatears*, flocks of *Whimbrels* and a meowing team of pretty *Mediterranean Gulls* overhead. A real surprise, since we expected them to be gone by

Mustapha Frontier Birding

now, was a female *Little Bustard* that walked out from the roadside scrubs. A highlight was a handsome male *Pallid Harrier* passing very close and low over the track.



Pallid Harrier in the Shirvan. Photos Johan Joelsson.

Down by the “Flamingo Lake” is a house with an observation deck built on top of it. From here a great, but quite distant, 360 degree view can be had of the lake with its reed beds and surrounding steppe. Most birds showed flying and/or distant so it took some time before species were logged; small teams of *Red-crested Pochard*, *Ferruginous Duck*, *Garganey*, *Whiskered* and *White-winged Black Tern* passed by as well as a *Bittern* and a lone *White-fronted Goose*. *Pygmy Cormorants* and *Greater Flamingoes* were in the distance with *Purple Heron* and *Gull-billed Terns* at closer range.



The “Flamingo Lake” as seen from the observation deck. Fairly rich in species but few birds and quite distant views. Photo Linus Karlsson.

We explored a visitors’ site in the reeds before bumping away north on the rough tracks towards Mount Bändovan near the coast of the park. Here a lagoon is mentioned with exciting waders but we never found the right place, road signs and guides are rather few out here ☺ Plenty of the afore mentioned larks and wheatears, some pairs of *Ruddy Shelducks*, a *Montague’s Harrier* and some *Short-toed Larks* on the track kept us going. We made it down to the beach some kilometers south of the mountain (a sign saying “Caspian shore” along the track) but found the area rather empty of birds. Some *Slender-billed* and *Mediterranean Gulls* passing by, two *Black-necked Grebes* on the sea and two mean-looking crews of five plus six *Arctic Skuas* heading north at close range.

Our return towards the entrance was interrupted in the most monstrous way by two huge *Black Vultures* taking off from the roadside and landing further out on the steppe, keeping an eye at the many groups of Goitered Gazelles roaming the park. Upon returning to the main road we decided to continue south towards Masalli and stay the night there. Just north of Salyan we pulled off to scan some wet fields with *Gull-billed Terns*, *Mediterranean Gulls*, *Night Herons* and our only *Glossy Ibis* for the trip. After a meal in Salyan we stopped also at the vast Machmud Chala wetlands along the road east of Biläsuvar. Fading light and distant birds gave little, but well over a thousand *Shovelers*, roosts of *Caspian Gulls* and *Greater Flamingoes* were seen. At night we arrived at rather calm and sleepy Masalli and found a hotel with the same name and a four person room at excellent 50AZN.

April 14

Masalli is a good base for exploring the southernmost part of the country with the Iranian border just about 50km to the south. We awoke and headed towards the coast in a rather gloomy and rainy dawn, pulling off the highway at sign “Nārimabad” and entering the Kizil Agach area, a huge coastal wetland complex. The large bay is to the north and rather inaccessible, the best option seems to be the southern limits of “small” bay/lagoon which is also quite huge. We drove on a dam out on the peninsula, to roads end in a village, and worked our way back to the main road during the morning, good birding grounds easily accessible.

Along the flat sandy beaches were flocks of gulls (we looked hard for Great Black-headed with no luck) and terns including *Caspian* and *Sandwich Terns*, many *Little Egrets* and large groups of *Ringed Plovers*, *Dunlins*, *Little* and *Temminck’s Stints* with a lone *Red-necked Phalarope* with them. Flocks of wagtails had at least seven *Citrine Wagtails* among them and a highlight during the morning. From the road along the dam we scanned flocks of *Greenshanks* and *Marsh Sandpipers*, 100+ *Little Gulls*, many *Pygmy Cormorants* and two species *Chlidonias* terns and 25 *Collared Pratincoles*. During this our only pulse-raising event for the trip occurred, with a truck and a car nearly colliding by our jeep and the drivers getting into a fight. We found it wise to quickly drive off.

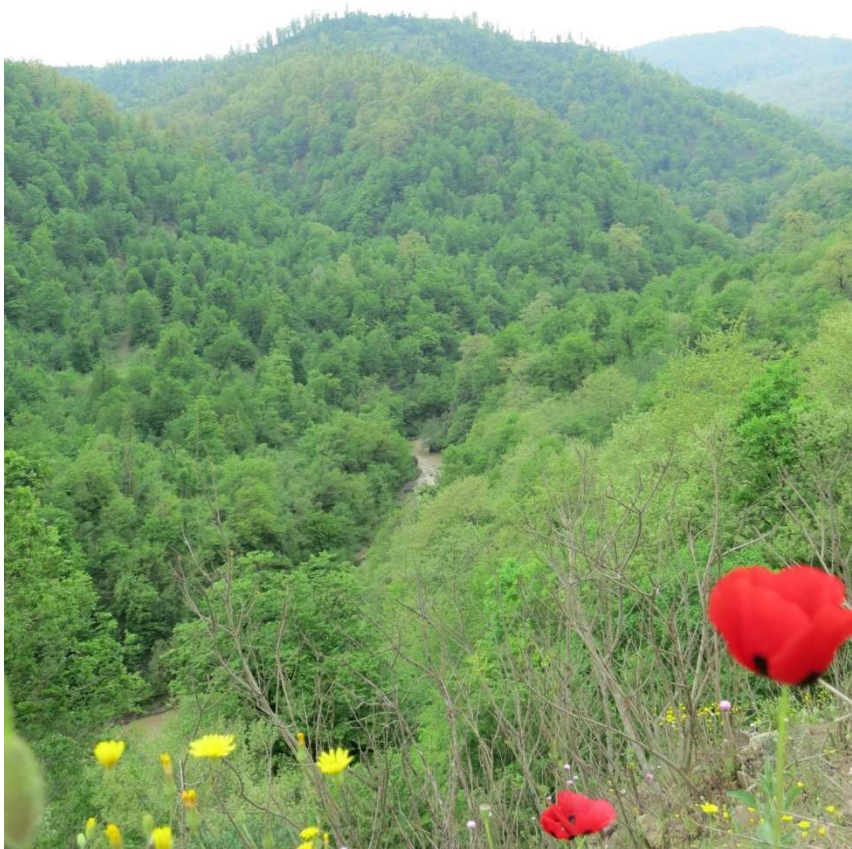


Citrine Wagtails on the beach at Kizil Agach, two out of at least seven here. Photo Johan Joelsson.

From German birders we had learned that the forest strips at the roundabout south of Masalli near the river is a breeding site for Shikra ¹. We didn’t know whether they had arrived by now but gave it a try, finding only a male *Sparrowhawk* (carefully studied!), a *Short-toed Eagle* overhead and a pair of

¹ see Heiss & Gauger 2009 *The rediscovery of breeding Shikras Accipiter badius in the Western Palearctic*, Sandgrouse 31:134-137.

