

Turkey

28 May–11 June 2010

Participants:

David Brooks
Alan Gibson
Margaret Goddard
Keith Horne
Chris Hughes
Roger Kay
Monica and Owen Marks
Lynsey and Maurice McCann
Brian Smith



Leaders: Soner Bekir and Peter Lansdown

Red-fronted Serin

Day 1: For the twelve of us from the U. K., the tour began with a flight from London Heathrow to Istanbul, followed by an internal flight to Kayseri in central Turkey. Here we were met by the tour leader, Soner Bekir, together with our tourist guide and our driver. We boarded our roomy coach, which we were to use throughout the tour including for all but two of our many off-road excursions, and set off for Camardi for a two-night stay. The journey produced a Black Kite, an Egyptian Vulture and a Lesser Grey Shrike as well as the only rain we were to witness during the tour. Dinner, which was accompanied by the sound of a European Scops-owl, was served on the verandah of our guest-house, so we had stunning views of the mountains we would ascend the next day.

Day 2: We assembled early, very early, for coffee and biscuits, with calling European Scops-owl in the background, then we squeezed into a tractor's covered trailer for the long haul into the mountains. We reached our destination, just below the impressive rock walls with their mini-snowfields, soon after dawn. It was cold, but we were warmly dressed and, in any case, the birds were to capture our full attention during the several hours we remained at high altitude: three sought-after Caspian Snowcocks, a Chukar, two Radde's Accentors, an Alpine Accentor, a Rufous-tailed Rock-thrush, two Yellow-billed Choughs, 10 eye-catching White-winged Snowfinches, five glowing Red-fronted Serins, four Crimson-winged Finches, a Rock Bunting and an Ortolan Bunting were rich reward indeed for our efforts. We descended by tractor, interspersed with spells of strolling, seeing a Tawny Pipit, four Finsch's Wheatears, a Rock Thrush, 15 White-winged Snowfinches and two more Red-fronted Serins on the way. After a well-earned late breakfast/early lunch, with the day having warmed up considerably, we travelled by coach to a nearby valley and continued on foot along a track, which led up into the mountains. During the drive and walk we saw two Golden Eagles, two impressive Lammergeiers, three Chukars, three gorgeous White-throated Robins, two Rufous-tailed Rock-thrushes, 20 White-winged Snowfinches, four Red-fronted Serins, four Crimson-winged Finches and nine Ortolan Buntings.

Day 3: Before breakfast we heard the European Scops-owl again and also a Eurasian Golden Oriole, which, unlike the owl, allowed some of the group to see it. The birding day started with a walk up a beautiful steep-sided valley; birds were showy in the warm sunshine and we were treated to views of 11 Chukars, two Blue Rock-thrushes, two Eastern Orphean Warblers, five Red-fronted Serins and four Rock Buntings. We left the Camardi area and headed south to a raptor watch-point where two Booted Eagles, three Golden Eagles, a Lammergeier, a distant Saker and a European

Serin entertained us during an extended picnic lunch. We continued south, then south-west along the Mediterranean coast, to Tusucu, one of a string of tourist resorts and our base for the next three nights. We paused at a cemetery on the edge of town, where a Masked Shrike tried unsuccessfully to elude us.

Day 4: The warmth of the mountains had given way to the heat of the coast. Nevertheless, apart from an afternoon siesta at the hotel, we spent all day in the nearby Goksu delta. We were rewarded for an early start with two Black Francolins, two flashy White-throated Kingfishers and a Spanish Sparrow along an ordinary-looking approach road. The lakes, marshes and fields of the area produced 10 Purple Herons, two Great White Egrets, a Little Bittern, four Eurasian Spoonbills, a locally rare Marbled Duck, two Red-crested Pochards, a Black Francolin, three Purple Swamphens, a Gull-billed Tern, seven Whiskered Terns, a Tawny Pipit and a Savi's Warbler. Along a sandy beach and its offshore sand-bar we watched 20 Kentish Plovers, 11 Audouin's Gulls and a Gull-billed Tern.

Day 5: Another early start saw us heading north into the hills, where three Olive-tree Warblers, two Rüppell's Warblers, five Masked Shrikes and four Cretzschmar's Buntings awaited us in a partially wooded valley. At the site of a Roman amphitheatre we saw an Eastern Orphean Warbler, three Sombre Tits and two Masked Shrikes, while our picnic lunch in the forest produced seven busy Krüper's Nuthatches and a European Serin. After a siesta at the hotel, we returned to the Goksu delta, seeing the two White-throated Kingfishers along the approach road, seven Purple Herons and a Great White Egret in the freshwater marshes, a lazy Cory's Shearwater and two Audouin's Gulls during a seawatch and two Black Francolins, 18 Kentish Plovers and a Caspian Tern along the coastal strip.

