



BIRD TOURISM REPORTS 4/2016

Petri Hottola

ARMENIA (via Georgia) in 2016



Fig. 1. Late spring is the time of flowers in the Caucasus region.

From 25th April to 6th May, 2016, I finally was able to travel to Armenia for birding, and also to realize my third visit in Georgia, after a long break since the nation became free of Russian rule. The journey was quite an enjoyable one and inspired me to write this report to help others to get there, too.

I myself was particularly encouraged and helped by a 2014 report by two Swedes, Thomas Pettersson and Krister Mild. Vasil Ananian was also contacted in regard to **Caspian Snowcock** and he let me know the current situation, helping to avoid sites which have become empty or required a local guide. I have nothing against somebody employing a guide to guarantee a better success rate in this case, but being guided is not my personal preference.

The main target species of the trip were as follows: For Georgia – **Caucasian Grouse**, **Caucasian Snowcock**, **Güldenstädt's Redstart** and **Great Rosefinch**. For Armenia – **Dalmatian Pelican**, **Caspian Snowcock**, **See-see Partridge**, **Radde's Accentor**, **Eurasian Crimson-winged Finch**,

Mongolian Finch and **Black-headed Bunting**. Even though my life list already was around 7.300 in April 2016, I still missed some relatively common species such as the pelican and the bunting.

The secondary target list, the Western Palaearctic region lifers, included: **Red-tailed Wheatear**, **Upcher's Warbler**, **Menetries's Warbler**, **Eastern Rock Nuthatch**, **Wallcreeper**, **White-throated Robin**, **Red-fronted Serin**, **Grey-necked Bunting** and **Pale Rock Sparrow**.

Out of these birds, only the **See-see Partridge** and the **Mongolian Finch** were missed. For the former species, I had but one afternoon in Meghri, a known even though unreliable stake-out. In the next morning, I opted for **Caspian Snowcock**, at the Kaler site which not suitable for the partridge. For the finch, a lot of searching was done in Vedi-Dashtakar area, without success. The birds probably were not there. The species apparently is an irregular and/or scarce breeder and winterer in Armenia. Fortunately, both the missing species, and especially the partridge, may be seen in southeastern Turkey, a destination I plan to visit later on.

All in all, my trip list had more than 220 bird species, out of which 200 were observed in Armenia. In regard to the common bird species, only an assortment will be mentioned in the following text. The widespread species such as **Little Egrets**, **Black Redstarts**, **White** and **Yellow Wagtails**, **Ravens** and many others, are frequently recorded and do not merit to be repeatedly listed after each location. Moreover, birdwise, the focus is going to be almost solely on Armenia. There already are excellent trip reports on Stepantsminda, Georgia, available in the Internet (see Cloudbirders etc.).

TIMING AND WEATHER

In the case of high altitude birding, timing is rather important. One needs to get to the mountains of Georgia before snow melts on lower slopes and wintering birds leave the accessible valleys. If one arrives too early, the roads may be blocked by snow. A late arrival, on the other hand, means that the birds have already migrated to high altitudes, perhaps 1.000 meters higher. In those conditions, one needs to be fit and lucky to score. The slopes are steep and the weather variable. At the right time of the year, just about everything may be accessible by a car, with minimum need to walk and to get wet, when there is rain. Moreover, the birds are concentrated in the wintering valleys. That is why I arrived in Georgia on the last week of April. In spring 2016, the best period for a visit probably was between 20th of April and 5th of May.

Most of the days were sunny, even though May is the wettest month of the year in the region. There was, however, also hours of cold rain in Stepantsminda. In there, the precipitation produced some memorable landslides, along flooding mountain streams, especially on the slopes east of the Ioane Natlismcemeli Orthodox church. Huge rocks bounced up and down and there was a lot of roaring noise when masses of land went down the slopes. It clearly was not a good idea to follow the streamside path too far up the hills there!

In Armenia, I did not experience much rain. Only when driving from the border to Vanadzor, in the first afternoon, it was raining heavily after Dzoraget. My second night at Yeghegnadzor was rainy,

as well. Otherwise, short afternoon showers with thunder were encountered on two days. Most of the afternoons and mornings were sunny. On the other hand, early mornings tended to be cloudy, even foggy, before sunrise. Moreover, there was plenty of snow at high passes and on top of Mt. Aragats. The nights tended to be cold, occasionally close to +5C, and the days hot, well above +20C.

In Armenia, with its milder climate, the timing of the visit is not that crucial, even though arriving too early may exclude some migratory species from one's trip list. In other words, one should be in Georgia early enough and in Armenia late enough to score with the above-mentioned target species. In this sense, I had to worry especially about **Upcher's Warbler** and **Pale Rock Sparrow**. These species are both supposed to be late arrivals.

FLIGHTS

I flew in via Istanbul (Oulu-Helsinki-Istanbul-Tbilisi), the more reliable of the best two options, Turkish Airlines and Ukraine International Airlines. Flying via Kiev would have been interesting, but the transit time there was so short that my luggage would not necessarily have reached Tbilisi on time. Overall, the northern route did not allow any delays. Pricewise, there was not much difference between these two choices, which in spring 2016 clearly were the most economical (€260 return) flights to Georgia, from Finland. What is more, they were also the shortest available flight connections.

Georgia is very welcoming to EU visitors, with no need for a visa, swift immigration procedures at the airport and, at least in my case, walk through customs. There were currency exchange (attractive rates) and a possibility to buy water, soft drinks and snacks at the airport, despite the early hour. In Armenia, crossing the land border is more time-consuming, but EU citizens have a visa-free access there, too. The same could be said about driving through the former areas of Azerbaijan, today Armenia, and the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh.

ROUTE

26th to 28th of April: Before entering Armenia, I followed the beaten track in Georgia by visiting Stepantsminda via Gudauri, on the legendary Georgian Military Road, across the Caucasus Mountains. For me, it was a nostalgic visit, so many years after crossing the mountains from Pjatigorsk to Vladikavkas (then, Ordzhonikidze) and Tbilisi, in 1983, during the Russian occupation. Some things had changed in 30 years, some had not. Nevertheless, Georgia clearly had been able to shed more of its Soviet rust than Armenia had, as later witnessed across the border.

In and around Stepantsminda, particular attention was paid to the village itself, but also to the small hamlet of Kobi, and the Sno road to the east (Sno-Akhaltsikhe-Karkucha-Juta), 4.7 km south of Stepantsminda. Between Karkucha and Juta, the track was narrow and dangerous (mud, risk of landslides), and not really worth my while, because there were not many birds there, either.

On the **28th of April**, I made a major transit to Armenia, a drive from Stepantsminda to the border, and all the way to Gyumri in northwestern Armenia. The main birding stop was made at Kobi, with shorter breaks at Gudauri (high slopes), Natakhtari (failed attempt to see the reservoirs, could not locate the access, even though heard the frogs!), Tbilisi Reservoir (reliable for **Armenian Gulls**), Kumisi (fields E of the village (41.603003, 44.782630); nice views of a **Booted Eagle**, **Cinereous Vulture**, **Levant Sparrowhawk**, 16 **Rosy Starlings** etc.) and at Shirak, Armenia (fields).

The 380 km drive is mostly mountain roads of variable quality and involves crossing a border at Bagratashen, and is therefore not necessarily recommended for everybody during the rainy season, when driving conditions may occasionally become difficult because of flooding. One needs to be a bit crazy and also adamant to deal with the long sections of potholed surfaces (e.g. Alaverdi-Vanadzor), and the orientation, especially after sunset (the last hour of my drive). Well, there would have been no real hurry if I had not spent so much time birding on the way...