Syrian Woodpeckers in the park by the petrol station. We decided to try the lower reaches of the Talish Mountains in the afternoon and drove towards Yardimli on a good quality road, having field lunch up in the forest covered hills with great vistas. In this far corner of the Western Palearctic, with just some tens of kilometers to Iran, we had hoped for more but displaying *Short-toed Eagles*, several singing *Red-breasted Flycatchers* and, surprisingly, a 2cy *Northern Goshawk* would have to do.



View from our lunch spot in the Talish Mountains, near the border with Iran. Photo Linus Karlsson.

In the late afternoon we turned north again, stopping at some wet fields near the Machmud Chala lakes. In perfect light and at close range we picked out at least nine *Citrine Wagtails* among *Yellow Wagtails* of several subspecies until a *Merlin* flushed the flocks. Here also 75(!) *Little Ringed Plovers* and at the vast lake system lots of ducks including *Pintails* and *Gadwalls*. The evening turned out a little more adventurous than we had planned as we drove for Gobustan. The headlights of the jeep had gone out and we hoped to avoid night driving but darkness fell as we pulled off the highway at Sängachal and bumped out in the semi-desert towards the village of Umbaki. With a tiny torch light held out from the window we made slow progress in total darkness and after being freaked by barking guard dogs we found a place to pitch the tent before our last source of light also went out.

Mustapha Frontier Birding

April 15

We crawled out of the tent in the chilly dawn and shook ourselves to life. The semi-desert wilderness was alive with *Lesser Short-toed Lark* and *Isabelline Wheatear* songs and herds were grazing nearby, completing the idyllic picture. Our only *Long-legged Buzzard* appeared and also a pair of *Ruddy Shelducks*. We decided to explore the road leading south and did some random stops along it. At a settlement with a small pond for the cattle we found a *Little Owl*, a pair of *Red-billed Choughs*, five *Garganeys* and another pair of *Ruddy Shelducks*. The only passerine at the pond was a female *Citrine Wagtail*! Further along the road a male *Montague's Harrier* passed very close and we had a nice chat with some BP staff saying this was restricted area due to the Baku-Tblisi-Ceyhan gas pipeline so we turned back. A pair of *Stone Curlews* had then occupied our camp site. The Sociable Plovers said to use this area during migration seem to have tens of square miles to choose among so we skipped that project after a while...



Gobustan near the village of Umbaki. Our camp was next to this track. Photo Tomas Axén Haraldsson



Male Montague's Harrier passing our jeep in the Gobustan. Photo Johan Joelsson.

Some more stops at the dry hills between Umbaki and Sängachal/the main road provided two plus three *Griffon Vultures*, singing *Tawny Pipits*, our first *Rock Sparrows*, four *Bee-Eaters*, a pair of *Egyptian Vultures* and three *Chukars* in a wadi. We used the midday heat for continuing north, looking for a place to fix our headlights. The highway runs in the outskirts of Baku and traffic was manageable yet again. We pulled off at a service station near Giläzi but ended up wasting 90 minutes with a helpful staff who just couldn't fix it, despite involving truck drivers and other locals ☺

We arrived at the famous silhouette of the Besh Barmag Mountain in the late afternoon and had a meal and bought some supplies before heading down to the coast. We had made contact with the German birders monitoring this bottleneck migration site and met up with Micha and Friedrich in the evening at our camp site by the coastal lagoons. Migrations had been fairly quiet the last days but what we had read about the site on the blog still raised our expectations for the next day. We scanned the lagoons in the fading light and saw a flock of ten *Marsh Sandpipers*, three *Red-necked Phalaropes*, both *Merlin* and *Hobby* hunting and our first *Water Pipit* overhead.



Small lagoons and scrubs along the Caspian Sea with the famous Besh Barmag peak in the distance. Photo Linus Karlsson.

April 16

With coastal scrubs along the Caspian Sea in mid-April you would expect them to be filled with migrant passerines but not so. We awoke in a quiet morning with only some *Chiffchaffs* and noisy *Black-winged Stilts* breaking the silence. Friedrich patrolled his mist nets during the morning and came up with extremely little. After working through the scrubs we at last came up with two male *Redstarts*, two *Bluethroats* and some *Lesser Whitethroats*. We took post on a patch of grass by the lagoon and prepared breakfast, noting some flocks of *Short-toed Larks* and *Yellow Wagtails* passing overhead with *Citrine Wagtail* and *Tawny Pipit* in between. But in the clear and calm morning the migration soon faded out so we decided to head up to the rock on the ridge in the late morning. The Germans had seen some raptor movement the last days so we hoped that would be the case also today.

Working our way back to the main road and then up the bumpy track on the grassy hill side took some time, both due to the terrible condition of the “road” and for us having to stop for a pair of *Finsch’s Wheatear* and our first *Steppe Eagle* cruising slow overhead. Arriving up at the parking lot by the peak, the sacred Besh Barmag *Dag*, it neared lunch time and the midday heat and thermals should attract some raptors we thought, but the *Steppe Eagle* would be pretty much the only raptor wings we saw. One more *Steppe Eagle* and some of the local *Black Vultures* glided by. We focused instead on the small stuff at the foot of the rocks: *Black-eared Wheatears* fighting with a male *Pied Wheatear* over territory, several *Rock Sparrows*, an entertaining pair of *Rock Nuthatches* (getting very upset by

Johan playing their call on his iPhone), two pairs of *Blue Rock Thrush* and two odd *Tree Pipits* landing on a crag.



Immature Steppe Eagle at Besh Barmag. Photo Johan Joelsson.

Disappointed by the lack of raptors but happy at the magnificent scenery and pleasant weather we had field lunch and went back down the track. We stopped again for the Finch's pair and discovered many soaring raptors between the road and the waste dump of the chicken farms, this kept us busy for the next hour: some 25 *Black Kites* kept low over the smoking carcasses at the dump while about 15 *Black Vultures*, two *Griffon Vultures* and two immature *Imperial Eagles* soared above. At least two more *Steppe Eagles* joined in as did two adult *Dalmatian Pelicans*! A flock of ten *Steppe Buzzards* was at least a sign of migration going on and a female "ringtail" harrier put in a short appearance. Add to this several *Marsh Harriers* and a swarm of 50+ *Lesser Kestrels* and we had our raptor appetite satisfied for a while ☺. With this we headed off on the main road towards Quba – gateway to the Caucasus.

An idyllic one hour drive through orchards and farming sceneries taken from the early 20th century saw us in Quba where we bought some supplies and exchanged money. The turnoff for Xinaliq is not entirely clear but after some asking around and wrong turns we found the rather good but small road winding up in the mountains. The road follows the Guidalchay river and where it enters a dramatic narrow gorge with sheer cliff faces on the sides we can thoroughly recommend a stop. For here our first *Lammergeier* appeared, slowly gliding along the cliffs, and soon there were four of them on the sky! With them also our first *Lesser Spotted Eagle*, and in this company it was "Lesser" indeed.

