

Turkey

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Participants:

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Leaders: Soner Bekir
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Pallid Scops-owl

Day 1: The group met early morning at London Heathrow airport for the flight to Istanbul. In Istanbul airport we meet Soner Bekir, our local guide, before catching the internal flight to Kayseri where we were met our driver. We were soon loaded into our luxury coach and on our way ticking some common roadside birds including Long-legged Buzzard, Eurasian Hoopoe, Hooded Crow and Eurasian Tree Sparrow whilst Calandra Lark, Isabelline Wheatear and Black-headed Bunting were the pick of the rest of the bunch. On arrival in Camardi, we checked into our rooms at the guesthouse and were soon exploring the immediate grounds with Syrian Woodpecker and Eastern Olivaceous Warbler added to the list. This must be one of the most birder-friendly guesthouses in the world with extremely hospitable hosts and stunning views. Unfortunately, the European Scops-owl across the road was not as hospitable, refusing to show itself!

Day 2: Today we were up very early for coffee and biscuits and a tractor ride into the Taurus Mountains. The ride was neither too bumpy nor cold but shortly after getting out of the tractor we started to feel the cold. To say that it was freezing is an understatement and the hot tea given to us by our drivers mainly served to defrost our hands! Despite the discomfort however, we enjoyed distant but good views of several Caspian Snowcocks. The supporting cast in this stunningly beautiful area were Chukar, Eurasian Crag Martin, Alpine and Radde's Accentors, Horned Larks, Rufous-tailed and Blue Rock-thrushes, Finsch's Wheatears, Red-billed and Yellow-billed Chough's, Rock Petronia, White-winged Snowfinch, Crimson-winged Finch and Ortolan Bunting. A nice surprise was a Wallcreeper initially on nearby boulders then on the rock face as we walked part of the way down. Returning to the guesthouse for a late breakfast/early lunch we took a brief rest

before visiting the nearby Emli Valley where we enjoyed prolonged views of Eastern Orphean Warbler, Red-backed Shrikes, Western Rock Nuthatches and Rock Buntings. In the evening, a couple of us managed to pin down the European Scops-owl which was calling from its nest.

Day 3: After breakfast, we first looked for the Eurasian Scops-owl on its nest but no luck. We then visited another valley in the Taurus Mountains where Alpines Swifts were swirling around the cliffs. Several more Chukars were seen together with Horned Lark, Rock Sparrow and White-winged Snowfinch, whilst a distant falcon turned out to be our one and only Saker Falcon of the tour. Moving on, we stopped in Camardi to buy the ingredients for our picnic lunch, which we ate in a good raptor watching spot. Unfortunately, no one told the raptors that it was a good spot and our reward was a single Egyptian Vulture and a pair of displaying Golden Eagles. Other birds somewhat compensated however, with Red-rumped Swallows, European Turtle-doves and our only European Serins of the tour. Our final destination was the Goksu Delta but we first stopped in Silifke town to pick up our new tourist guide (one who could speak English!) and to look at a White Stork's nest. We then moved to a cemetery close to our hotel where Soner had staked-out Masked Shrike. We enjoyed excellent views of the shrikes together with Syrian Woodpeckers and Eastern Olivaceous Warblers before checking into our hotel overlooking the Mediterranean Sea with just enough light left to record a few Laughing Doves, Common Terns and Yellow-legged Gulls.

