

Turkey & Georgia

9-23 May 2006

Knud A. Jønsson & Thomas Olsen

Itinerary:

May 9th: Arrived at Ankara Essenboga at 11.30 pm.

May 10th: Driving all night. Birding along the road during the day. Birding at Gelinkaya and Sivrikaya in the afternoon.

May 11th: Birding along the road en route to Hopa.

May 12th: Crossing into Georgia. Driving all day arriving in Kazbegi in the afternoon.

May 13th: Birding around Kazbegi.

May 14th: Driving to Tbilisi for a short visit before returning to the Turkish border. Driving some hundred kilometres in Turkey towards Ishak Pasa.

May 15th: Arriving at Ishak Pasa. Birding around Ishak Pasa.

May 16th: Birding around Ishak Pasa

May 17th: Birding around Ishak Pasa and Serpmetas in the morning. Birding Lake Van in the afternoon.

May 18th: Driving along the Syrian border looking for Red-wattled Plover. Arriving in Birecik in the afternoon.

May 19th: Birding around Birecik.

May 20th: Birding Durnalik and Isikli.

May 21st: Birding Around Demircili and Imamli and Göksü Delta. Arriving in the evening at Demirkacik.

May 22nd: Birding Demirkacik and Sultan Marshes.

May 23rd: Departing from Ankara Essenboga at 3.30 pm.

Georgia

From May 9th till May 23rd Thomas Olsen and Knud Jønsson undertook the classic bird watching trip to Central and Eastern Turkey. This bird-watching trip has been covered in detail by several other people (e.g. Malling Olsen 2005, Ortvad *et al.* 2004). To a large extent we followed the guidelines by Ortvad *et al.* (2004) and Malling Olsen (2005) and had few problems finding the target species in Turkey. The reason for writing this report is not so much for Turkish birds. However, no other trip report gives information on combining a trip to Turkey with a side trip to Georgia. No doubt Georgia has a lot to offer birders. Known sites hold very good birds and there are a lot of unknown places to explore in this beautiful country. Nevertheless, we decided to do

Georgia the quick and dirty way with the sole aim of finding the three Western Palearctic Caucasus endemics **Caucasian Snowcock**, **Güldenstarts Redstart** and **Great Rosefinch**.

We were able to find little information on the internet but quickly realized that one very reliable spot for all three species seems to be the mountains surrounding the small village of Kazbegi which sits right in the north of the country close to the Russian border in the middle of the Caucasus Mountains.

It was not possible to find a rental car company in Turkey that would allow us to drive one of their cars in Georgia. Therefore, we thought the easiest option was to park our Turkish rental car at the border (there is a small guarded parking lot for which we paid a rather minor fee) cross the border by foot and then once in Georgia find our way to Kazbegi. Due to the time consumption of local transport we took contact to a Georgian based birding company Caucasus birding <http://www.birding-georgia.com> through which we had two options 1) Rent a car with a driver which costs 150 Euro/day, 2) rent a car with a real birding guide (it was unknown whether that included a driver as well) for the price of 450 Euro a day! In the end we found the cheapest option most appealing and decided to book three days, one day to bring us to Kazbegi, one day birding around Kazbegi and one day going back. We did make sure that we could extend the stay with an extra day in case we would dip out.

We decided to do Georgia at the beginning of our trip. We had heard that all three birds feed high up close to the snow line. As the snow melts the birds simply retreat to the highest parts of the mountains, which means more work for the birders.

On the 12th of May in the morning we arrived at the Black Sea Coast border just east of Hopa, parked the car and crossed the border to be on the Georgian side at 9 am as agreed with Caucasus Birding. By now you do not need visa for Georgia so with a valid passport we had no problems at all crossing the border and leisurely walked into Georgia 15 minutes early. We thought.....keep in mind that Georgia works +1hour compared to Turkey.

Our driver Vato Asatashvili was a brilliant 23 year old Georgian who had studied 5 years in Austria and now did his PhD on modern history in Tbilisi. He spoke great English and it was really a bonus to have the Soviet Union history refreshed spiced with little anecdotes and stories from his own family life during the Soviet times. He also knew the hidden road side places to have lunch and snacks at and also import, though at times slightly nerve-wrecking, he drove fast and did the 570 km in about 8 hours (it probably would have taken us more like 10-11 hours). The roads (or at least the main road) were quite good (better than the Turkish) at least up to the ski resort

about 30 km south of Kazbegi. Vato told us that the president is an eager skier and therefore makes sure that access to the ski resort is easy. The rest he doesn't give a s... about! We reached Kazbegi in the late afternoon just in time to have a chat with Nik Borrow of Birdquest about the current situation. He was there with a group of elderly people but they had managed to get decent views of the Rosefinches. The redstarts and the Snowcocks had proven rather easy. But two things he said are of great importance to secure the birds. "You need scopes and you need to get all the way up to the snow line". He also said that there was no particular spot to find the birds.