After some slightly scary sections of the road we were in the uplands with *Black Redstarts*, two male *Ring Ouzels*, *Rock Buntings* and *Water Pipits* along the road. Ahead towered the snow covered 4000m peaks of the Caucasus in sceneries no less than awesome. It took us about 1hr 45 min to reach the mythical village of Xinaliq at 2300m a.s.l. including short birding and photo stops. The river bed fans

out in a wide sediment-filled river valley the last kilometers before the village, truly magnificent views with the white topped Tofandag (4.100m) as backdrop. A male *Rock Thrush* and *Snowfinches* on the roofs greeted us upon arrival in the village and two of us also caught glimpses of a *Wallcreeper* flying overhead! We parked for a chat with the local old boys.

The word “homestay” was familiar and we soon worked out a night’s accommodation with Yusuf who spoke a few words of English and was very hospitable and easy-going. We showed him our permit for the Shahdag Nationalpark and he insisted we go to the military base near the village to clear us for our birding hike tomorrow. Here, however, a gentleman of an officer with good English explained that we did NOT have the permit from the military administration and that the Russian border was very close and sensitive (which can be understood with the chaotic Dagestan and Chechnya on the other side of the peaks!) so we could not enter the high mountain areas around Mount Shahdag. We could though hike up the eastern part of Gizilgaya and its southern slope, outside the sensitive areas, which became the plan for the next day.

April 17

The night with Yusuf and his family was very memorable. After a home-cooked meal we fell asleep like babies in a room adorned with carpets and rugs and awoke decently fresh at about 6:30 the next morning. The sky was cloudy with mist hanging low over the mountains, it had been snowing at higher altitudes and we could see a thin layer of white covering the rocks and gravel fields at some 3.000m a.s.l. which was our destination for the day. We geared up for rough weather and rough terrain and headed off upwards at a steady pace, hearts thumping in the thin mountain air.



Dramatic views and thin mountain air – Caucasus is indeed breathtaking! Photo Linus Karlsson.

Our first *Shore Larks* appeared and also a pair of *Twite* of the local subspecies *brevirostris*, “Asia Minor *Twite*”. *Water Pipits*, *Northern Wheatears*, *Black Redstarts* and *Snowfinches* were all around with *Red-billed Choughs* and a lone *Griffon Vulture* on the sky. We paused for breakfast after having gained a few hundred meters of height. A distant Curlew-like whistle reached our ears, we froze, it sounded again, we smiled at each other – *Caucasian Snowcock* song! Great. Using the scopes we soon found a small flock feeding on a grassy slope further up. The shout for this discovery was drowned though by another shout from one of us: “Wolves, I see Wolves!” And indeed, two *Wolves* walked slowly among the patches of snow high up towards the peak. What amazing display of Caucasian wildlife ☺

We pressed on uphill and the steep angle and high altitude, nearing an estimated 3.000m, made progress slow and exhausting. A male *Wallcreeper* cheered us up as did an *Alpine Accentor* and more flocks of *Caucasian Snowcocks*. The mist swept in from time to time but as it cleared we worked hard for remaining target species and were finally rewarded as Daniel found a male *Güldenstädt's Redstart* on a rock, what a relief. We saw it fairly close but it moved around, could have been two and a possible female was seen shortly next to the male. It was now early afternoon, our food and water was almost out so we decided to start our descent. We saw Xinaliq like a miniature village far down in the valley and it took us almost two hours to reach back, the last hour in constant rain. On the way we met three herders at their small camp and they invited us for tea, truly an experience. When hearing about our Wolf sighting two of them ran off to gather the sheep closer to the camp.



A male Wallcreeper among rocks on the slope of Gizilgaya. Photo Johan Joelsson.

Back in the village we sorted out our soaking wet clothes and equipments, were offered another meal at Yusuf's place and loaded the jeep for the drive back towards Quba. The rain had caused minor damages and rock fall on the road and at some sections things got a bit hairy but we made it through. Further down the valley near Quba the road was almost flooded with muddy rain water. We found a hotel called Otel Oskar at a large junction near the market place and got two nice rooms for the night. Grilled kebabs and a cold Efes topped off a great day in the Caucasus and for tomorrow we decided to head for Laza and more mountain birding instead of going back to Besh Barmag.

April 18

Quba was still quiet as we left heading north to Qusar and then following the Qusarchay river up the valley towards Laza. Forests and meadows around the road were crisply green and it felt like spring had not reached very far up here. *Wood Lark* and *Jay* were added to the trip list. The road snakes through the vast construction complex that will become a ski resort in late 2013 *inshallah* and continue as a small track clinging to the steep hill sides. At one place we had to wait for the recent rain damages to be repaired... We reached Laza in fairly good time, about 8am, and decided to head on the last two kilometers towards the Suvar Resort at 1800m a.s.l. Just before the resort is a green patch/lookout spot next to the road with excellent views so we based ourselves here for the morning.

The birch scrubs covering the hill sides is reportedly the home of the Caucasian Black Grouse and we scanned hard for it during the next four five hours to no avail. Two flying *Caucasian Snowcocks* were seen higher up in the valley and *Lammergeiers* were seen the whole day. *Ring Ouzels*, 100+ *Red-billed Choughs*, flocks of *Red-fronted Serins*, two *Golden Eagles*, a distant *Griffon Vulture*, a passing *2cy Steppe Eagle*, time flies when you are having fun. The sceneries from our spot were no less than magnificent with the northern side of Gizilgaya on our left and on our right, the majestic snowy

Mustapha Frontier Birding

Shahdag at well over 4.000 meters. See video sequence (commentary in Swedish) here <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Ar6a7Wrvcl>

After lunch, and after scraping every birch twig with our scopes, we were about to give up when Johan suddenly shouted, but not because of a grouse. “I have something here looking good for Great Rosefinch!”, the species we had not counted on seeing. A few Pine Grosbeak-looking long-tailed passerines flew in from the valley and landed in the highest birch scrub above the resort. In the zoom scope there was no doubt, they were *Great Rosefinches*!! Five of them, with at least two ruby red males. After just a few minutes they took off again and headed back up the valley. Just incredible, and what luck. We were overjoyed to have nailed three out of four target species for the Caucasus.



Our post near the Suvar Resort, deep in the Gusarchay valley near Laza. From here we saw Great Rosefinch, Caucasian Snowcock, Red-fronted Serin, Lammergeier and more, but missed out on the Caucasian Black Grouse. Photo Tomas Axén Haraldsson.

The way back to Qusar provided a *Wallcreeper* taking off from the road, some awesome views of two *Lammergeiers* at less than a hundred meters range, a soaring *Lesser Spotted Eagle* and a bunch of *Chiffchaffs* looking boringly ordinary. We made it back to the main Baku highway, had a flat tire in Quba that was repaired in no-time at a service station and drove the 60 km to Besh Barmag in good spirits. We had received message from Micha that a male Caspian Plover had rested there this morning and hundreds of Black-winged Pratincoles had passed by. We decided to extend the jeep hire one more day and to stay in tent at Besh Barmag rather than staying the last night in Baku. Wise decision it soon proved to be.

Mustapha Frontier Birding



The dragon from the mountains coming incredibly close. Photo Johan Joelsson.