Day 4: After an early breakfast we departed for the nearby Goksu Delta, surprising a group of Danish birders who had camped there overnight! The light from the tower hide in the mornings isn't good but we added a number of new birds including Great Crested Grebes, Grey and Purple Herons, Little Egrets, Red-crested Pochards, Western Marsh-harriers, Whiskered Terns, Bearded Tits and Eurasian Reed-warblers. A single Purple Swamphen was on the far side of the lagoon, whilst in the scrub around the tower Rufous Scrub-robin, Spectacled Bulbuls and Graceful Prinia showed well. Finally after hearing several calling birds, a male Black Francolin was eventually spotted calling from the top of a bush. Moving on to another hide, we immediately found a pair of Spur-winged Lapwings, here at almost the most northerly part of their range. In fact, they proved to be somewhat common in the delta. Many Ruddy Shelduck were evident including some with rafts of young together with Yellow (Black-headed) and Citrine Wagtails, whilst three White Pelicans drifted over the lagoon. Our first Eurasian Spoonbills of the tour were also added to the list before we moved on to a derelict building that gave us excellent panoramic views over the delta. From here we could pick out White Storks and a small group of Greater Flamingos on a saline lagoon. A number of waders were also present on the lagoon but we had to move nearer to pick them out of the by now increasing heat haze. Short-toed Larks were present in the recently ploughed areas as we walked towards the lagoon and a Gull-billed Tern hawked insects. Eventually, we were able to pick out a fine selection of passage waders including Grey and Ringed Plovers, Ruddy Turnstones, Curlew Sandpipers and Little Stints in summer plumage, Broad-billed Sandpipers and singles of Common Greenshank and Ruff. After lunch we continued through the Goksu Delta from where we left off in the morning with our first new birds being Little Owls around a small village. We then walked down to the beach where we could distantly view Audouin's Gull on a sandy island about a mile away. Cory's Shearwaters were passing fairly closely inshore and a Peregrine sat on a piece of driftwood waiting for an opportunity. Little Terns fished close inshore and after a short while we decided to 'bite the bullet' and walk along the beach for better views of the gulls. Walking on sand is never easy and it took around 30 minutes to get to the best viewing position but it was worth it with excellent views of 45 Audouin's Gulls in various plumages plus Yellow-legged Gulls, Common and Little Terns. A couple of brown birds were picked out flying behind the island and were initially thought to be skuas. It then became apparent that they were actually a pair of European Nightjars migrating north low over the water! For those who didn't make the walk they enjoyed the spectacular sight of the Peregrine attacking the nightjars but amazingly missing both of them! On the walk back to the coach our first Great White Egret was spotted and whilst by carefully picking through a colony of Spanish Sparrow we saw several fine males.

Day 5: Another early breakfast and up into the hills to look for several maquis-dependant birds. At our first stop Rüppell's Warblers and nesting Sombre Tits showed well but an Olive-tree Warbler proved somewhat harder work. A short distance up the road Cretzschmar's Buntings were common and conspicuous and a Common Buzzard was added to the ever-growing list. A pleasant walk up a track yielded nothing new although Black-eared Wheatears, Blue Rock-thrushes and Rüppell's Warblers were conspicuous. Heading further up into the hills we eventually reached Olba Diocaesarea, a two thousand year old Roman theatre complex. A cultural stop was taken, although not at the expense of birding, as we also enjoyed excellent views of Lesser Spotted and Syrian Woodpeckers, Eastern Orphee and Olive-tree Warblers, and Black-headed Buntings. With lunch beckoning, we retraced our steps to a forest picnic area and whilst the driver and guide were preparing our lunches we enjoyed prolonged and close encounters with good numbers of Krüper's Nuthatches as well as a few other new species such as Common Raven, Spotted Flycatcher and Common Chaffinch. After our picnic lunch, we headed back to the Goksu Delta. A short walk took us to another tower hide, which was definitely in need of repair! It didn't take us long to find several Moustached Warblers singing and giving excellent views. Good numbers of Squacco Herons flew over the reeds together with a single Black-crowned Night-heron finishing a highly successful day.

Day 6: With the Collared Pratincole colony appearing to have been deserted this year, that left us with just one more target bird from the delta, Marbled Duck. After an early breakfast, we headed back into the delta again and it didn't take us long to firstly find a small group of Marbled Ducks, which unfortunately flew off all too soon. Luck was with us, however, as a female with several young was found close to the reeds and with a bit of patience everyone was able to enjoy good views of this globally-threatened species. We returned to the hotel and packed up for the journey east. A picnic lunch had been arranged at a local protected wetland project where local dignitaries warmly welcomed us. The main purpose of this visit (other than to support local conservation) was to look for kingfishers. Pied Kingfishers were easy to see but White-breasted Kingfishers took a little more perseverance! There were plenty of other birds to see, however, with Great Reed-warbler and Eurasian Penduline-tits showing extremely well, plus a Short-toed Eagle was found perched high up on a hillside, and a brief flyover Black Stork was the only one of the tour. Several more new birds for the tour were added including Cattle Egret, Common Moorhen and Little Ringed Plover before we set off east again towards Gazientep. Our last stop of the day was at a small roadside horse trough where birds come to drink. Several White-throated Robins were seen well before we decided to walk down a sidetrack. Cinereous Buntings were added to our lists very quickly and towards the end of the track an Upcher's Warbler responded extremely well to tape and gave exceptional views. Finally, at the end of the track, where a spring emerges from caves, we found an Eastern Rock Nuthatch nest and enjoyed good views of both birds. Those who chose to stay back at the horse trough were treated to a couple of Desert Finches coming in to drink. Alpine Swifts flying low over the road and the coach having difficulty negotiating the narrow streets enlivened the short drive to our hotel through the city!