Just like on the 26th of April, I followed a bypass east of Tbilisi to avoid traffic jams in the city. The area is good for larks, including **Calandra Larks**. The northern half of the bypass was in a rather bad shape, unlike the southern half. The worst section could, however, be avoided by a narrower bypass of the bypass. The entrance to the secondary by-pass could be identified by large slabs of concrete, erected to prevent lorries from entering the narrow tarmac road. In the south, after the by-pass, one had to drive 10 km on Rustavi Hwy back towards Tbilisi, in order to reach the Marneuli/Armenia Jct. Towards the junction, there was plenty of traffic and the going was slow.

South of Marneuli, I saw my first **Black-headed Bunting**. On my return drive to Georgia, more of them were seen in this area. At Bagratashen, the immigration and customs took one hour to pass. For the paperwork, one had to pay AMD 2.000/€4 (both for entry and exit). Almost all the services, including currency exchange, were located in one room, and the process went smoothly. The Armenian traffic insurance, however, had to be purchased (AMD 4.300/€8) across the road.

Initially, a team of boys (=touts) tried to press me to go to another company (on the right), but this only prompted me to push them away and to choose the other, less aggressive option (on the left). As soon as I entered the open-door office, I knew I was in the right place. There were two pairs of **Barn Swallows** breeding inside the office room!

29th of April: The next day I visited Lake Arpi, at the far NW corner of the nation, in the morning, and drove to Agarak, below Mt. Aragats, in the afternoon. From Gyumri, I followed the Marmashen Hwy (H32) past a number of abandoned Soviet housing projects to Vahramabed and Kaps. Thereafter, the road became narrow (partly gravel), to Jradzor and Amasia. Turning left at Amasia, it was easy to follow the long and birdy gravel track to Berdashen, on the shore of Lake Arpi. From Berdashen I tried to drive to Tsaghkut, on the opposite side of the lake, but was unfortunately stopped some distance after Zorakert (see Security).

Driving back to Gyumri, after a delay at Amasia Police Station (!), I opted for the faster H32/M1 route via Pokrashen. It is tarmac all the way. Then the M1 was followed through Gyumri and beyond. Past the Gyumri Airport, going was fast and straightforward to Agarak, on the southern

foothills of Mt. Aragats. Some names of the settlements on the way caught my attention, for example the famous burial ground of Armenian kings, Aghtsk! My first *armenicus* **Stonechat**, a male, was seen by the road, together with my first **Rock Bunting**. There was plenty of time to bird the Mt. Aragats access road.



Fig. 2. On top of Mt. Aragats, the tarmac was covered by an increasingly thick layer of snow.

On the last day of **April, 30th**, the birding started again at Mt. Aragats, with subsequent visits to Armash Ponds and Ooranots, and a transit to Yeghegnadzor, via the enclave of Tigranashen. Bypassing Yerevan was a bit complicated in places. I followed the Agarak (H20) – Oshakan (H19) – Vagharshapat (M3) – Voskehat – Zorak – Masis – Armash route. At Vagharshapat it was important to memorize the right street junctions. It is necessary to drive through (poor city, light traffic), because the main highway junction (M3/M5) has no access to M5 East. At Yerashk, towards Tigranashen and along the Nakhchivan border, a specifically designed security embankment hides the traffic from Azeri observers and, potentially, fire.

On the **1st of May**, a long transit to the south followed, with a number of stops and a visit to Kaler en route, between Yeghegnadzor – Goris – Kapan – Karajan – Meghri Pass (2.539 m) – Meghri, and hours of afternoon birding at the Armenia-Iran border in Meghri. Gasoline was bought at Goris and Kapan, and I had started the day with a full tank. At the Goris gas station, I chatted with a former resident of Leningrad, to whom the Soviet Union still appeared to exist, as if *perestroika* and *glasnost* never occurred. Well, nowadays he is more right than wrong...

The strategy in Armenia was to do the long distances in the beginning, just in case something unexpected happened, and to return to certain sites for more detailed exploration, at ease. In regard to route options, it is important to notice that the new M2, which marginally enters

Nagorno-Karabakh on its way from Goris to Kapan, is the faster choice, not the H45 via Tatev. Moreover, the road enters some good deciduous forest between Goris (services!) and Davit Bek.



Fig. 3. Entering Goris, at the border of Nagorno-Karabakh.



Fig. 4. Karajan, a mining town with a distinctive post-Soviet flavor.

South of Kajaran (a copper and molybdenum mining town where one could expect to meet Borat...), one climbs to the top of a rather high pass, the Meghri Pass (2.539 m). Thereafter, it is downhill all the way to the Iranian border.

The eastern side road to the mountain hamlets of Vank and Kaler is easy to locate 29 km south of Karajan or 16.5 km north of Meghri. It has tarmac all the way, but the surface has deteriorated and there will be rocks on the road. Therefore, a 4x4 is recommended, even though not absolutely necessary. Overall, a sedan would have been adequate for all my sites in Armenia.

Meghri is a food-producing town of 5.000 inhabitants and the mildest climate in Armenia.

On the **2nd of May**, I started the day at Kaler, driving to Goris, Yeghegnadzor and Vedi afterwards, before locating a highway hotel, not far from Artashat. In the highland section between Goris and Yeghegnadzor, I made three side trips along some gravel tracks, scoring with a **Red-throated Pipit**, a **Calandra Lark**, a pair of **Isabelline Wheatears** and a second calendar year **Montagu's Harrier**, to name few examples. Dozens and dozens of people sold wild mushrooms by the highway.

The 360 km drive was not too strenuous, with the nicest road in Armenia waiting in the end, the section between Lanjar and Dashtakar. It took, however, some time to locate the accommodation, with the help of local advisors, who were met on the streets of Artashat.



Fig.5. Mt.Ararat at first light, as seen from Dashtakar. So close, but on the wrong side of the border for Armenians. Despite intensive scoping, I failed to spot the ark...

3rd of May: The next day started above Daktashar, at 'Vedi Gorge 1', before continuing to 'Vedi Gorge 2', above Vedi itself, and visiting some new sections of the Armash Ponds. Breeding **White Storks** were particularly common in the area. The day did not involve much driving and the driving was mostly done on wadi bottom 4x4 tracks or on local gravel roads.

On the **4th of May**, I checked both the Vedi Gorges again, before visiting the new wetlands close to Ararat highway junction, in the northern section of Armash Ponds. The mid- and southern sections of the ponds were observed in the afternoon, before retreating to Yeghegnadzor, via Tigranashen. Again, I did not drive so many kilometers but made a lot of observations from the car, using it as a hide.

5th of May: On my last day in Armenia, I left Yeghegnadzor early and made a prolonged stop at Shatin, mainly to see **Bezoar Ibex**. Afterwards, I drove north to Selim Pass (2.410 m), stopping there and at a flooded section of the Argitchi River, further on, before arriving at Lake Sevan, at Martumi. Following the western shoreline, I made a few stops on the way, at birdy spots, before (relatively futile) afternoon roadside birding at the broad-leaved forests of Dilijan.

Almost all remaining drams (AMD) could be spent at a petrol station in Vanadzor. I kept on speeding to the border, despite the terribly potholed M6 Hwy, managing to avoid hitting any of the more serious holes. Another **Dipper** and my only **Yellowhammer** were spotted on the way. In good weather, returning to Georgia went surprisingly fast.

As a result, I still had some time to bird the east side of Lake Kumisi, despite the 400 km drive and border formalities, and stocking up with groceries in Marneuli. The best birds of the brief Kumisi stop were a pair of **Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters** and two **European Rollers**. **Isabelline Wheatears** were also present in the area.