We pitched the tent on the grassy ridge near the sea, overlooking both the lagoons and the fields, and awarded ourselves a few Xirdalan (a local well-tasting lager) in the evening sun. Suddenly a few pratincoles appeared on the sky, heading north along the shore, *Black-winged Pratincoles*! Then came a flock of 20-something, then a large loose flock of about a hundred, all *Black-winged Pratincoles* 😊 During about 25 minutes we counted 630 Black-winged Pratincoles in perfect light conditions, slightly amazing and one of the absolute highlights of the trip.

The evening continued in a great way with good views of a *Dalmatian Pelican*, 33 unidentified pelicans heading north, two immature *Pallid Harriers* coming nice and close, four *Merlins*, one adult *Armenian Gull*, flocks of *Gull-billed Terns* and *Marsh Sandpipers*. Sharing a few beers with our German friends overlooking the Caspian Sea was a fitting and nice way to wrap up our trip.



Last evening at Besh Barmag with an incredible show of Black-winged Pratincoles. Not to mention Pallid Harriers and a few cold Xirdalan ©Photo Tomas Axén Haraldsson

April 19

Departure day and a time to keep in Baku, so some focused birding and sorting out our equipment took most of the morning. Trickle of migration were noted with flocks of *Yellow Wagtails*, *Short-toed Larks*, a female *Hen Harrier* and Friedrich showed us a trapped *Nightingale*. A v-shaped flock of 25 *Great White Egrets* passed at about a kilometers height against the blue sky. The best part of the morning came late when the thermals attracted vultures and eagles to soar over the waste dump – c. 50 *Black Vultures*, at least five *Griffons*, three *Steppe Eagles*, two *Imperial Eagles* and a group of six *Dalmatian Pelicans* with an adult *White Pelican* joining them.

About lunch time we drove into the slightly chaotic city traffic in Baku and thanks to some excellent map reading, calls to our local tour operator and cold nerves behind the wheels we made it to a parking lot near the office. We had a chat with our contacts, secured some paper work and had time for about two hours of sightseeing (walk to the old city, eating two döner kebabs and buying a tacky cup with the Azeri flag) before heading to the airport. Departure procedures very convenient and at 6pm our flight took off. Thank you Azerbaijan for an unforgettable birding adventure ☺

Analysis of our result

Our decision to go in mid-April rendered us some obvious gaps in the following species list. The winter in the region was also reportedly severe and spring had not reached as far as we had hoped. Basically no shrikes, flycatchers, bee-eaters, nightingales and extremely few warblers was disappointing but not totally unexpected. However, the snow line had retreated very far up towards the

Mustapha Frontier Birding

peaks and we had to reach nearly 3.000 meters to see Gldenstdt's Redstart and get decent views of the snowcocks. We thought the snow would be lower in mid-April. The vegetation in mountain valleys in the Caucasus was not very developed.

List of species in Azerbaijan

12-19 April 2012

Mute Swan Knlsvan *Cygnus olor*

A group of 15 flying over the so-called Red Lake south of Baku and one at the "Flamingo Lake", Shirvan Nationalpark.

White-fronted Goose Blsgs *Anser albifrons*

One lone bird at the "Flamingo Lake", Shirvan Nationalpark.

Greylag Goose Grgs *Anser anser*

One at the Machmud Chala wetlands.

Ruddy Shelduck Rostand *Tadorna ferruginea*

Three pairs seen on the steppe in Shirvan Nationalpark and two pairs in the semi-desert of Gobustan.



Pairs of Ruddy Shelduck were seen in some dry steppe areas, here in the Gobustan. Photo Johan Joelsson.

Shelduck Gravand *Tadorna tadorna*

Low numbers seen at wetlands with maximum 20 at Machmud Chala.

Wigeon Bläsand *Anas penelope*

A pair each at Machmud Chala and Besh Barmag.

Gadwall Snatterand *Anas strepera*

c. 20 at Machmud Chala among other dabbling ducks.

Teal Kricka *Anas crecca*

Low numbers seen at wetlands and a flock of c. 50 flying off Besh Barmag.

Mallard Gräsand *Anas platyrhynchos*

Only recorded at Machmud Chala with a few birds among the Shovelers.

Pintail Stjärtand *Anas acuta*

c. 10 at Machmud Chala.

Garganey Årta *Anas querquedula*

Fairly widespread but in low numbers (less than ten) including five birds in a tiny pond for watering cattle in the Gobustan semi-desert!

Shoveler Skedand *Anas clypeata*

By far the most common and numerous duck. Most wetland sites held some tens of birds but at Machmud Chala the number was estimated to at least 1.500 birds.

Red-crested Pochard Rödhuvad dykand *Netta rufina*

Two males and a female at the "Flamingo Lake", Shirvan Nationalpark.

Pochard Brunand *Aythya ferina*

8 at the "Flamingo Lake", Shirvan Nationalpark.

Ferrugineous Duck Vitögd dykand *Aythya nyroca*

Three in flight at the "Flamingo Lake", Shirvan Nationalpark.

Caucasian Snowcock Kaukasisk snöhöna *Tetraogallus caucasicus*

Several displaying birds and small flocks, at least 16 all together, seen at about 3.000m a.s.l. on the southern slope of Gizilgaya (3.750m) at Xinaliq. Also two birds in distant flight above the Suvar Resort at Laza.

Chukar Berghöna *Alectoris chukar*

Three in a wadi near the village of Umbaki, Gobustan, and several birds (two seen and others heard) at Xinaliq.

Black Francolin Svart frankolin *Francolinus francolinus*

Common in Shirvan Nationalpark and also heard at Kizil Agach. A short video sequence of a displaying male can be seen here http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xHtO_DB-n-Y

Quail Vaktel *Coturnix coturnix*

3-4 heard displaying in Shirvan Nationalpark and one bird seen at Besh Barmag.

Little Grebe Smådopping *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

Two at the "Flamingo Lake", Shirvan Nationalpark.

Great Crested Grebe Skäggdopping *Podiceps cristatus*

A few pairs at the "Flamingo Lake, Shirvan Nationalpark and very common (100+) at the lagoon of Kizil Agach.

Black-necked Grebe Svarthalsad dopping *Podiceps nigricollis*

Two adult birds at sea off Shirvan Nationalpark.

Mustapha Frontier Birding

Cormorant Storskarv *Phalacrocorax carbo*

Fairly common along the coast in small numbers.

Pygmy Cormorant Dvärgskarv *Phalacrocorax pygmeus*

c. 10 at the “Flamingo Lake”, Shirvan Nationalpark, c. 50 at the lagoon of Kizil Agach and some singles flying over the Red Lake, south of Baku.

White Pelican Vit pelikan *Pelecanus onocrotalus*

One adult bird with Dalmatians at Besh Barmag on the 19th.

Dalmatian Pelican Krushuvad pelikan *Pelecanus crispus*

Several birds around the waste dump at Besh Barmag with maximum six together on the 19th.