Day 7: Setting off early, we had a minor setback as part of our bus fell off! Nevertheless, within 30 minutes we were on the road again in a replacement minibus to a site for Red-tailed (Persian) Wheatear. Sadly, although they bred here again this year, the young had already fledged and the birds had departed so we were left to enjoy our first Bimaculated Larks and Pale Rockfinches, and more Cinereous Buntings. Other highlights included a Peregrine perched high up on the cliffs, a Syrian Woodpecker bizarrely flying high over a treeless mountain, a couple more each of White-throated Robin and Finsch's Wheatear and best of all ice creams at the local shop! After lunch, we were reunited with our fully repaired bus (imagine that happening so quickly in the UK!) and moved on to Birecik where the local tea garden gave us 'crippling' daytime views of both Pallid Scops-owl and Long-eared Owl as well as cups of tea. After checking into our hotel, we headed north along the Euphrates where the captive population of Bald Ibis were seen on the cliffs with Alpine and Little Swifts screaming overhead. Both Dead Sea Sparrow and Chestnut-shouldered Petronias showed well in the pistachio groves before we moved back across the river to an area of reedbeds. Iraq Babblers have bred here for the past few years and were doing so again. They were obviously feeding young

from their movements, showing briefly in the same dead tree on a regular basis. Several Ménétries's Warblers showed well, Pygmy Cormorants flew over and a Squacco Heron flushed from the reedbed at the end of another excellent day.

Day 8: This morning we made a pre-breakfast visit to the Bald Ibis gorge in search of See-see Partridge. Few birds were actually seen in the gorge as the noise of us walking on the shingle probably frightened everything for miles as was the case with the first two See-see Partridges! Climbing up on the plateau, we settled down to scan the fields. A Desert Lark sang but could not be located so we changed position to look for it. See-see Partridges were calling and eventually one was picked up in the distance. Not great views but a good start and after it flew we tried to home in on another calling male. Eventually it was located at a lesser distance and obliged by turning around as it called so we could view it from all angles. Well satisfied, we returned back down the gorge to our hotel for breakfast. After picking up the ingredients for a picnic lunch, we headed north to a lake on the Euphrates River. Several European Rollers were on the wires and we stopped at a likely looking spot for Cream-coloured Coursers. A thorough scan of the area drew a blank but we were well rewarded when the only two Black-bellied Sandgrouse of the tour flew over followed shortly after by a small passage of European Honey-buzzards. Short-toed Larks were in the ploughed fields and a nice male Lesser Kestrel hawking insects was a welcome addition to the list. Dropping down to the tourist village of Halfeti for lunch, a Short-toed Snake-eagle sat majestically on the cliffs above us. Lunch was taken on a water boat/raft with no additions to the list. In the afternoon, we returned to Biricek and revisited the Iraq Babbler site. A single bird was seen well together with Pygmy Cormorants. We then made a special effort for better views of Ménétries's Warblers and had a pair coming in to tape. Dead Sea Sparrows also showed exceptionally well to round off a good day.