It was a total of 2.600 km, a very interesting route with some great sceneries and rather variable habitats, ranging from hot and dry wadis to deep snow on top of Mt. Aragats. My last bird of the trip was a **European Nightjar**, which was catching insects by the well-lit runway at the Tbilisi Airport, very early on the **6th of May**.



Fig. 6. A **Blue-cheeked Bee-eater**, resting before migrating further northeast, to Central Asia?

CAR RENTAL

In regard to car rental, the best choice clearly is the locally operated **Car Rent Georgia in Tbilisi**. They are ready and experienced with cross-border rentals, and have both very reliable services and competitive rental rates. They deliver and pick up vehicles at the Tbilisi Airport, any time of the day, for a reasonable out-of-business-hours (18.00-9.00) USD25 fee. The rates are around USD50 per day, for rentals exceeding seven days, with unlimited kilometers and CDW. I preferred to pay the rental in cash. For further details, contact Mrs. Tamuna Topuria at georgia@carrent.ge. She organizes the rental agreements and the necessary documents.

George, the man in charge of field operations, was waiting for me at the airport, at the agreed wee hours time. The vehicle I received was a 4x4 Mitsubishi IO, in a good condition. As a rule, I had no technical problems with the car, despite the occasionally challenging roads of Armenia. As a bonus, there was a mobile phone with some prepaid time and a rather entertaining assortment of music in a USB-stick. Their attorney prepared legal documents for Armenia for a USD30 fee. One needed to email digital images of one's driver's license and passport for this purpose.

There was one minor but irritating technical problem in the beginning. Car Rent Georgia had though that the malfunction had been fixed, but it resurfaced at Gudauri, on my way to Stepantsminda. When I started the engine, the horn started to blow, and kept on blowing. After some experimenting, I gave up and called George. Immediately knowing what it was about, he told me to take a certain fuse off. That was however not easy, because the fuse was in a tight spot and required two knives to be released. I, as a Finn, of course had a big knife at hand, but the British tourists at the viewpoint were useless in this sense. Instead, I located a Russian guy, also with a knife, and together we did the job. That was the first occasion when my (rather limited) ability to speak Russian saved the day.

Late in the evening, when I was already in my bed in Stepantsminda, a mechanic arrived and borrowed the car keys. In few minutes, he replaced the entire steering wheel of the car, and the fuse, and the problem ceased to exist.

Afterwards, I almost finished the rental without any further incidents. To my great disappointment, I nevertheless managed to dent the left end of Mitsubishi's rear bumper in Armenia, despite very careful driving. This happened on the road towards Meghri. There are many concrete milestones there, fog on the mountains and a number of heavy trucks on their way to Iran. Reversing in a hurry, I managed to hit one of the milestones in a confusing traffic situation. At the time of the return, the matter was settled with a rather reasonable GEL50 (€20) payment.

The reliability of a car rental company is really tested when something unexpected occurs. In these situations, the bad apples tend to leave their customers stranded or overcharged. Car Rent Georgia passed the test not once, but twice, and was ready to organize the cross-border rental. I therefore warmly recommend Car Rent Georgia for other visiting birders with car rental needs, for Georgia, Armenia or both of them. Visiting both Georgia and Armenia on a single visit is an

attractive option, as the distances are not that large, and services such as theirs enable this particular form of regional tourism diversification.

I did my best to avoid Yerevan and its heavy traffic, preferring by-pass routes instead. On most other roads, traffic was light. On the mountains, large but slow trucks occasionally required defensive driving. Make no mistake, the Iranian truck drivers were the most professional lot on the local highways. The ones with dangerous moves tended to originate from Uzbekistan, Russia and, to a lesser extent, Armenia. The daily military convoys to the front in Nagorno-Karabakh, and back, were orderly, and did not create any problems for a visiting tourist.

Another interesting feature of the roads in Armenia were the hundreds of Western cyclists on their way from Istanbul to Tehran. The region has diversity of terrain, nature and culture, together with peaceful mountain roads, reasonably priced food and budget accommodation. It is therefore not surprising that cyclists, some of them all the way from Australia, love to roam there. According to chats I had with them, a common route appears to be Istanbul – Batumi – Tbilisi – Baku – Tbilisi – Yerevan – Tehran.

Gasoline was readily available both in Georgia and Armenia. In fact, there were clearly more stations than one is accustomed to see in Finland, for example. No wonder a number of them had already been closed, because of excessive competition? The gasoline was not expensive, either, with around €0.50-0.70/l for 95 octane, unleaded, in spring 2016. Keep, however, in mind the long mountain rides, through regions with low population and therefore less frequent gas stations. Locating the right octane may also require some local advice, as it did in Ararat-Vedi and Goris, in Armenia. Ask anybody and they are likely to help, even guide you to the right spot.



Fig. 7. Wadi bottoms tend to be fine for driving. This track runs north of Vedi.

ACCOMMODATION

Stepantsminda

One should always make Internet accommodation bookings with great care, double-checking the dates and other important details. This I had attempted to do, also in the case of my only pre-booked accommodation for the trip, the Red Stone in Stepantsminda. On the other hand, I had been working hard on a large number of reservations for another trip (two months, eight nations) at the same time. As an end result, my arrival in Stepantsminda started with a realization that the reservation was for 26th May, not for 26th April, and the house was fully booked for a group of Russians.

Fortunately, the manager of Red Stone, contacted by the phone of a caretaker, did not mind the canceled booking too much. He even helped me to find a bed for the next two nights. About 100 meters up the same narrow alley, on the right at a four-way junction, a lady had yard-side building for rent, for the same rate of GEL20 (€7) per night. I would not have a breakfast for the money but would have a private toilet and shower instead, not available at Red Stone. What is more, she did fill my thermos with hot tea, for the cold mornings, when I made a request for this extra service.

The accommodations had no sign. Ask around, and you will find it. There are more expensive choices in the centre of the village, some of which require full payment before arrival. The several recent trip reports, available at Cloudbirders, provide information in regard to them. As both my arrival and departure were in the middle of the night, there was no sense in renting a room in Tbilisi – even though it would have been interesting to revisit the former Intourist Iveria hotel.

Armenia

At the planning phase of the trip, I was guided by the above-mentioned 2014 trip report by Thomas Pettersson and Krister Mild. Some of their accommodation information remained valid in 2016, but some guesthouses had gone bankrupt after their visit. At the moment, according to several local sources, there are no hotels or guesthouses in the Ararat-Vedi-Artashat triangle, for example.

In Gyumri, I was happy with my choice, the **Garun Hotel & Restaurant**, at the start of the Marmashen Hwy (H32). A comfortable and tidy triple room cost AMD 12.000 (€22) per night, roughly the average amount of monthly pension in Armenia. There are many accommodations in the city and around, but the Garun Hotel has a peaceful location along a road which leads to Lake Arpi. There is a restaurant there and room service kept on carrying huge servings to the rooms, but I was simply too tired to eat in the evening.

In **Agarak** (access to Mt. Aragats), the **roadhouse with rooms**, recommended by the above-mentioned report, was still open and a fairly comfortable. The rate was AMD 5.000 (€9) per night.

Look for a gated restaurant style establishment on the left, 1 km east of the M1/H20 Agarak Jct, towards Yerevan, stop there (40.296597, 44.296383) and make a request for a room. The accommodations are hidden behind the building and it is also possible to park there.