We decided to start the search on the nearest mountain slopes just east of the village. There is a small pine tree forest (the only forest around) east of the village. We paid to be taken beyond the forest in a 4WD vehicle and were dropped just at the foot of the slopes at the time of the first day light. From here we started the hike up and immediately heard the first Snowcocks. It is really steep and pretty hard work to get up. We took two hours to reach the snowline (or at least where there are only small patches of grass in the snow which seems to be the favoured spot by the Rosefinches. We made many smaller stops as we ascended and searched the slopes for the Snowcocks. One was seen very well while displaying and later on two were seen flying down the mountain. The village of Kazbegi we were told is situated at 1700 m.a.s. Most of the literature states that the Redstarts and the Rosefinches are found at about 3000 metres. Although we are not entirely sure we think we reached something around 2800 m.a.s. We saw the first Redstart a couple of hundred metres below that and although we never saw many we did observe some (both males and females flying around at the right altitude. At times the walking was difficult due to loose rocks and just before a particularly nasty part from where we had good views to the grass patches in the snow we set up the scopes and after a short while of searching we were able to ensure the last of our three target species. All in all we saw around 15-20 Great Rosefinches feeding in the grass and even in the snow. Goldenstarts Redstarts flew around in the same area and water pipits were everywhere common. We had coffee in the heights and enjoyed the amazing birds and the stunning views of Kazbegi and the Caucasus Mountains. Around midday bad weather came in. Happy about having seen the birds we started to descend. At 1 pm we were down again (the Snowcocks still displaying) and in the afternoon some heavy showers fell over Kazbegi. We wanted to bird around the valley in the afternoon as it looked rather promising but the local people in the guest house had prepared an early dinner with local specialities and plenty of grapa....three hours later we found ourselves only just able to find our beds.

Other nice birds around Kazbegi included: Caucasian Black Grouse which we for some reason did not find! Lammergeier, Griffon vulture, Rock Bunting, Grey Wagtail, Snowfinch, Shore Lark (*penicillata*) and Common Rosefinch. The valley in which Kazbegi is situated is no doubt a passage route for migrating birds. We saw Honey Buzzards going north and also had about 100 bee-eaters going north. Due to bad weather all birds kept returning and the whole scenario with the mountains the low hanging clouds and the exotic birds had an utterly supernatural feel to it.

It is worth noting that we had no problems finding our target birds within our one day in Kazbegi. However, bad weather is a factor that can cause trouble. As mentioned above the afternoon brought bad weather and heavy rain fell over Kazbegi and the surrounding mountains all night. Next morning all the upper slopes were snow-covered. Probably this causes the birds to come further down and it may even be easier to find them, although climbing the slopes will be harder. On the other hand, bad weather during the day could seriously delay you so we recommend to have the possibility of extending the trip.

If you are very limited on time it would actually be possible to do Georgia “very quick and very dirty”. You could take one day driving from the Turkish border to Kazbegi. Climb the slopes next morning to search for the birds. Come down again and return the same afternoon to the border. But that is really pushing it! We thought three days was very short! On the third day when driving back we stopped in various forest areas to search for Semi-collared Flycatcher but without luck. In those areas we heard Greenish Warblers everywhere and we also saw Caucasian Black Woodpecker. We noted that the “landing call” which is usually in two parts klee-eeh was only a single klee. We heard the call several times. Whether that is coincidence or a special characteristic for the Caucasian form is unknown to us but it would be interesting to hear the opinion from other birders going to Caucasus. We managed to spend a few hours cruising around Tbilisi which was definitely noteworthy.

Turkey

Returning to the border we found our car in perfect condition (even washed) and continued our Turkey trip. As mentioned before Ortqvad *et al.* 2004 and Malling Olsen (2005) as well as other trip reports cover this area very well so we only have few additional comments.