Day 6: As the day was to prove, a long journey does not necessarily mean a lack of good birds. We left Tusucu, heading north-east along the coast and then due east. Two stops were made in quick succession: the first was at a heronry, where we watched five Cattle Egrets and four locally highly-prized Eleonora's Falcons, and the second was at a wetlands reserve, where we enjoyed three Little Bitterns, three White-throated Kingfishers, a Pied Kingfisher and two Great Reed-warblers. Our third birding break was for a walk along a track in a farmed and well-vegetated, albeit rocky, valley. Here we found two Upcher's Warblers, five Eastern Orphean Warblers, two Sombre Tits, three Eastern Rock Nuthatches and two Cinereous Buntings. We finally arrived at the picturesque town of Berecik, for a three-night stay. Our hotel was situated next to the River Euphrates, and 60 Pygmy Cormorants and seven iconic Bald Ibises were seen before dinner.

Day 7: Visiting the marshes of the Euphrates early in the day meant that we saw 12 Pygmy Cormorants, two Little Bitterns, a Black Francolin, two Pied Kingfishers, five Great Reed-warblers, a Ménétries's Warbler, six recently-discovered Iraq Babbler, a Spanish Sparrow and 15 Dead Sea Sparrows before it became really hot; and it certainly did get hot in the Birecik area! After breakfast we went to the famous gorge and enjoyed 37 Bald Ibises, 30 Little Swifts and 10 Ménétries's Warblers before accessing a pistachio orchard and locating four Chestnut-shouldered Petronias. In the shady local park and tea gardens, where we had lunch, we found a Long-eared Owl and a cute Striated Scops-owl, while the walk back to the hotel produced 10 Pygmy Cormorants, a Great White Egret and 10 Cattle Egrets. After a siesta we drove slowly south along the Euphrates seeing 23 Pygmy Cormorants, two Red-crested Pochards, a Ferruginous Duck, 20 European Honey-buzzards, an Iraq Babbler, five Dead Sea Sparrows and a Desert Finch.

Day 8: Birding began near and at what appeared to be a very attractive lake, but which was actually a dammed portion of the River Euphrates, where three Pygmy Cormorants, nine Chukars, three subtly beautiful See-see Partridges, three Upcher's Warblers, four Ménétries's Warblers, three Sombre Tits, 10 Eastern Rock Nuthatches, a Lesser Grey Shrike, two Pale Rockfinches and 10 Desert Finches were seen. Next, from the shade of a mulberry tree, we watched a rock-face overlooking a small water channel, which birds were visiting to drink. Here we saw a Eurasian Golden Oriole, a Dead Sea Sparrow, six Chestnut-shouldered Petronias and two Pale Rockfinches. After discovering 15 Black-winged Stilts and a Collared Pratincole at an upland lake we returned to the hotel, where 12 Pygmy Cormorants and four Bald Ibises showed themselves before dinner.

Day 9: Although it looked on the map like a straightforward north-easterly drive to our next destination, birding dictated that we should travel both south and much further north than expected, and then have to catch a ferry to get to Siverek for a one-night stay. After witnessing a final fly-past of 97 Pygmy Cormorants and 11 Bald Ibises outside the hotel in Birecik, we drove to an undulating plain which was designated as a wildlife improvement area and where we saw a Short-toed Snake-eagle, a Chukar, 17 See-see Partridges, 12 Lesser Short-toed Larks, six Finsch's Wheatears,

six Pale Rockfinches and two Desert Finches. There were 65 gorgeous Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters at our next stop, with a European Honey-buzzard high overhead. After a lengthy drive into the mountains, we had lunch then packed ourselves into a four-wheel-drive minibus, which would be able to go higher, on steeper tracks, than our coach could go. It was well worth it to see six Red-tailed Wheatears, eight Finsch's Wheatears, an Upcher's Warbler, a Lesser Grey Shrike, a White-winged Snowfinch and two Cinereous Buntings. Our final journey of the day, to Siverek, produced a White-throated Robin near the beginning and a Black Stork from the ferry.

Day 10: Continuing in an easterly direction, our first stop of the day was on a plain, where we enjoyed views of two Lesser Short-toed Larks, seven Bimaculated Larks, two White-throated Robins and six Spectacled Warblers, while our second stop was at an ancient cave-dwelling site where we saw a Short-toed Snake-eagle, three Egyptian Vultures and 10 Lesser Kestrels. Finally we searched a length of river valley and discovered a Cattle Egret, a Montagu's Harrier, four highly-prized Red-wattled Lapwings, two Black-bellied Sandgrouse, eight Pied Kingfishers and 300 Spanish Sparrows. We stayed for one night in Batman.