Along the Yerevan – Ararat highway, there was a large but mostly empty hotel along the fast four-lane E117 highway. The **Gold Star** was located on the right (39.967168, 44.509060), 6.2 km towards Yerevan, from the main Artashat Jct. From there, it is 38 km (30 min) to Armash and 25 km (25 min) to Vedi. The AMD 7.000 (€13.50) room was spacious but a bit worn out and smelled of cigarettes. The bathroom, on the other hand, had been recently renovated, and it was possible to order meals to the room. Amazingly, I also received a receipt there, my only one in Armenia! If judged by the poor occupancy rate, the place may be closed in the near future. For Armash and Vedi region, it is therefore important to make back up plans and search the Internet. The available accommodations may be rather far away though, close to Yerevan or perhaps in Chiva.



Fig. 8. The toilet and shower at Garun Hotel & Restaurant, Gyumri. No complaints!

In Yeghegnadzor, the **Gohar's Guest House** (Spandaryan Street; see Google Maps) proved to be an excellent choice, well above the average. The room was like in a three-star international hotel, very comfortable, and cost only AMD 10.000 (€19), including a massive home-made take-away breakfast the next morning. I had a breakfast, brunch and a lunch, and still had not finished all the food by dinner-time! The take-away package included: two boiled eggs, a large tomato, a cucumber, large container with yoghurt and cheese, two chocolate cakes, three large pieces of bread, an enormous flatbread filled with fried chicken fillets, potatoes, tomatoes etc., and some salt. A picnic basket à la Enid Blyton!

The house was not easy to spot as there was no sign, but a passer-by helped me, in American English! With the lady of the house, I spoke Russian, before her daughter came to help us, in English. I attempted to stay with them again, my stomach begging for another run with their tasty breakfast, but unfortunately the guesthouse was fully booked when I returned there. They guided me to their neighbor instead, after asking if I had been happy with their take-away breakfast. Perhaps it had not been sumptuous enough?

The other Yeghegnadzor guesthouse, the close-by **Ruzan B&B** (also at Google Maps), was not quite as good even though the lady of the house was very charming and spoke English. A room (no heating) with a shared toilet and shower, and a small (compared to Gohar's!) take-away breakfast cost AMD 8.000 (€15) per night. The main drawback was the difficulty of carrying one's luggage between the car (street parking) and the room, including a gate and concrete stairs, the route being exposed to rain. Also the shower arrangement was a bit awkward.

The **Meghri Hotel** had very basic rooms with a hard and narrow bed and two chairs, plus a shared toilet and shower. There was parking space right by the building, but no meal service. Be prepared for a cold and somewhat noisy rest. They charged AMD 5.000 (€9.50) for the night. The manager spoke some English and another guest, an Armenian lawyer, volunteered to help in communication. The other local choice, the Haer B&B probably is more comfortable. Being rather tired late in the afternoon, I did not search for it but spent the night at the hotel.

FOOD

In Stepantsminda, I was happy that I had imported some food with me, all the way from Finland. Soft drinks (Coke Zero €0.40/l), milk and water were easy to find at the small grocery shops, such as Georgia Supermarket, together with nice freshly-baked bread, fruit, Finnish Viola cheese, candy and biscuits. There were plenty of choices in alcohol, including some Finnish brands, but I could not try them. Otherwise, groceries were limited, especially for somebody like me with a strict boycott against palm oil and motivation to avoid excessive amounts of saturated fats. Unfortunately, I had no time to explore the restaurants.

A great place to stock up on the route was located in the centre of Marneuli, by a large roundabout. One needs to drive that way if planning to visit Armenia from Tbilisi. The Smart Supermarket has a wide selection of groceries, and a deli. They also sold the difficult to find Georgian tea and the tasty local pear cider, Zedazem. The only problem was parking space. One may have to wait a bit for a vacant space in front of the popular supermarket. There is also gasoline close by.

Beware, however, the Marneuli mentality. People did not seem to be able to stand any delays, caused by tourists for example. One complained that I had bought too many items at the supermarket, thereby delaying the cashier line. Another could not wait me to turn the ignition on at the petrol station, apparently expecting me to move the car without starting the engine! In both cases, I had acted without any delay, as fast as possible..

Overall in Armenia, I bought groceries at local supermarkets. The shops were generally small and with a bit inadequate assortment for a traveling birder. The stores were not always easy to spot along the driving routes. Some of the more accessible locations included Masik, Vedi and Goris. My advice is: Buy plenty of food and drinks whenever available, to save time for birding. I failed to find any supermarkets in or around Agarak, Ararat and Armash, not to mention Meghri.

At the end of the day, I did not have hot dinners, as a rule, but preferred to rest instead of waiting for service. The only exception was the Gold Star Hotel, where a large fried chicken and potatoes meal (with vegetables etc.) and similar fares cost around AMD 2.300 per serving. By Lake Sevan, people sold smoked fish at numerous places, but I played it safe there. Even though delicious when fresh, smoked fish may become a source of bacteria after a few days in the warm climate.



Fig. 9. A simple room service dinner at Gold Star. The servings are delightfully ample in Armenia!

SECURITY

Before flying to Georgia, one had to follow the news to guesstimate what the Russian occupation of South Ossetia might create during the forthcoming week. The highway between Tbilisi and Stepantsminda runs next to the Ossetian border (across a deep valley) north of Gudauri, and the border is also uncomfortably close to Tbilisi. The Russians may be busy with their other imperialistic projects in Crimea, Donbass and Syria, but there may be unpleasant developments worth noticing also in the Caucasus. There certainly are Russians everywhere; tourists and 'tourists' in Georgia and also troops in Armenia (e.g. Gyumri).

Overall, read your news before starting your journey. In early April 2016, Armenia suddenly became a less attractive destination. The tense situation in the disputed province/republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, a sour fruit of Soviet policies of rule-and-divide (creating pockets of ethnic minorities within states dominated by other ethnicities; in order to create tension between neighbors rather than towards Kremlin) flared in a major way. The so-called Four-Day War, an Azeri assault, apparently involved relatively large scale use of tanks, helicopters and artillery. Nevertheless, it soon was next to impossible to get objective information of the conflict, both sides immediately resorting to propaganda.

Fortunately, in late April/early May, the tense situation in the east had little effect in Armenia. Military convoys were commonplace, transporting ammunition and goods, not to mention rotating troops to the front and back, but the convoys were relaxed and well-organized. The same can be said of the various Armenian voluntary formations, occasionally encountered as we shared roadside services and rest areas. The situation was clearly in control and there was no acute need to worry about driving to the east. Well, if trapped in Meghri, I could always seek refuge in Iran!

On the first day in Armenia, it all nevertheless appeared very different, because of some guardians of security far away from the frontline, but close to the archfoe of the Armenians, Turkey! Remarkably, I was stopped by police or military four times on the 29th of April, and not once afterwards. All this happened in the sensitive Lake Arpi region, where they certainly are not used to see foreigners in cars with Georgian license plates. The scenic lake lies in a large, open valley bordered by Turkey in the south and Georgia in the north. As a result, the locals may inform the military if they see somebody unknown there, and the military may not be very accommodating to foreign visitors. Especially, if the visitor is dressed in military style clothes, like I was.

First, when observing the birds at Lake Arpi, just north of the Akhurian River, two gentlemen in Soviet style uniforms arrived to investigate. They had seen me from the other side of the river, where the national park headquarters are located. They politely told me not to photograph the office building and then photographed all my documents, with phone consultations to some higher office somewhere else. In the end, they said that everything was ok and they were sorry for having disturbed my observations for an hour.

Moving towards Zorakert, I made few stops by the road, and was met by the local mayor and his aide. After a discussion, they concluded that it would be a good idea to receive more birdwatching tourists like me. Beyond Zorakert, a border guard who arrived by a military 4x4, was not quite as welcoming. In fact, he was furious and escorted me back to Berdashen, declaring that the area was within a border zone where foreign visitors were not allowed. There are, however, no signs informing about the zone. Being restricted so much, I decided to leave the area.