Day 9: Our tour was flexible enough for a special day trip to be made to Nemrut Dagi for Red-tailed (Kurdish) Wheatears. The journey out was long, partly through taking a 'short cut', which proved not to be so, and partly through extensive roadworks. Because the coach couldn't negotiate the road to the top we started to walk but some more sensible members of the group found a minibus and everyone went for this option as it was getting pretty hot by now. Red-rumped Swallows showed well on roadside telephone wires and a nesting pair of Woodchat Shrikes was well watched. Corn Buntings sang and eventually one was seen. Two of the group opted to continue right up to the ancient monument at the top of the park whilst the rest of us opted to remain around the park entrance where a pair of Red-tailed (Kurdish) Wheatears was continuously on show. It was an extremely pleasant spot and although the park guards were reluctant for us to enter the park they did provide us with tea! Several singing male Pale Rockfinches and Cinereous Buntings proved very photogenic and a pair of Short-toed Snake-eagles displayed overhead including talon locking. Meanwhile, the two members of the group who went all the way to the top and enjoyed the ancient monument were rewarded with more Red-tailed Wheatears. We had a slightly shorter journey home as we missed out the short cut!

Day 10: Another early start to a protected site for gazelle east of Birecik on the Syrian Border. Because of the no hunting rules, See-see Partridges were common and easy to see here and we had our only Pin-tailed Sandgrouse of the tour, with a distant flock in flight and a flyover pair. More Finsch's Wheatears were seen but some of the group still needed to see Desert Finches so we headed back to a Pistachio grove. We had experienced frustratingly brief flight views until now but eventually we found several birds around a house, which considerately perched up on the fence! Our next stop was at a mixed colony of Blue-cheeked and European Bee-eaters, which we enjoyed at close range, and as we drove along, European Rollers were scattered along the roadside wires. We drove through the wonderfully named town of Batman (no, we didn't see any Robins there!) until eventually we reached the spectacular ancient town of Hasankeyf with its cave dwellings and colony of Lesser Kestrels. Plenty more pixels used on the Lesser Kestrels and Western Rock Nuthatches before we ate a fish lunch on the banks of the Tigris River. Finally, we arrived in Cizre with just enough light to rush to the river and see three Red-wattled Lapwings and experience a brief

encounter with the Turkish Military Police who were suspicious of our motives! Not many species seen today, but it was definitely a day of quality rather than quantity!

Day 11: As we didn't want to attract the attention of the police again, after breakfast we went straight to an army base to ask permission. Permission was given but unfortunately no Red-wattled Lapwings were there to watch! A nice male Little Bittern in a tiny patch of reeds in the river was seen well however. As we worked our way north, we made a couple of stops on tributaries of the Tigris but no joy. A Collared Pratincole was a nice surprise find at one bridge but then disaster, our coach couldn't get through a village due to low power lines and when turning round got stuck in a sewerage ditch! This turned out to be quite an event for the local villagers who all mucked in (literally!), got us a tractor and towed us out! On the road again, we stopped at another riverside site and walked down through the fields to scan the shingle islands. And there it was, another Red-wattled Lapwing, which we could watch without military/police oversight. Red-wattled Lapwing is actually quite widespread and common on the Tigris tributaries, you just have to know the sites! The last leg of the journey to Tatvan was rather slow as there were extensive roadworks but we arrived in the town around dusk with our first views of Lake Van.

Day 12: An early morning visit to Nemrut Golu crater lake to look for White-winged Scoter. They have not been present here for a couple of years but worth the try for the spectacular scenery as well as our first Armenian Gulls. Sky Larks were singing overhead whilst Eurasian Crag Martin, Water Pipit, Rock Petronia, White-winged Snowfinch and Ortolan Bunting were all present. So down to the lake and in the lagoons and on the beach Common Shelduck, Gadwall, Garganey, Northern Lapwing and Common Redshank were all new additions to the list. Walking along the beach, it didn't take us long to enjoy fine views of a couple of Paddyfield Warblers together with Moustached Warblers. We headed off the main road on a sidetrack where on a small arm of Lake Van large flocks of Black-necked Grebes were seen together with a single Red-necked Grebe. Arriving in a village and setting up our scopes on a lagoon, we were immediately greeted by children from the local school. They were all so well dressed and polite it was a pleasure to show them birds and the staff of the school added to the occasion by offering us all tea. We recorded our first Little and Slender-billed Gulls here as well as Eurasian Oystercatchers and a number of species we had already seen before. Waving goodbye, we headed to another part of the lake for lunch. In the cloudy, muggy weather, literally thousands of birds were hawking insects over the lake including Sand Martins and hundreds of wonderfully-plumaged White-winged Terns. Many Calandra and Lesser Short-toed Larks were seen but the Lesser Short-toed Larks here are not Asian Short-toed contrary to many tour reports as they are just a race or colour morph of Lesser Short-toed Larks. Moving on a short distance, we found a single Red-necked Phalarope on a lagoon together with more White-winged Terns giving spectacular views. An excellent looking site next to another village proved to be problematical. Many ducks and waders were present and we added several new birds to the list but it was the White-headed Ducks that were the draw. We moved closer to look at them and enjoyed excellent views. By now the kids were becoming a real hassle however, and as we left one of them threw a stone at the bus breaking the back window. There was nothing that we could do but leave as the adults in the village weren't interested and this was such a complete contrast to the previous village it seemed like we had arrived in a different world. We therefore carried on to Ercis for a two-night stay.