Day 11: During our drive to the north-east, to Tatvan at the western end of enormous Lake Van for a one-night stay, we first visited an impressive old bridge and saw a Black Stork and two Eastern Rock Nuthatches then stopped in Bitlis, where a Lesser Kestrel was spotted. Near Tatvan itself we were treated to views of a party of 25 Rose-coloured Starlings at the roadside before we zig-zagged up the side of an extinct volcano, over its rim and down onto the volcano's floor. We enjoyed a picnic lunch here as well as a Golden Eagle, two Rufous-tailed Rock-thrushes and a Cinereous Bunting. After checking into our hotel we drove to a reed-bed adjacent to Lake Van, where we saw two Black-winged Stilts, a Moustached Warbler and a Paddyfield Warbler and heard a Great Reed-warbler and three more Paddyfield Warblers.

Day 12: Once more we headed north-east all day, hugging the north-west side of Lake Van, to Ercis for a two-night stay. For the second time we visited the reed-bed next to the lake, on this occasion seeing six Moustached Warblers and two Paddyfield Warblers and again hearing the Great Reed-warbler. Next we diverted to a small wooded valley; we walked along a track by a stream and located a handsome male Semi-collared Flycatcher and two European Penduline-tits. Our final birding of the day was at a lake adjacent to Lake Van which was host to about two thousand birds including 300 Red-crested Pochards, 20 rather special White-headed Ducks, a Montagu's Harrier, 150 Black-winged Stilts, a Collared Pratincole, 10 Kentish Plovers, three Terek Sandpipers, eight hyperactive Red-necked Phalaropes, 46 Slender-billed Gulls, two Caspian Terns, 20 White-winged Terns and two Whiskered Terns.

Day 13: Beautiful undulating uplands covered with crops and swathes of colourful wild flowers and interspersed with river flood-plains were the focus of our attention. Here we located three Eurasian Spoonbills, a Booted Eagle, five Montagu's Harriers, six stately Great Bustards, eight White-winged Terns, four Tawny Pipits, a singing Marsh Warbler, a Lesser Grey Shrike and 115 Rose-coloured Starlings. We ended the day on the shores of Lake Van, trying to escape the attentions of millions of tiny flies and watching two Red-crested Pochards, 20 Black-winged Stilts, six Slender-billed Gulls, a Gull-billed Tern and two Caspian Terns.

Day 14: Our final destination, Van, where we would spend the last night of the tour, lay to the south, but we began by heading north-east to a stunning mountain locality close to the border with Iran. We saw 30 Rose-coloured Starlings on the way and a Blue Rock-thrush, four White-winged Snowfinches and five much appreciated Grey-necked Buntings on the mountain slopes. A short raptor watch produced a Short-toed Snake-eagle and a Golden Eagle, after which we headed to a wonderful flat, wet, high plain semi-circled by rocky hills. In addition to our last picnic lunch, we enjoyed views of an amazingly close adult Steppe Eagle, six White-winged Terns, two Bimaculated Larks, a Tawny Pipit, four pretty Citrine Wagtails, three Rufous-tailed Rock-thrushes, an Eastern Rock Nuthatch, nine White-winged Snowfinches, a Common Rosefinch, three Mongolian Finches and two Crimson-winged Finches. During the drive to Van, three Gull-billed Terns were spotted and we were informed that we had travelled over 3100 kilometres in the coach in fourteen days.

Day 15: It felt strange, starting the day leisurely and not carrying a 'scope and tripod. All good things must come to an end, however, and so it was that we took our last ride in the coach to Van airport, said our farewells to our tourist guide and driver and caught the internal flight to Istanbul, where we parted company with Soner Bekir. We were due to have a long wait for our international return flight to London Heathrow and individuals chose to spend the time in different ways: four remained at the airport; four went by taxi to the ferry terminal at the Bosphorus and saw 55 Yelkouan

Shearwaters; and Soner had arranged that the remaining four would be met by his birding associate, Kerem, and taken by car as far as Cerkezoy, a round trip which produced three Imperial Eagles, six Pallid Swifts and 30 Spanish Sparrows.