Returning to Amasia, I was however stopped by a police patrol. They invited me to visit the local police station, one of them entering my car to show the way. After few hundred meters, we were there, and I was politely guided upstairs by some policemen, for a 'discussion'. In there, an officer with fluent English was finally met and I understood that I had not been arrested. They just needed to know why I had been to Lake Arpi.

A discussion followed, during which I mentioned that I could have visited Turkey instead, to look for more or less the same birds, but had preferred to show my support to Armenia by visiting them. In the end, the officer also apologized and asked if I would like to have some tea or something to eat, but I had to decline, being already late because of the unexpected delays.

Finally, when entering Guymri, I saw a traffic police car driving to the opposite direction. A glance in the mirror showed them making a u-turn and soon blue lights were flashing behind me. A Georgian vehicle had caught their eye and the men checked if all my documents were in order. They were, and I could soon continue my journey.

As a rule, the Armenians were warm and welcoming, helpful and polite, and seemed to enjoy the fact that somebody from the EU had come to visit their country. The only exception was a shepherd at Vedi Gorge 2, a Yazidi man who repeatedly (I mean many times) asked me to give him my pair of Leicas, to better spot wolves on the hills, and then demanded for cigarettes (I do not smoke). Eventually, he gave up and started to behave in a more polite way.

In Meghri, the border zone with Iran had relaxed since some previous trip reports. There was no real need for local guides and I did not need to hide in any way. Neither was it necessary to avoid watching Iran. Instead, I observed the sites next to the border, and looked across the Aras River to Iran, with my bins and telescope, sometimes standing between border guard towers, right on the border highway. Meetings with the locals were easygoing, too.

The same could be said about Armash. As an example, I parked next to the highway, scoped the ponds towards Turkey/Kurdistan, and talked with the locals, military convoys passing by and the police having their speed trap 100 meters away, but not bothering me.

Before the visit, I was wondering if it was possible to drive straight from Armash to H10, towards Yeghegnadzor, or was it necessary to make the long detour via Vedi? The reason for this was the enclave of Tigranashen, till 1992 part of Azerbaijan as Karki, through which the shorter route ran. Having not been able to find details on the situation there, I simply drove the road to see what would happen. Nothing special, as the highway ran past the settlement, instead of entering it, and there was no control at the borders of the former enclave, today completely annexed to Armenia. In other words, there is no need to worry about driving restrictions there.

In regard to risks in Armenia, one probably should keep in mind the danger posed by Armenian Gampr dogs. The ones working as shepherd dogs tend to be very loyal to their owners and the cattle, and genetically suspicious and defensive against any outsiders, such as wolves or people, which may threaten the pack. Weighing about 60 kg, they could easily kill a man.

Because of the dogs, it is not always a good idea to wander far away from one's car, if visibility is limited. I was happy I happened to be inside mine when meeting a large herd of sheep and goats, and a pack of dogs in Vedi. One of the dogs would surely have bitten (or killed) me, if it was possible. Well, if the dogs are with people, their owners will tell them to behave, if they see you

early enough! In this case, the shepherds were working with some stray animals, some distance away.



Fig. 10. Dogs like this one have been bred and trimmed to fight wolves.

SITES AND BIRDS

The following notes will include short descriptions of the main birding sites on my route, the most important bird records and guidelines for access. The coordinates are provided to help in locating the exact spot. Write them at the search function space at Google Maps, and the program will point out the correct location.

Stepantsminda (42.658243, 44.640954)

See more detailed reports in the Internet! The target species were relatively easy to locate, as a result of the proper timing of the visit. Up to ten **Caucasian Snowcocks** were active, noisy and occasionally visible on the crags east of Ioane Natlismcemeli, the orthodox church east of the village (42.657454, 44.662626), behind a coniferous hill. In the same direction, a female **Güldenstädt's Redstart**, **Red-fronted Serins** and a male **Great Rosefinch** were seen, but they all were much easier a bit lower down. A **Caucasian Squirrel** was discovered in the conifers. On the landslide-prone slopes, a male and two female **East Caucasian Tur**s were persecuted by an adult **Golden Eagle**.

On the way up to the church, the brushy area (42.652330, 44.653925) south of an obvious 90 degree bend to the left, right below the steep slopes, was productive with a male **Güldenstädt's Redstart**, **Red-fronted Serins** and a number of **Great Rosefinches**. Unless taking photographs, there is no need to walk through the habitat. Scoping is easy. To the south of the site, I scoped a female **Caucasian Black Grouse**, flying, my only female one. Closer and up the partly snow-covered grassy slope, a few males could be seen lekking. Once, a pair of **Caucasian Snowcocks** was there, as well.

According to a group of Swedish birders, the other brushy area (42.647203, 44.647984) southeast of the village had two pairs of redstarts and some rosefinches, but I never bothered to walk there.

The extensive wet brush between Terek and Snotskali Rivers (42.634793, 44.628322), by the E117 highway, also had a few **Güldenstädt's Redstarts**, **Red-fronted Serins** and **Great Rosefinches**, not to mention **Caucasian Chiffchaffs**. Overall, locating the target species was a piece of cake in late April. There were many other birds there, too, such as **Black Redstarts** (two subspecies).



Fig. 11. Long-legged Buzzards were observed both in Georgia and Armenia, on a daily basis.

Sno – Juta Road (42.625855, 44.612343)

Five minutes and 4.7 km south of Stepantsminda, a side road turns east to Sno, Akhaltsikhe, Karkucha and Juta. I explored the area in one afternoon, when it was raining at Stepantsminda but not in the direction of Sno. **Caucasian Black Grouses** were seen lekking on open, grassy slopes above Sno (2 males) and soon after Akhaltsikhe (4 males). Right after Sno, there is a wetland (herons, shorebirds) along the southern bank of Snotskali River.

The flat valley bottom between Akhaltsike and Karkucha had an interesting variety of passerines, such as a **Red-throated Pipit**, a **Dipper**, a **Red-backed Shrike**, a **Lesser Grey Shrike**, and **Red-fronted Serins**, to mention few examples. A **Lesser Kestrel** was seen there, too.

Kobi (42.560937, 44.512380)

The small hamlet of Kobi (signposted), with a roadside gorge, lies about 17 km south of Stepantsminda, close to Ukhati. There is parking space right in front of the gorge. It is a reliable site for breeding **Wallcreepers**, soon seen and heard on both short visits, and also had dozens of **Red-fronted Serins**.

Kobi is also a good spot for birds of prey, both resident and migratory. During my second visit, 20 minutes of observation produced a pair of **Lammergeiers**, one **Griffon Vulture** (widespread), a **Cinereous Vulture**, a **Pallid Harrier**, a **Goshawk**, 8 **Honey Buzzards**, more than 50 **Steppe Buzzards**, one dark morph **Long-legged Buzzard** and a **Saker Falcon**. The buzzards and the harrier were migrating north.

Lake Arpi (41.059015, 43.629435)

Lake Arpi is the site in Armenia where **Dalmatian Pelicans** breed, on barren islands of the lake, together with many other birds, e.g. thousands of **Armenian Gulls**. During my visit there, three pairs of pelicans had arrived and there were more than 10.000 gulls, including few **Black-headed Gulls**, plus **Common** and **White-winged Terns**. Waterfowl included, among others, **Greylag Geese**, **Ruddy Shelducks**, **Pintails**, **Garganeys** and **Shovelers**. Other notable records included a party of 12 **Glossy Ibises**.