Bittern Rördrom *Botaurus stellaris*

One bird in flight over the reeds at the “Flamingo Lake” in Shirvan Nationalpark.

Night Heron Natthäger *Nycticorax nycticorax*

Seen along the road near Salyan where small numbers breed in tree colonies with egrets and Rooks.

Cattle Egret Kohäger *Bubulcus ibis*

Fairly common in the lowlands and seen at the tree colonies near Salyan with tens of birds.

Little Egret Silkeshäger *Egretta garzetta*

Seen in the lowlands and at the tree colonies but in small numbers.

Great White Egret Ägretthäger *Egretta alba*

Four along the road near Salyan, two at Kizil Agach and 25 migrating north at Besh Barmag on the 19th.

Grey Heron Gråhäger *Ardea cinerea*

Singles and small flocks seen at several sites.

Purple Heron Purpurhäger *Ardea purpurea*

Two at the “Flamingo Lake”, Shirvan Nationalpark and five at the lagoon of Kizil Agach.

White Stork Vit stork *Ciconia ciconia*

One bird perched on top of a pylon outside Masalli was the only record.

Glossy Ibis Bronsibis *Plegadis falcinellus*

The only record was a bird feeding with gulls and terns on a wet field north of Salyan.

Greater Flamingo Större flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus*

Mustapha Frontier Birding

c. 50 at the “Flamingo Lake”, Shirvan Nationalpark and c. 300 at Machmud Chala.

Black Kite Brun glada *Milvus migrans*

Two at the Red Lake, two along the road near Salyan and at least 25 hanging around the waste dump at Besh Barmag.

Lammergeier Lammgam *Gypaetus barbatus*

Fairly easily seen in the Caucasus with four birds on the road to Xinaliq, one bird near the village of Xinaliq and 3-5 birds around the Suvar Resort, Laza. A video clip of a feeding bird at Laza can be seen here http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zp97ePsiRpE&list=UUOJ6gYfB-0cEEDDT_Rb58SA&index=4&feature=plcp

Egyptian Vulture Smutsgam *Neophron percnopterus*

A pair in Gobustan, along the road between Sangachal and Umbaki.

Griffon Vulture Gåsgam *Gyps fulvus*

Seemingly fairly common: five in Gobustan, maximum five at the waste dump at Besh Barmag, one at Xinaliq and one at Laza.

Black Vulture Grågam *Aegypius monachus*

Two birds in the steppe of Shirvan Nationalpark and good numbers hanging around the waste dump at Besh Barmag with at least 50 in the air on the 19th.



Black Vultures were almost constantly in the air near the waste dump at Besh Barmag. Photo Johan Joelsson.

Short-toed Eagle Ormörn *Circaetus gallicus*

One at Masalli and three, including display, in the Talish Mountains along the road to Yardimli.

Marsh Harrier Brun kärrhök *Circus aeruginosus*

Common in the lowlands and especially so at the reed beds of Shirvan Nationalpark and Kizil Agach with each 30-40 birds at least. Migration seen at Besh Barmag with some 20 birds heading north.

Hen Harrier Blå kärrhök *Circus cyaneus*

One female at Shirvan Nationalpark and another female migrating north at Besh Barmag on the 19th.

Pallid Harrier Stäpphök *Circus macrourus*

One 3cy male at Shirvan Nationalpark and two immatures migrating north at Besh Barmag on the 18th.

Montague's Harrier Ängshök *Circus pygargus*

One female in Shirvan Nationalpark, male and female in Gobustan, near the village of Umbaki, and a male just south of Besh Barmag on the 19th. Also at least three "ringtails" in Shirvan Nationalpark.

Northern Goshawk Duvhök *Accipiter gentilis*

One 2cy in the Talish Mountains on the road to Yardimli and one passing overhead at Xinaliq.

Sparrowhawk Sparvhök *Accipiter nisus*

Some singles seen.

“Steppe Buzzard” Ormvråk *Buteo buteo vulpinus*

Singles and small numbers at several sites with a flock of c. 10 at Besh Barmag on the 16th the only clear migration sign.

Long-legged Buzzard Örnvråk *Buteo rufinus*

Only one recorded, near Umbaki in the Gobustan.

Lesser Spotted Eagle Mindre skrikörn *Aquila pomarina*

One along the road to Xinaliq and one west of Qusar on the road to Laza, both probably migrating over the Caucasus.

Golden Eagle Kungsörn *Aquila chrysaetos*

Two, one adult and one immature, around the Suvar Resort, Laza.

Steppe Eagle Stäppörn *Aquila nipalensis*

At Besh Barmag was both single migrating birds and some circling the waste dump, at least five on the 16th and three on the 19th. One immature also at the Suvar Resort, Laza.

Imperial Eagle Kejsarörn *Aquila heliaca*

Several hanging around the waste dump at Besh Barmag with at least three immatures seen. One large, dark *Aquila* in the Talish Mountains was probably of this species.

Lesser Kestrel Rödfalk *Falco naumanni*

Common in the fertile lowlands with several large gatherings of 50+ seen.

Kestrel Tornfalk *Falco tinnunculus*

Very common.

Merlin Stenfalk *Falco columbarius*

Surprisingly many records with some ten birds seen, highest count four migrating at Besh Barmag on the evening of the 18th. At least two female-type birds on the trip referred to the pale sandy coloured subspecies from Central Asia.

Hobby Lärkfalk *Falco subbuteo*

One hunting at dusk at Besh Barmag and at least one more on migration there on the 18th.

Moorhen Rörhöna *Gallinula chloropus*

Only two records: two birds in the canal at the “Flamingo Lake, Shirvan Nationalpark, and one heard from a cattle pond in Gobustan.

Mustapha Frontier Birding

Coot Sothöna *Fulica atra*

Fairly common at lakes and wetlands in the south but in small numbers.

Little Bustard Småtrapp *Tetrax tetrax*

One lone female along the track to the "Flamingo Lake", Shirvan Nationalpark.



Little Bustard in front of our jeep in Shirvan. Photo Johan Joelsson.

Black-winged Stilt Stytlöpare *Himantopus himantopus*

Common and widespread, most water bodies regardless of size had at least a pair. Some larger gatherings at Kizil Agach and Besh Barmag coastal lagoons with some 75 birds each.

Avocet Skärfläcka *Recurvirostra avosetta*

One bird with other waders at Kizil Agach.

Stone Curlew Tjockfot *Burhinus oediconemus*

One pair at our camp site in Gobustan, just by the road side.

Collared Pratincole Rödvingad vadarsvala *Glareola pratincola*

c. 25 birds around the road crossing the lagoon at Kizil Agach. Also three unidentified pratincoles near Salyan.

Black-winged Pratincole Svartvingad vadarsvala *Glareola nordmanni*

One of the highlights of the entire trip was the 30 minute migration wave of Black-winged Pratincoles along the shore at Besh Barmag in the evening of the 18th. At least 630 birds passed, from singles to groups of about 200. Another 600 had been counted by the Germans earlier in the day as well!