Further species seen or heard (with, respectively, in brackets, the number of days recorded and the maximum daily total) were Black-necked Grebe (1, 13), Squacco Heron (5, 10), Black-crowned Night-heron (9, 50), White Stork (12, 100), Greater Flamingo (5, 200), Ruddy Shelduck (5, 200), Garganey (5, 20), Long-legged Buzzard (11, 9), Eurasian Hobby (5, 2), Common Quail (2, 5), Pied Avocet (1, 4), Eurasian Thick-knee (3, 3), Spur-winged Lapwing (5, 25), Wood Sandpiper (1, 2), Armenian Gull (5, 2000), Yellow-legged Gull (8, 50), Lesser Black-backed Gull *fuscus* (3, 2), Little Gull (1, 2), Little Tern (5, 25), Black Tern (4, 10), European Turtle-dove (7, 12), Laughing Dove (11, 6), Barn Owl (2, 1), Little Owl (10, 28), Alpine Swift (7, 200), European Bee-eater (10, 25), European Roller (8, 20), Eurasian Hoopoe (10, 10), Syrian Woodpecker (7, 4), Greater Short-toed Lark (6, 100), Calandra Lark (8, 150), Horned Lark (4, 20), Woodlark (4, 2), Crested Lark (11, 400), Eurasian Crag Martin (5, 20), Red-rumped Swallow (8, 12), Water Pipit (1, 1), Yellow (Black-headed) Wagtail (8, 20), White-spectacled Bulbul (7, 10), Common Nightingale (4, 1), Rufous-tailed Scrub-robin (8, 9), Black Redstart (3, 10), Isabelline Wheatear (8, 17), Black-eared Wheatear (9, 10), Common Stonechat *maura* (1, 1), Ring Ouzel (2, 3), Graceful Prinia (5, 20), Eastern Olivaceous Warbler (10, 6), Bearded Tit (1, 17), Western Rock Nuthatch (5, 6), Woodchat Shrike (5, 5), Red-backed Shrike (4, 20), Red-billed Chough (3, 60), Hooded Crow (15, 40), Tree Sparrow (3, 10), Rock Petronia (6, 10), Twite (1, 1), Black-headed Bunting (14, 20) and Corn Bunting (8, 40). We also recorded Great Crested Grebe, Little Grebe, Great Cormorant, European Shag, Grey Heron, Little Egret, Greylag Goose, Common Shelduck, Mallard, Gadwall, Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveler, Eurasian Teal, Common Pochard, Tufted Duck, Common Buzzard, Eurasian Marsh-harrier, Peregrine, Common Kestrel, Common Moorhen, Eurasian Coot, Eurasian Oystercatcher, Northern Lapwing, Common Ringed Plover, Little Ringed Plover, Grey Plover, Eurasian Curlew, Common Sandpiper, Common Greenshank, Green Sandpiper, Common Redshank, Sanderling, Red Knot, Little Stint, Ruff, Black-headed Gull, Mediterranean Gull, Sandwich Tern, Common Tern, Rock Dove, Common Wood Pigeon, Eurasian Collared-dove, Common Cuckoo, Common Swift, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Sky Lark, Barn Swallow, Sand Martin, House Martin, White Wagtail, Grey Wagtail, Eurasian Wren, Common Redstart, Northern Wheatear, Whinchat, Common Stonechat, Eurasian Blackbird, Mistle Thrush, Eurasian Reed-warbler, Sedge Warbler, Cetti's Warbler, Common Whitethroat, Lesser Whitethroat, Goldcrest, Spotted Flycatcher, European Pied Flycatcher, Long-tailed Tit, Coal Tit, Great Tit, European Blue Tit, Eurasian Jay, Eurasian Magpie, Common Raven, Rook, Western Jackdaw, Common Starling, House Sparrow, Chaffinch, Eurasian Linnet, European Goldfinch and European Greenfinch.

Turkey is a fascinating, historic, beautiful, varied and bird-rich country. The addition of a robust and far-reaching itinerary, excellent travel and accommodation arrangements, first-rate ground support and guidance throughout, warm (sometimes too warm!) weather and, above all, many high quality birds makes for a potentially very good tour. So it was in 2010, when we saw all of the realistic target species and saw and heard 242 species in all: a new Birdfinders record in Turkey.

The success of the tour was due in no small measure to the ability, professionalism, efforts and friendliness of our tour leader, tourist guide and driver; all three are fully deserving of our congratulations and gratitude. Thanks are also due to the group: David Brooks, Alan Gibson, Margaret Goddard, Keith Horne, Chris Hughes, Roger Kay, Monica Marks, Owen Marks, Lynsey McCann, Maurice McCann and Brian Smith. The various personalities combined well: they were amiable, enthusiastic, hard-working in the field and communicative, and quickly became an efficient bird-finding group.

Birdfinders will be repeating this exciting tour in 2011.

Peter Lansdown