As explained under 'Route', the access is via Amasia, by the gravel road to Berdashen. Along the road, dark morph **Long-legged Buzzards** were present, and **Twites** (seen every day) were particularly common (40). For observations at the lake, one needs a telescope, because many of the birds are on islets and the shoreline is difficult to approach. One could try the national park headquarters at Paghakn (Berdashen).

Another 4x4 track runs to the shore close-by, north of the Akhurian River (see Google Earth). There is parking space and it is possible to walk to the shore, to get closer views. Further on towards Zorakert, the grassland was fenced with cattle, and with some rather aggressive bulls.

Between Zorakert and Tsaghkut, it is possible, in theory, to go to the shore, but the military in the area does not appear to tolerate that (see 'Security'). This is a bit irrational, because the whole area, including slopes belonging to Turkey, may be observed in detail from the above-mentioned Berdashen Road, for example, if there was an interest to do so. From the road to Tsaghkut, one only sees the lake and its birds! Well, Tsaghkut has military presence but that is no secret to anybody with access to the Internet.

At the end of the day, I would recommend an independent foreign visitor to try the Akhurian River estuary 4x4 track early in the morning and to let the park staff to find out who you are and what you are doing there.

Mt. Aragats (40.443165, 44.217442)



Fig. 12. White-throated Robins were in a spring-time mood at the middle section of the road.

At the time of my visit, this was a very peaceful place to bird, with only few other visitors passing by. The access road (H20, north of Agarak) was also in a very good condition, tarmac all the way to the snowline and beyond. Towards the top of the mountain, the ground was covered by increasingly thick snow. A u-turn in snow required some skill there. I focused on the stretch which started about 800 meters below the obvious Amberd Fort Jct (to left) and ended about 11.5 km higher up, at the altitude of 3.000 m. A number of stops were made and I drove very slowly up and down, windows open. Even though the habitats are open, scarcer species such as **Eurasian Crimson-winged Finches** are not necessarily easy to spot.

The weather was fine, calm and sunny, even though a bit cold up towards the Aragats Cosmic Ray Research Station. It was a great experience to move between the +26C summer in the valley (1.500 m) and +4C up in the top. Suntan lotion was needed at both temperatures!

Long-legged Buzzards and migrating **Honey Buzzards** were present. The lower section had **Syrian Woodpeckers**, a **Short-toed Lark**, a **Nightingale**, an **Eastern Orphean Warbler**, **Caucasian Chiffchaffs**, **Cetti's Warblers** and an **Ortolan Bunting**. The mid-section, stony with bushes, was favored by **White-throated Robins** (>10; easy), **Radde's Accentors**, **Bluethroats** of *magna* subspecies, **Blackstarts** and **Rock Thrushes** (both seen every day). The scree on top of the mountain had many *penicillata* **Horned Larks**, **Water Pipits**, **Radde's Accentors** (>10; easy) and **Alpine Accentors** (12).

I heard one **Eurasian Crimson-winged Finch** singing, but could not locate it in the scree. Fortunately, a party of four flew past lower down, resplendent in the fine afternoon sunshine.



Fig. 13. Further up, the most common passerine was **Horned Lark**, subspecies *penicillata*.

Vedi Gorges

Several stony wadi loving species are best searched in this area. I found, however, the information in Internet trip reports a bit confusing. At least two separate sites around Vedi had been named the Vedi Gorge! What is more, the access information was scarce. Personally, I made repeated visits to both of them and found both the gorges to be good for birding.

Vedi Gorge 1 (39.945879, 44.743844)

Access: Drive to the village of Dashtakar, the next settlement above Vedi, along H10 (great views of Mt. Ararat!). Turn left at the village junction, and immediately left again, following the usually dry Barakaghbyur River (tributary of Vedi River). The small road runs straight through some agricultural land worth a stop or two. The access road had for example a **European Roller**, **Menetries's Warblers**, **Spotted Flycatchers** and **Black-headed Buntings**.

Beyond the orchards, one will enter a narrow wadi. Soon after passing a lone building on the right, I arrived in wider valley surrounded by gorges, apparently the site for **Mongolian Finch**. In there, floods had damaged the track and I decided to park and walk the valley, to be sure to not risk damaging my rented vehicle. A small Uaz 4x4 arrived and was able to pass the rough spot, with some bouncing, but driving a taller car, I considered the unavoidable tilt too heavy.



Fig. 14. The orchards of Dashtakar had many birds, both in bushes and in the sky.



Fig. 15. Entrance to Vedi Gorge 1, the lone building and the rough spot.

Well, there really was no reason to drive the remaining 300 meters, to an open grass picnic spot, because birds had been everywhere already since the start of the wadi. I did not see any cattle or dogs at this site during the two visits, and only two cars were encountered at the peaceful site. I guess the damaged access road keeps people away.

Crested Larks and **Hoopoes**, both widespread, were particularly common in the area. The site also had breeding **Stock Doves**, **Crag Martins**, dozens of **Isabelline** and **Finch's Wheatears** (adults with young ones), **Black-eared Wheatears**, **Blue Rock Thrushes**, many **Rock Sparrows**, **Trumpeter**

Finches and a **Rock Bunting**. In the **Eastern Rock Nuthatch** competition between the two gorges, Gorge 1 beat Gorge 2 16-6, with a record party of 10 individuals. The best bird undoubtedly was an **Upcher's Warbler**, a singing male which was not shy at all! In other words, they do arrive right in the beginning of May.



Fig. 16. Eastern Rock Nuthatches are funny creatures, and may stand on wires...



Fig. 17. The large size of the bird is obvious, even when it flies.

Vedi Gorge 2 (39.951928, 44.706072)

In the center of Vedi, there are traffic lights at the junction of Araratyan St (the thoroughfare) and Tumanyan St (see Google Maps). Turn north there, and follow the street to the end of tarmac, going left at a y-fork. When arriving at a farm, drive right and through between the buildings (beware of sheep and dogs) and keep on driving forward, through an area of rubbish, aiming towards a small farm with green trees and grass (39.939098, 44.709684). When reaching a large electric line, follow one of the several tracks to the left and turn right uphill soon beyond the above-mentioned farm (on the right). At this point, there is a long shed/cattle pen on the left.



Fig. 18. The 4x4 track leads to Vedi Gorge 2, towards the red hills.

The several parallel tracks will become one and one will see some red hills up the road. It is a 4x4 track, but a fine one, and leads to another great picnic spot under a red gorge. Park there, and walk the wadi uphill, or drive on the wadi bottom (see 'Security', about dogs). The route is narrow in places, but there is an opening further on, at a y-junction where it is easy to do a u-turn.



Fig. 19. My Car Rent Georgia Mitsubishi IO, parked at the Vedi Gorge 2 picnic site.

A **Rufous Bush Robin** sang in a bush along the access track. **Chukars** (widespread) were particularly visible at the picnic site. **Isabelline, Finch's** and **Black-eared Wheatears** were as common as at the first gorge. **Blue Rock Thrushes, Rock Sparrows, Trumpeter Finches** and **Black-headed Buntings** were there, too. In the territorial male **Grey-necked Bunting** competition between the gorges, Gorge 2 prevailed, with a result 1-6! Gorge 2 did also hold a pair of **Pale Rock Sparrows**, which had probably arrived just recently. An additional **Upcher's Warbler** was located there, too. The other odd birds included a **Stone Curlew** and a **Tawny Pipit**.

Both the gorges being part of a great escarpment leading to the north, raptor migration could be expected. In addition to the resident **Lammergeiers, Golden Eagles, Long-legged Buzzards, Eurasian Sparrowhawks** and **Common Kestrels**, the following migratory birds of prey were noted while searching for the passerines: **Egyptian Vulture 1, Griffon Vulture 3, Cinereous Vulture 1, Short-toed Eagle 1, Black Kite 3, Pallid Harrier 5, Montagu's Harrier 4** and **Marsh Harrier 1** (many at Armash Ponds). Hundreds of **Common Swifts** and **European Bee-eaters** joined the movement.