Little Ringed Plover Mindre strandpipare *Charadrius dubius*

Fairly common both along the coast and at inland wetlands. 75(!) birds were with wagtails and Ruff on some wet fields along the road just south of the Machmud Chala lakes.

Ringed Plover Större strandpipare *Charadrius hiaticula*

Common at Kizil Agach with 100+ along the sandy beaches. Also smaller numbers at the coastal lagoon at Besh Barmag.

Kentish Plover Svartbent strandpipare *Charadrius alexandrinus*

Four birds on the beach at Kizil Agach and three with Little Ringed Plovers near Machmud Chala.

Grey Plover Kustpipare *Pluvialis squatarola*

One with other waders at Kizil Agach.

Northern Lapwing Tofsvipa *Vanellus vanellus*

A small group, including displaying birds, was around the fields at Besh Barmag during our visits there.

Little Stint Småsnäppa *Calidris minuta*

Common at Kizil Agach with 150+ along the beaches.

Temminck's Stint Mosnäppa *Calidris temminckii*

Small numbers among other *Calidris* at Kizil Agach with some 15 at least.

Dunlin Kärrsnäppa *Calidris alpina*

Common at Kizil Agach with 300+, especially at the small coastal lagoon on the peninsula, and also a small group at the Besh Barmag lagoon.

Ruff Brushane *Philomachus pugnax*

Small groups (<20) seen at several wetlands and 250+ at Kizil Agach.

Common Snipe Enkelbeckasin *Gallinago gallinago*

Singles and small groups (<5) at Kizil Agach and Besh Barmag lagoon.

Black-tailed Godwit Rödspov *Limosa limosa*

6-7 birds with gulls and terns on wet fields near Salyan and c. 80 counted at Kizil Agach.

Whimbrel Småspov *Numenius phaeopus*

At least 75 in several flocks in Shirvan Nationalpark and three migrating at Besh Barmag.

Curlew Storspov *Numenius arquata*

Five at Kizil Agach.

Redshank Rödbena *Tringa totanus*

At least one at Kizil Agach with other *Tringa* waders.

Marsh Sandpiper Dammsnäppa *Tringa stagnatilis*

At least 15 with other *Tringa* waders just south of the road crossing the lagoon at Kizil Agach and a group of ten at the Besh Barmag lagoon on several days.

Greenshank Gluttsnäppa *Tringa nebularia*

c. 60 at Kizil Agach and some singles at other wetlands.

Green Sandpiper Skogssnäppa *Tringa ochropus*

Singles and small groups (<5) at several wetlands with the highest number at the Besh Barmag lagoon where 25 roosted in the evening of the 15th.

Wood Sandpiper Grönbena *Tringa glareola*

Singles and small groups (<10) seen at several wetlands.

Common Sandpiper Drillsnäppa *Actitis hypoleucos*

Singles seen at several wetlands as well as on the Shirvan coast.

Red-necked Phalarope Smalnäbbad simsnäppa *Phalaropus lobatus*

One in summer plumage with other waders in the coastal lagoons on the peninsula at Kizil Agach and three at the Besh Barmag lagoon.

Arctic Skua Kustlabb *Stercorarius parasiticus*

Two nice teams of five plus six birds (one dark morph) heading north along the coast at Shirvan Nationalpark, seen from a newly constructed beach house south of Mount Bändovan.

Mediterranean Gull Svarthuvad mås *Larus melanocephalus*

Some 15 in Shirvan Nationalpark, the same number feeding at wet fields near Salyan and small numbers (<20) moving along the coast at Besh Barmag. Most birds in summer plumage.

Little Gull Dvärgmås *Larus minutus*

Common at the lagoon around the road at Kizil Agach with 100+ feeding with *Chlidonias* terns. Some singles also along the shore at Besh Barmag.

Black-headed Gull Skrattmås *Larus ridibundus*

Mustapha Frontier Birding

Rather common and widespread with several gatherings of 250+ seen, mainly at evening roosts.

Slender-billed Gull Långnäbbad mås *Larus genei*

Seemingly fairly common along the coast with 15-20 seen at both Shirvan (from the beach house), Kizil Agach and Besh Barmag.

Caspian Gull Kaspisk trut *Larus cachinnans*

Common and widespread but mainly in small numbers (<50).

Armenian Gull Armenisk trut *Larus armenicus*

At least one adult bird along the shore at Besh Barmag. Little time was given to gull studies and more could probably have been found.

Gull-billed Tern Sandtärna *Gelochelidon nilotica*

c. 10 in Shirvan Nationalpark, c. 20 at wet fields near Salyan and some singles seen along the road during the trip, both coastal and inland.

Caspian Tern Skräntärna *Hydroprogne caspia*

Four with other terns and gulls on the beach of the peninsula at Kizil Agach.

White-winged Black Tern Vitvingad tärna *Chlidonias leucopterus*

14 birds passed the observation deck at the "Flamingo Lake", Shirvan Nationalpark, and 100+ were feeding with terns and Little Gulls at the roadside lagoon at Kizil Agach. All in handsome summer plumage.

Whiskered Tern Skäggtärna *Chlidonias hybrida*

Five at the "Flamingo Lake", Shirvan Nationalpark, and c. 15 at the lagoon of Kizil Agach.

Common Tern Fisktärna *Sterna hirundo*

Small numbers recorded along the coast at Shirvan and Kizil Agach.

Sandwich Tern Kentsk tärna *Sterna sandvicensis*

Several (10-15) recorded along the coast at Shirvan and Kizil Agach.

Rock Dove Klippduva *Columba livia*

Seemingly "pure" birds at the Besh Barmag rock and in Caucasus.

Wood Pigeon Ringduva *Columba palumbus*

Common.

Collared Dove Turkduva *Streptopelia decaocto*

Mustapha Frontier Birding

Rather common in towns and larger villages.

Laughing Dove Palmduva *Streptopelia senegalensis*

Like Collared Dove but more scarce.

Cuckoo Gök *Cuculus canorus*

A calling bird heard in the Talish Mountains.

Scops Owl Dvärguv *Otus scops*

At least three birds calling at our camp site just inside the Shirvan Nationalpark.

Little Owl Minervauggla *Athene noctua*

One along the highway near the Red Lake, south of Baku, one at a settlement in Gobustan and one on the coastal plain at Besh Barmag.

Swift Tornseglare *Apus apus*

Rather common.

Kingfisher Kungsfiskare *Alcedo atthis*

Several at canals and at the “Flamingo Lake”, Shirvan Nationalpark, and one also at the Besh Barmag lagoon.

Bee-eater Biätare *Merops apiaster*

Only one record: four birds passing overhead in Gobustan. Perhaps a sign that we were a little too early in the season for many breeders to have arrived?

Hoopoe Härfågel *Upupa epops*

Common and widespread, from semi-desert to towns. Five together in Shirvan Nationalpark.

Great Spotted Woodpecker Större hackspett *Dendrocopos major*

One in the forest along the road to Xinaliq.