Mongolian Trumpeterfinch

May 17th 1 male + 1 female at Serpmetas

This notoriously difficult bird to find caused great difficulties for us as well. We arrived at Ishak Pasa at 1 pm on the 15th of May and spend the rest of the day searching around the upper car park (and all the way up to the massive) and around the upper café but all in vain. On the 16th we started at 5.30 and searched everywhere around Ishak Pasa (again giving special attention to the upper car park and the upper café) until sunset. Again without luck. Next day on the 17th we spend an hour at the upper car park having coffee and then decided to quit the search. In a rather disappointed mood we continued to the lava fields around Serpmetas, which is located 7 km west of Caldiran. Malling Olsen (2005) and his group were denied access to this area by the military the year before but we had no problems entering. This area is another spot where Mongolian Trumpeterfinch is regularly found and also a very good place for Crimson-winged Finch which we had not found at Ishak Pasa. We easily found several Crimson-winged Finches and then as we stopped the impossible thing happened. Two Mongolian Trumpeterfinches (male and female) came flying and landed in the side of the road 20 metres from our parked car. They fed in the very short grass at the side of the dirt road for about 5 minutes before they took off. The cheering would not end! A really good bird which we had given up on finally showed itself extremely well. Perfect!

Red-wattled Plover

May 18th 1 bird at small reservoir near Oyali.

The famous spot for Red-wattled Plover on the banks of river Tigris in the town of Cizre is a generally rather sensitive area sitting right on the border to Syria. Most birders have reported that birders with binoculars and telescopes are quickly thrown away by the military. When planning the trip we got the following report from Jens Søggaard Hansen who found it on MEBirdnet

For all going to Turkey to find Red-wattled Lapwing: again and again the trip-reports speak of the difficult situation at the famous spot at Cizre due to military and police. In spring 2005 we found the birds at two places far west of Cizre, where only shepherds might have disturbed us:

1. a small reservoir near OYALI at secondary road 47-07 (c 40 km west of Cizre, as the crow flies). We found there at least 4 Red-wattled Lapwings, May, 2nd, 2005, and were able to observe them over a long time feeding and flying around.
2. the reservoir west of IDIL at motorway 380 (c 30 km west of Cizre). There we found 1 bird, May, 2nd, 2005, and 2 birds, May 3rd, 2005.

Both places were good for other waders, waterbirds and songbirds, too.

Good birding

Jürgen Berg, Huusbarg 89, 22359 Hamburg, Germany

and an immediate reply followed:

Dear all,

If you look for the flood areas and small ponds on the road between Nusaybin and Cizre. You can easily find the red wattled lapwings there. You don't need to drive till Cizre. Just keep our eyes open after Nusaybin.

Süreyya İsfendiyaroglu

Doga Dernegi

As we came via Nusaybin expectations were high as we got on the road towards Cizre. We found very few flooded areas and only one pond which we checked carefully without success. We passed directly through Cizre and continued to the places recommended by the German birders. We started at locality one. The reservoir is about 500-700 metres from the road and we walked to the edge of the water to look for the Plover. After walking a little along the shore we heard a characteristic lapwing call and were overly happy to find one bird flying over and landing not far away from us. We watched it for about half an hour as it fed on the lake shore. As the other locality is a little off track we decided to skip it and commence the rather long drive to Birecik.

Striated Scops Owl

May 18th 1 male singing behind the Owl Café in Birecik

We arrived in the afternoon on May 18th. Having read Malling Olsen's (2005) very funny description of the seemingly standard scenario that takes place when birders come to the café, we leisurely walked into the owl café, ordered cokes and casually started looking through the trees expecting a huge crowd to gather around us quickly. At that time there was only a group of 10 elderly men at a table drinking tea and chatting away. Quickly one of the men called us over and we expected that he would want money to show us the bird. However, he only pointed to a tree to indicate that this was where the owl would usually sit....but it did not. When after some time still nothing had happened we proceeded to stage two and asked the waiter for beikus (which they no doubt recognized as owl). But the waiter, an extremely nice guy simply shrugged his shoulders to indicate that he did not know. Alright, we thought as it got dark. We will hear it in the night. We ordered dinner and as soon as it got dark a common Scops Owl started calling from the park behind the café. As we were eating another guy from the café came over and he seemed to know his stuff.