Fig. 20. Only **Trumpeter Finches** and no **Mongolian Finches** at Vedi Hills, this time.

Ooranots (39.788034, 44.817448)

If I was in a right place, and right it appeared to be (cf. the records), the site can be reached by accessing the village of Armash by the second main street (southernmost, after the railway station). At the end of the street, uphill, drive straight up. The street becomes a gravel track as soon as one leaves the settlement. After few kilometers of gravelly plateau, one enters a craggy wadi on the right, just before a steep climb to the top of a hillock. There is a dam in the wadi, to maintain moisture at the stony grasslands above the site. The track continues all the way up to Tigranashen but it is probably not a good idea to drive further on.

I made some reconnaissance further up, but eventually parked my car by the crags, and walked the terrain there, shortly. My main activity was to carefully scan the whole place, to locate anything that might hide in-between the many rocks and stones. Up in the wadi, one is only likely to meet shepherds. As usual, the local people were welcoming. A man visited me for a friendly chat, while herding his sheep uphill.

The birds included a calling **Quail** (just before rain hit the place), five pairs of breeding **Finch's Wheatears** and two pairs of **Black-eared Wheatears**. Importantly, a pair of **Pale Rock Sparrows** had already arrived at their territory, standing alert on top of a wall of stone, observing an intruder. I also had perfect views of two territorial **Black-headed Buntings**.

Armash Ponds (39.787608, 44.767960)

Armash Pond is a well-known birding destination and a large area of fish ponds at the four-nation border area where Armenia, Turkey, Iran and Azerbaijan (Nakhchivan enclave) meet. The main entrance to the ponds is well signposted, with an emphasis on bird observations, at the southern end of Surenavan village, along the Yerevan – Yerashk highway. **Pygmy Cormorants** (hundreds), **Slender-billed Gulls** (dozens) and **White-winged Terns** (thousands) are common there. For the latter, my best day total was 5.000, inspiring a guesstimate of 10.000 for the whole area.



Fig. 21. Thousands of **White-winged Terns** adorned the extensive fish ponds of Armash.

Unfortunately, after passing a canal and about five ponds (depending on water levels), one arrives at a closed gate. Birders, at least independent foreign visitors, will not be let in, perhaps because of the close proximity of the Turkish border. In addition, the owners of those particular ponds may not desire invite witnesses to their hunting activities. In May 2016, shooting by shotguns was frequently heard beyond the gate. Waterfowl were not really numerous, but potentially include species such as **Ruddy Shelduck** (26), **Red-crested Pochard** (hundreds), **Ferruginous Duck** (dozens) and **White-headed Duck** (none were seen). There were ten species of herons, egrets, storks and ibises, including 24 **Spoonbills**, about 60 **Glossy Ibises** and but one **Little Bittern**.

It is, however, possible to follow the side tracks on embankments, to increase one's chances to discover something new. Make sure to close gates (sometimes only a wire) behind you, if necessary. The few canal-side reeds and bushes on the way to the above-mentioned closed gate, along the access road, were particularly good for **Menetries's Warblers** (the drab *mystacea*), several of which were readily seen there.



Fig. 22. In roadside reeds, mystacea **Menetrie's Warblers** could be seen and heard.

The scarcer species at the ponds included a pair of **European (Common) Pochards**, a **Northern Goshawk**, a **Eurasian Hobby**, a total of 8 **Gull-billed Terns**, a **Quail**, a **Common Kingfisher**, a **European Roller**, a **Short-toed Lark**, a **Sedge**, a few **Paddyfield** and **Eurasian Reed Warblers** (**Great** was common), only (!) 4 **Bearded Reedlings** at two sites, three **Woodchat Shrikes** (in addition to **Red-backed** and **Lesser Grey**), few **Golden Orioles** and few **Black-headed Buntings**.

On the 3rd of May, a party of three adult **Dalmatian Pelicans** were seen circling over the no-access fish ponds (probably not welcome there!). The same day, the many **European Bee-eaters** (seen daily) were joined by 12 **Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters**, and there were at least 5.000 **Barn Swallows** and 1.000 **Sand Martins** at the ponds. A relatively rare find was a second calendar year **Mediterranean Gull**, a visitor to Armenia. Once, a **Red Fox** was seen there, too.

Overall, the proximity of Kurdistan, as the locals called the cross-border region controlled by Turkey, made moving around the ponds difficult. Most of the area and its birds are out-of-bounds, but there nevertheless is plenty to see at the few access points. Moreover, some landowners appeared to be welcoming to birders. Keep in mind, however, that the area right behind the ponds is controlled by the military. It probably is not a good idea to go too far in, even if it was possible.

Close to the end of the Yerevan four-lane highway, just before the southern Ararat intersection, a track leaves the highway to the south, 150 m before a gas station. By following this track, it is possible to check a series of birdy ponds at a new section of aquaculture (39.810573, 44.719864). For example, **Little Grebes** preferred the habitats there. In the near future, a giant reservoir will be constructed in the area.

Around Armash, it is possible to scope the ponds from the highway. I also entered an orchard there, to be able to do the scoping from the railway embankment, but did not gain much by doing so. As one goes down from the highway, the visibility tends to decrease.

An important reservoir area could however be accessed by driving across the railway tracks just before the Armash railway station. At some large agricultural buildings, I turned right to a small farmland track and followed it for 800 m, before turning left to an even smaller track (39.764097, 44.791055). In there, a caterpillar was met, the driver being the owner of the close-by ponds. After a short discussion, he invited me in to the gated pond area, for two hours. There was an access to a muddy pasture, the favorite haunt of **Collared Pratincoles** (31), **White-tailed Lapwings** (8) and **Common Lapwings** (2). A party of four **Caspian Plovers** also passed by.

It was a pity that the large ponds with plenty of exposed mud, so close by in the south (30 meters from the above-mentioned track), could not be observed because there was no access and tall reeds blocked the views. Walking in was out of question because there was a drainage canal on the way. From the highway, I had seen hundreds of shorebirds, out of which only half could be identified. **Black-tailed Godwits** (60) were easier than the small peeps at their feet, to say the least. The best other waders included a two **Marsh Sandpipers**.



Fig. 23. It can be hot at the new section of the Armash Ponds; a **Purple Heron** cools off in the heat.

Kapan Highway (39.412599, 46.379373)

Between the towns of Goris and Kapan, the section beyond Vorotan and before Davit Bek Jct held some nice broadleaved forest. The highway followed the border between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, meandering on both sides, and there were not many houses along this section. I made a few stops there, both going in and out, and also drove slowly, car windows open, in order to spot birds by their song.

The best birds in Nagorno-Karabakh, before Vorotan, were a **White-throated Robin**, a pair of **Crag Martins**, a **Grasshopper Warbler**, an **Icterine Warbler**, a **Menetries's Warbler** and **Black-headed Buntings**. Along the main Kapan Highway, **Nightingales** and **Green Leaf Warblers** were aplenty. Several common forest birds were added to my Armenia list, too, in addition to **Semicollared Flycatcher** and **Sombre Tit**. The more surprising birds included a **Wallcreeper** (in a spot with rocks) and three territories of **Barred Warbler**, each of the latter within a hearing distance of one another.



Fig. 24. If tired of birds and craving for cultural experience, one could always stop at Crazy Club...

Kaler Road (39.066238, 46.273165)

As already mentioned in this trip report, the eastern side road to Vank and Kaler is easy to locate 29 km south of Karajan or 16.5 km north of Meghri, along M2. The access bridge has been closed after some structural damage, but a smaller bridge exists right by it.