Syrian Woodpecker Balkanspett *Dendrocopos syriacus*

One pair in the park in the southern outskirts of Masalli.

Calandra Lark Kalanderlärka *Melanocorypha calandra*

Common on the Shirvan steppe and in the Gobustan semi-desert.

Short-toed Lark Korttälärka *Calandrella brachydactyla*

Two or three on a dirt track in Shirvan, one along the road in Gobustan (both records with accompanying Lesser Short-toeds) and several smaller flocks (5-15) migrating north during our time at Besh Barmag.



Short-toed Lark in front of the jeep, far out on the Shirvan steppe. Photo Johan Joelsson.

Lesser Short-toed Lark Dvärglärka *Calandrella rufescens*

Rather common and widespread in the lowlands and along the coast, especially in Shirvan and Gobustan.

Crested Lark Tofslärka *Galerida cristata*

Common, typically along the roadside in the lowlands.

Wood Lark Trädlärka *Lullula arborea*

Several singing and perched along the road between Qusar and Laza.

Skylark Sånglärka *Alauda arvensis*

A bit unexpectedly, several singing birds were at higher altitudes (2500m a.s.l.) in Xinaliq.

Shore Lark Berglärka *Eremophila alpestris*

Fairly common (15+ with several singing) during the hike in Xinaliq.

Sand Martin Backsvala *Riparia riparia*

Singles and small numbers among other martins and swallows.

Mustapha Frontier Birding

Barn Swallow Ladusvala *Hirundo rustica*

Rather common.

House Martin Hussvala *Delichon urbicum*

Rather common, mainly near settlements and villages.

Tawny Pipit Fältpiplärka *Anthus campestris*

Two pairs in Gobustan and one each passing Besh Barmag and the Suvar Resort, Laza.

Tree Pipit Trädpiplärka *Anthus trivialis*

A few migrants noted at Besh Barmag, including two perched on the peak of the rock.

Meadow Pipit Ängspiplärka *Anthus pratensis*

A few singles each in Shirvan and at Besh Barmag.

Red-throated Pipit Rödstrupig pipilärka *Anthus cervinus*

Many records of singles and some small groups (<5), mainly at Shirvan and Besh Barmag.

Water Pipit Vattenpiplärka *Anthus spinoletta*

Several records of singles at Besh Barmag and common around Xinaliq (25+).

Yellow Wagtail Gulärta *Motacilla flava*

The most numerous passerine on migration with hundreds heading north at Besh Barmag and several flocks of 75+ seen in the lowlands. Many subspecies are involved with both *flava*, *thunbergi*, *feldegg* and *lutea* fairly common, we also found some *beema*.



Yellow Wagtail of ssp lutea in the pastures at Besh Barmag. Photo Johan Joelsson.

Citrine Wagtail Citronärla *Motacilla citreola*

One of the delights of the trip was to have so many Citrine Wagtails: one passing our camp in Shirvan, at least six on the beach at Kizil Agach, at least nine with wagtails and plovers at wet fields near Machmud Chala, one at a pond in Gobustan and several records (at least 7-8 birds) during our time at Besh Barmag.

Grey Wagtail Forsärla *Motacilla cinerea*

One or possibly two passing the Suvar Resort, Laza.

White Wagtail Sädesärla *Motacilla alba*

Rather common and widespread.

Wren Gärdsmyg *Troglodytes troglodytes*

Seemingly fairly common in the mountain forests of Talish and the Caucasus with many in song.

Duncock Järnsparv *Prunella modularis*

One feeding and singing on green pasture in the village, Laza.

Alpine Accentor Alpjärnsparv *Prunella collaris*

Mustapha Frontier Birding

Two birds encountered on the slopes of Gizilgaya, Xinaliq, at some 2.500m a.s.l.

Robin Rödhake *Erithacus rubecula*

Distribution similar to Wren with singing birds heard in Talysh and Caucasus.

Nightingale Sydnäktergal *Luscinia megarhynchos*

One trapped and ringed at Besh Barmag on the 19th.

Bluethroat Blåhake *Luscinia svecica*

Two birds in the coastal scrubs at Besh Barmag, seemingly of subspecies *svecica*.

Black Redstart Svart rödstjärt *Phoenicurus ochruros*

Fairly common in the Caucasus, represented by the subspecies *ochruros* and one male above Xinaliq looking very much like *semirufus* but seen insufficiently.

Redstart Rödstjärt *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*

Two subspecies seen: two migrating males *phoenicurus* in the coastal scrubs at Besh Barmag and quite many (10+) singing males *samamisticus* in the Caucasus forests

Güldenstädt's Redstart Bergrödstjärt *Phoenicurus erythrogastrus*

One or two males and a possible female at nearly 3.000m a.s.l. on the southern slope of Gizilgaya, Xinaliq. The habitat was large rocks and crags below the highest peaks with patches of snow, gravel and basically no vegetation.

Whinchat Buskskvätta *Saxicola rubetra*

One male, seemingly on migration, along the road up to the Besh Barmag rock.

Isabelline Wheatear Isabellastenskvätta *Oenanthe isabellina*

Rather common and widespread, especially in Shirvan and Gobustan.

Northern Wheatear Stenskvätta *Oenanthe oenanthe*

Migrants seen regularly in the lowlands and it was a fairly common inhabitant of the higher reaches of the Caucasus.

Pied Wheatear Nunnestenskvätta *Oenanthe pleschanka*

One male positively identified, up at the parking lot by the rock at Besh Barmag.

Black-eared Wheatear Medelhavsstenskvätta *Oenanthe hispanica*

Only recorded up at the Besh Barmag rock with at least two males fighting with the Pied Wheatear over territory.

Finsch's Wheatear Finschstenskvättä *Oenanthe finschii*

One pair seemed territorial along the dirt track up towards the rock at Besh Barmag, where the track winds through the hills.

Rock Thrush Stenstrast *Monticola saxatilis*

One male at the Xinaliq village.

Blue Rock Thrush Blåstrast *Monticola solitarius*

Another species only recorded at Besh Barmag where two pairs seemed to hold territory around the rocks at the peak.

Ring Ouzel Ringtrast *Turdus torquatus*

Two males on the road to Xinaliq and fairly common around the Suvar Resort, Laza, with some ten birds.

Blackbird Koltrast *Turdus merula*

Singing birds noted in the Talish and Caucasus mountain forests, seemingly common.

Songthrush Taltrast *Turdus philomelos*

Some migrants seen/heard at the Besh Barmag coastal scrubs.

Mistle Thrush Dubbeltrast *Turdus viscivorus*

Two birds in birch scrub along the road near Laza, chased off by a territorial male Ring Ouzel.

Cetti's Warbler Cettisångare *Cettia cetti*

A few singing birds in bushes at Kizil Agach.

Reed Warbler Rörsångare *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*

Two singing birds in the reeds at the "Flamingo Lake", Shirvan Nationalpark.

Great Reed Warbler Trastsångare *Acrocephalus arundinaceus*

At least one singing in the reeds near the observation deck of the "Flamingo Lake", Shirvan Nationalpark.