At least he knew all the names of the birds. He pointed out Long-eared Owl chicks that were sitting in the café ground and showed us the dead tree right next to the fountain where the Striated Scops Owl supposedly has its nest. And then all of a sudden he says: “listen Striated Scops Owl!” we raced out of our chairs but could only hear a Common Scops Owl. He kept claiming it was a Striated Scops Owl but for sure it was a Common Scops Owl. We kept asking him if he was sure and in the end he got a little bit annoyed with our suspicion. Nevertheless, we still did not have it on our list and he was definitely wrong about the Scops Owl. We searched the park behind the café and heard at least 3 Common Scops Owls calling. And then all of a sudden we heard the very soft and faster call of the Striated Scops Owl. There is quite a bit of noise from cars and motorbikes racing in the streets so it was only possible to hear the Striated Scops Owl when standing within a distance of 25-50 metres of it. We saw it fly several times and sometimes “lost” it as it flew from one tree to another. Once we got accustomed to the voice we realised that the guy from the café really did not know what he was talking about. The voice of Striated Scops Owl is markedly different from Common Scops Owl and easily drowns in the noise of Turkish “night life”. We heard it between 9-10 pm but a Swedish group of birders heard it a couple of hours before.

Next day in the afternoon we returned to the café to get daylight views of the bird but even when offering money nobody was able to find the bird for us.

Radde’s Accentor & Caspian Snowcock

The classic place for these birds is Demircazik. Two places are generally mentioned and we were quite uncertain of where to start the search. We only had one day left of the trip and thus only one day to secure the birds on our list. In the end we thought the southern site (part two in Gosney (1992)) sounded most appealing. Unfortunately, the map in the Gosney guidebook is not to scale and what we expected to be a couple of hours walking turned out to be a very strenuous hike. We arrived in the evening of the 21st of May and easily found our way to the first nomad camp. Gosney (1992) suggests to park here but as the road seemed fine we continued for another kilometre or so. From here we started the hike. After having walked for more than half an hour on a perfect dirt road we decided to dump the packs and return to the car and drive as far as the road would allow us. At the same time darkness was falling upon us. We got back to the car, drove up to the dumped packs and happily continued only to find out that the end of the perfect dirt road came after the next curve. A bit frustrated we continued over a rough part only to get bogged..! Now the situation had gone from pretty ok to miserable. With a bogged car and 10 km from the nearest tractor to pull us out we

started fearing a major dip-out on two very good birds. We made a plan B and decided that we would continue anyway next morning and then go for help in the afternoon. Before doing so we gave the car a last try and by digging and lifting and cursing for about half an hour we miraculously got the car out of the hole/ditch. Exhausted but very happy with ourselves we decided to pitch the tent immediately and have some whisky. While enjoying our J & B under the most fantastic clear sky with an endless number of stars and the moon rising we had the pleasure of hearing displaying Nightjar and Scops Owl. Next morning we continued up to the end of the valley through the forest and started the climb up the scree slope. Passed the steep cliff and continued up the steep path (all according to Gosney (1992)). We managed to get what we think was halfway up the steep path and then realized that it would take us most of the day to get to the second nomad camp. Most of the area was covered in snow and it seemed to us impossible to get up on the plateau. Gosney (1992) has only visited this place in August and perhaps at that time of the year the snow is gone. In any case it is a long and demanding hike to get up there. We had breakfast and coffee while enjoying two beautiful Wallcreepers and we also heard many Caspian Snowcocks and even saw one. But Radde's Accentor was absent! Coming back down to the car by 1 pm we needed to move quickly to try the northern part of Demirkazik for Radde's Accentor.

The dwarf vegetation around the top of the Demirkazik Gorge is a place where many people have found the Accentor. We drove the car on a small dirt track that leads up to the right behind the Mountain centre. It continues up to the right of the shallow valley mentioned by Gosney (1992). We probably gained a couple of hundred height metres by doing so. When the road got bad we simply parked the car and walked across the rather soft rolling hills (maybe they only seemed soft because we just came from a very steep climb in the other place). This saw us standing at the top of the Demirkazik Gorge after an easy walk about one and a half hour later. And an hour later we enjoyed great views of one Radde's Accentor.

Other noteworthy sightings

May 10th Driving in the north eastern part between Sivas and Erzincan we counted **>500 Lesser Grey Shrikes**. They were sitting everywhere on the electric wires along the road . When we stopped they were sitting on small posts and branches out in the fields as well. An exact count probably could have boosted the number markedly.

May 17th At Van Marshes at Gosney site 2 we had **1 Greater Sand Plover** feeding together with 4 Curlew Sandpipers. This site as mentioned by Ortvad *et al.* (2004) and Malling Olsen (2005) is a great locality that holds good birds like **Paddyfield Warbler**, **Citrine Wagtail** and **Lesser Kestrel**.

References:

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