My idea was to drive as high up as possible, to get as good scope views as possible, of the surrounding craggy slopes in the Arevik National Park. The area is a known stake-out for **Caspian Snowcock**, one of which was spotted on the first visit. I therefore did not enter the village of Kaler itself, but stopped at the other side of the Meghri River, where some roadside hills provided better views, weather permitting. On my first visit, the air was clear and scoping productive. On my second visit, it was foggy, and the views consequently rather limited.

On the road, I passed some locals on their way up or down, in aged Lada 1200s. At Kaler, there was an old man shepherding cows together with some friendly dogs. He welcomed me to do the

observations there. For entering the national park, in other words for climbing up the slopes, one needs a permit and presumably a guide, too.



Fig. 25. Kaler road, in heavy fog.

The (main) road between Meghri and Kaler had many singing **Nightingales** (50), and few **Thrush Nightingales**, too. The Kaler Road had **Blue Rock Thrushes**, several *armenicus* **Stonechats**, a **Dipper** (another later at Karajan), **Golden Orioles**, **Rock Buntings**, a **Black-headed Bunting** and many **Red-fronted Serins** as well.

Meghri (38.899053, 46.245553)

By Aras River, on the Armenian-Iranian border in Meghri, I visited the following sites: 1. The stake-out for **Red-tailed Wheatear**, 5.9 km east of the M2 (Meghri) and M17 Jct. At this point, there is a farmhouse and a trail on the left, to the north. 2. The Alvank Road: the section between M17 and the village of Alvank, with access to some side trails. 3. The Shvanidzor Road: the section between M17 and the village. Overall, a limited area was explored in a limited time, with main focus on the wheatear and **See-see Partridge**. The partridges were not active, unlike the common **Chukars**.

The site for **Red-tailed Wheatears** was, unfortunately, out-of-bounds in May 2016. The house at the start of the trail has been fenced and gated, and was also guarded by ferocious dogs. As nobody was at home, and it consequently was not possible to request a permission to enter, I scoped the crags standing by the fence, thereby irritating the territorial dogs (they soon calmed down). On the second attempt, I finally succeeded. Long distance views, but nevertheless a nice addition to a WP list, considering that this is the only area where the species is known to breed in the Western Palaearctic!



Fig. 26. My Mitsubishi IO, parked by the Alvank Road, next to the Iranian border. See the dent?

The area also had great views to the hills across the Aras River, in Iran. The interesting raptors there included breeding **Lammergeiers** and **Lesser Spotted Eagles**, and a **Levant Sparrowhawk**, in addition to widespread species such as **Golden Eagle** and **Long-legged Buzzard**. **Black-eared Wheatears** were common in Meghri, and the area was also good for **Blue Rock Thrushes**. I recorded both **Rock** and **Eastern Rock Nuthatches**, and a few **Common Rosefinches** (a widespread species).

Shatin (39.833221, 45.298801)

The village of Shatin is located 10.5 km north of the H51 and M10 Jct, close to Yeghegnadzor. It lies at the western end of the Yeghegis State Sanctuary and has a particularly impressive, steep and stony mountain slope, with the only observation point for **Bezoar Ibex** (*Capra aegagrus aegagrus*) in Armenia. The observation platform has jointly been funded by the Norwegian and Armenian governments. It is well signposted all the way from the highway. In the end, one enters a gated yard by a private house, the home of the man who is in charge of the observatory.

The man was out there already at 6.30, and even though initially pessimistic about the goats, became excited when we soon spotted a family of a female **Brown Bear** with three cubs, the latter playing in the bright morning sun, about hundred meters above a site where one villager herded some cows and left them there! Well, the bears went uphill, being carefully observed by a lone **Bezoar Ibex**, from the top of the slope. No wonder the goats had left their favorite spot! It was enjoyable to watch the excitement of the women of the house, after they heard that a *medved* was there. Even the granny arrived to get some scope views!

In regard to birds, this was the site of my only Armenian **Great Spotted Woodpecker** and **Alpine Swifts**, about 10 birds. **Crag Martins** were also present.

Selim Pass Area (39.986021, 45.232473)

At 2.410 meters, Selim Pass was the third area high enough to have snow along my route in Armenia. The other two were Mt. Aragats and Meghri Pass. More interesting than the high altitude habitat were the migratory birds at the pass, and the birds encountered a bit lower down, at a flooded area along the Argitchi River. The wind there was a bit too strong for scope observations. One had to crouch in the shelter of one's car. The higher areas were also disturbed by many families picking wild mushrooms (for sale) – an activity I also love in other circumstances. It was a wild chase and competition between the various parties...

At the high pass, for example migratory **European Bee-eaters** (over 200), **Honey** and **Common Buzzards** were seen, in addition to territorial **Long-legged Buzzards**. Several tired **Tree Pipits** had landed at the pass. Resident passerines included few **Horned Larks** and **Radde's Accentors**, and my only Armenian **Ring Ouzel** (common in Georgia). The flooded area had, among other birds, 26 **Common Shelducks**, an assortment of common shorebirds, 3 **Gull-billed Terns**, and 2 **Common** and 40 **White-winged Terns**. Close to Martumi, 2 roadside **Lesser Short-toed Larks** were spotted.

Lake Sevan (40.513687, 44.953213)

Being in a hurry to get back to Georgia, I did not spend much time at Lake Sevan. There were, after all, neither potential lifers nor new Western Palaearctic species to be expected. A few stops were, however, made on the M10 highway between Martuni and the northwestern tip of the lake, whenever sizable parties of wetland birds were spotted. The best spots were the shores and marshlands at Hayravank, Lchashen and Tsovagyugh. At Lake Sevan, I saw my first **Great Cormorants** since Lake Arpi, about 50 individuals. According to my apparently outdated field guide, the species does not even occur in Armenia.

Dilijan Woodlands (40.734893, 44.865233)

Also this area of good, mature forests was neglected because of a need to arrive in Georgia early enough. I should have made more roadside stops after the tunnel north of Semyonovka, driving down to Dilijan. Instead, I shortly explored a side road to Jukhtavank Monastery (Abovyan St). Birding would probably have been more productive in the east, along the Haghartsin and Parz Lich Roads, or on the various forest trekking trails. It was nevertheless a very pretty area, with fresh leaves sprouting in the warm spring weather and the freshly arrived birds singing in the trees and bushes. **Green Warblers** were numerous. Single **Semi-collared** and **Red-breasted Flycatchers**, and **Eurasian Nuthatches**, were also located in the short time.

IN RETROSPECT



Fig 27. As the weather got increasingly warm, the spring rains made these poppies to bloom.

As the length of this report testifies, I enjoyed the visit a lot, partly because of personal nostalgia, in regard to Georgia, and partly because of a chance to explore a new nation for me, Armenia. Nevertheless, for a visiting birder, the main attraction of these mountainous nations is the great diversity of habitats and consequently also birds, many of which could turn out as vagrants in one's home region in other parts of Europe. Georgia and Armenia are not far away, but nevertheless provide a unique experience for a traveling visitor, with their endemic species and wildlife with both European and Asian features.

At the moment, the infrastructure is good to adequate, and the situation with security, even though potentially volatile, is stable enough. Georgia and Armenia are welcoming to the visitors, both in administrative terms (no visa requirements for EU citizens) and on an individual interpersonal basis. In both countries, the overwhelming majority of the people are friendly and helpful. It may help to be able to speak a bit Russian (or better still, Georgian and Armenian!) there, but I have no doubt that English will do just fine, in most situations.

Good luck with your visit in Georgia and Armenia!