Menetriés Warbler Östlig sammetsätta *Sylvia mystacea*

Fairly common and widespread, numerous in Shirvan Nationalpark. One female trapped and ringed at Besh Barmag.



Female, or is it immature male? Menetriés Warbler at Besh Barmag. Photo Linus Karlsson

Lesser Whitethroat Ärtsångare *Sylvia curruca*

Several birds in the coastal scrubs at Besh Barmag, looking like standard subspecies *curruca*.

Blackcap Svarthätta *Sylvia atricapilla*

A few singing birds in the verdant mountain forests of the Talish and Caucasus.

Chiffchaff Gransångare *Phylloscopus collybita*

Some migrants in the coastal scrubs at Besh Barmag and singing birds in the Caucasus.

Willow Warbler Lövsångare *Phylloscopus trochilus*

At least one bird in the coastal scrubs at Besh Barmag.

Red-breasted Flycatcher Mindre flugsnappare *Ficedula parva*

Mustapha Frontier Birding

Several birds (<5) in song in the lower reaches of the Talish Mountain forests and equally several heard along the road from Qusar to Laza.

Bearded Tit Skäggmes *Panurus biarmicus*

Some ten birds in the reeds of the “Flamingo Lake”, Shirvan Nationalpark.

Long-tailed Tit Stjärtmes *Aegithalos caudatus*

On at least two occasions noted in the dense forests at lower altitudes in the Caucasus.

Coal Tit Svartmes *Parus ater*

Fairly common in the mountain forests with singles and pairs along the road at several places, a few in song.

Blue Tit Blåmes *Parus caeruleus*

Mainly in forests along the mountain roads, singles and pairs.

Great Tit Talgoxe *Parus major*

Fairly common and widespread, from scrubs on the steppe to mountain forests.

Nuthatch Nötväcka *Sitta europaea*

One along the road from Qusar to Laza.

Rock Nuthatch Klippnötväcka *Sitta neumayer*

One territorial pair up at the Besh Barmag rock, feeding around the parking lot.

Wallcreeper Murkrypare *Tichodroma muraria*

Three records from the Caucasus: one in flight at the Xinaliq village (2.300m a.s.l.), one male on the slope of Gizilgaya and one taking off from the road side at the Laza village. Non of the birds in typical rock face habitat.

Penduline Tit Pungmes *Remiz pendulinus*

Several records during the day in Shirvan Nationalpark: one at the visitors house and at least three along the canal at the “Flamingo Lake” observation deck.

Woodchat Shrike Rödhuwad törnskata *Lanius senator*

The only shrike during the entire trip was this Woodchat Shrike perched next to the track through the steppe in Shirvan Nationalpark.



Woodchat Shrike in Shirvan. Photo Johan Joelsson.

Jay Nötskrika *Garrulus glandarius*

At least two birds along the road from Qusar to Laza.

Magpie Skata *Pica pica*

Common and widespread.

Red-billed Chough Alpkråka *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*

c. 10 birds in the Gobustan and fairly common in the Caucasus including flocks of 75+ birds.

Jackdaw Kaja *Corvus monedula*

Common.

Rook Råka *Corvus frugilegus*

Common, including one colony along the road near Salyan sharing (used) nests with Night Herons, Cattle and Little Egrets!

Common Crow Kråka *Corvus corone*

Common.

Raven Korp *Corvus corax*

Many records of singles and pairs in the Caucasus.

Starling Stare *Sturnus vulgaris*

Mustapha Frontier Birding

Common and widespread.

House Sparrow Gråsparv *Passer domesticus*

Very common.

Tree Sparrow Pilfink *Passer montanus*

Single records in the southern lowlands around Shirvan and Masalli.

Rock Sparrow Stensparv *Petronia petronia*

c. 10 along the road from Sängachal into the Gobustan, at least two pairs at the parking lot, Besh Barmag peak and several records in the Caucasus.



Curious Rock Sparrow at the parking lot of the Besh Barmag peak. Photo Johan Joelsson.

Snowfinch Snöfink *Montifringilla nivalis*

Common around Xinaliq, both around the road and at highest altitude on Gizilgaya.

Chaffinch Bofink *Fringilla coelebs*

Mainly in the mountain forests of the Talish and Caucasus, fairly common.

Red-fronted Serin Rödpannad gulhämpling *Serinus pusillus*

Some 25 birds, including a flock of 15, seen and heard throughout our day around Laza.

Mustapha Frontier Birding

Greenfinch Grönfink *Carduelis chloris*

Fairly common with scattered records during the trip.

Goldfinch Steglits *Carduelis carduelis*

Seemingly common and widespread in low numbers.

Linnet Hämpling *Carduelis cannabina*

Several records in the lowlands, for example five along the road in Gobustan and a few around Besh Barmag.

“Asia Minor” Twite Vinterhämpling *Carduelis flavirostris*

At least three pairs seen on the lower slopes of Gizilgaya, Xinaliq.

Great Rosefinch Större rosenfink *Carpodacus rubicilla*

Five birds seen, at least two of them males, at the Suvar Resort near Laza. Seen from the road just before the resort, flying in from higher up in the valley and perching for about five minutes in the birch scrub on the ridge above the resort. Then taking off and disappearing towards where they came from. Incredible.

Hawfinch Stenknäck *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*

Several records of singles and pairs in suitable habitat in the Talish and Caucasus low altitude mountain forests.

Rock Bunting Klippsparv *Emberiza cia*

Seemingly common at higher altitudes in the Caucasus with many along the roads near Xinaliq and Laza.

Reed Bunting Sävsparv *Emberiza schoeniclus*

Several seen in the reeds at the “Flamingo Lake”, Shirvan Nationalpark and also heard overhead at Besh Barmag. None of the thick-billed *caspius* seen.

Corn Bunting Kornsparv *Emberiza calandra*

Common and widespread including some small migrating flocks at Besh Barmag.

Mammals and amphibians

Grey Wolf Varg *Canis lupus*

Two magnificent animals were seen in boulder fields with patches of snow at well above 3.000m on Gizilgaya, Xinaliq, Caucasus.

Golden Jackal Sjakal *Canis aureus*

Mustapha Frontier Birding

Heard and one seen near the shore at Besh Barmag.

Red Fox Rödräv *Vulpes vulpes*

One healthy-looking individual in Shirvan Nationalpark.

Goitered Gazelle Persisk gasell *Gazella subgutturosa*

Common in Shirvan Nationalpark with 250+ seen out on the steppe, several herds with 50+ animals.

River Rat (Nutria)Sumpbäver *Myocastor coypus*

Several seen near the shore line and among floating vegetation at the roadside lagoon, Kizil Agach.

Levantine Viper *Macrovipera lebetina*

Several in sandy areas near the shore lines at Shirvan and Besh Barmag, including a mating pair where the female was nearly a meter in length and arm-thick.

Dice Snake *Natrix tessellata*

Several seen in Shirvan Nationalpark, for example in the little canal near the “Flamingo Lake” observation deck.

Tortoise