Day 13 After an early breakfast, we set off to look for Great Bustards and Demoiselle Cranes. Both species have become virtually impossible to see over the past few years and the crane may now be extinct as a breeding species in Turkey. After a couple of stops however, we did see four Great Bustards. At first they showed quite well but as the group emerged from the bus they sat down in the long grass with just their heads occasionally showing. Changing positions, we walked through the beautiful carpet of flowers on this stony steppe type habitat until we could see the birds again. Even at a range of 800 metres they were wary and soon took off giving excellent flight views. Hundreds of Rose-coloured Starlings flew around in various sized flocks as we continued our search for the crane. We stopped at another bridge and a thorough scan gave

us views of two Greylag Geese and a probable Eurasian Thick-knee. Walking the riverbank, we enjoyed good views of four Eurasian Thick-knees and our only Black Tern of the tour but sadly no Demoiselle Crane or even Common Crane. It is becoming apparent that the increase in the human population in this area and the resultant disturbance is causing the demise of these species despite the fact that they're not hunted. Local people said that they were still occasionally present but could they tell the difference between Common and Demoiselle Cranes and Grey Herons? Anyway, after lunch we continued our search but without success. At the final stop of the day (another bridge!) we were enjoying the sight of several male Montagu's Harriers when the army turned up in dramatic fashion. About 16 troops with submachine guns jumped out of lorries and lined the bridge whilst the officer questioned our driver and guide. All very professionally done and they apologised for any inconvenience! Left in piece, we added Common Sandpiper to our list but the Cetti's Warbler was only distantly heard.

Day 14: This was our final full day and we left our hotel early to drive the relatively short distance to Caldiran where we turned off on a dirt road to a pool on the edge of the lava flow. Our first notable bird was a European Honey-buzzard sat on a roadside rock, not a usual site for this species! Plenty of birds were around this small spring-fed pool and we were soon enjoying great views of Citrine Wagtail, White-winged Snowfinch, Crimson-winged Finch, Twite and a singing Common Rosefinch in drab first year plumage. It was really Mongolian Finch than we had come here to see and it took quite some time for everyone to get good views. The first male coming in to drink was only seen briefly and the fact that the next few sightings were only flight views or only seen by a few didn't help. It was a lovely day so we took an early picnic lunch break (punctuated only by a brief shower) and finally were rewarded with good views of firstly a male Mongolian Finch then two females at very close range. Whilst waiting we were constantly entertained by Short-toed Snake-eagles, amazing views of the very rare Steppe Eagle and a number of Long-legged Buzzards. Moving on, we headed through Dogubayazit and on up to the Ishakpasa Palace where after a very brief search we enjoyed excellent views of our last target bird of the tour, a singing male Grey-necked Bunting. With time to spare now, the group split up to do their own thing, some to visit the palace, some to carry on birding and others to find a tea and ice cream shop! At the end of the day we dropped back down into town and to our ideally-located hotel with a stunning view over Mount Ararat where, after seeing a few Common Wood-pigeons, the last bird of the day was a European Nightjar in the gloom on our way back from the restaurant.

Day 15: Up early for the last time for the three-hour drive back to Van. We made a couple of stops en-route including a scenic one to photograph the lake and arrived in plenty of time to catch our mid morning flight back to Istanbul. We had a few hours to kill in Istanbul before catching our connecting flight back to the UK with the tour finishing in London mid evening.