

## Iran. Part Two, Birding the North.

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Green valleys, snow-capped mountains, and lush forests, part two of my trip kicked off in the Alamut Valley, an exquisite location full of birds, Golden Eagles, Red-fronted Serins and Green Warblers amongst them. Next, after a trek to the 3200 m Salambar Pass, two Radde's Accentors seen en route, my trip continued with visits to Anzari Lagoon, a vast wetland crawling with herons and terns, and to the quaint village of Masuleh. And then it was off to the mighty Mount Damavand, its snowy peak a fitting finale to an amazing trip, its many birds including Grey-necked Buntings, Crimson-winged Finch and Persian Wheatears.

26 August. The Alamut Valley.

Iran, Part Two. The image of Iran, endless deserts, a baking sun, dusty plains stretching to distant horizons, yet now leaving the giddy temperatures and humidity of the south, I was entering an Iran quite the contrast - a land of lush green valleys, deciduous forests and Alpine peaks, snow-capped and dramatic. And with the change in scenery, a total transformation in the birdlife, the species now a mix of Caucasian specialities and birds associated more typically with lowland Middle Europe.

Having taken an overnight bus from Esfahan to Qazvin, my journeys in this region began with a dawn ride into the scenic Alamut Valley, a landscape of undulating meadows, cherry orchards and traditional hamlets, famous for its legendary Castles of the Assassins and cut and dissected by canyons, backed by the mighty peaks of the Alborz Mountains to the north. On route up, the road often hair pins and steep, European Rollers jostled for position with European Bee-eaters, Chukar Partridge scattered as we passed and the first Northern Wheatears of the day flitted up. Destination on this day was the small village of Gazor Khan, nestled in cherry groves and dwarfed by Alamut Castle, the ruins high on a crag towering above the village. Stayed here in the quaint Hotel Koosaran, effectively just a rooftop room in a family house overlooking the village square.

Now a pleasant 25 C, time to explore. Beneath the cliffs of Alamut Castle, following a stream out of the village, almost immediately there were birds to watch - Eastern Rock Nuthatches on the village's edge, Grey Wagtails and a Dipper on the stream, a flock of Rock Sparrows on scree slopes. Just north, abutting the stream, a small popular woodland proved most productive - alongside wandering Great Tits and perched Spotted Flycatchers, the morning sunshine was bringing sparkle to a number of right little gems, most prominent Green Warblers, a good eight or so working the foliage. Also Common Rosefinches and, in the sky above, my first Golden Eagle of the trip, an immature soaring against the high peaks, flocks of Chough around, Common Ravens in pursuit.

Contemplated a hike to higher grounds, but as the midday sun climbed and laziness kicked in, a quiet amble through the cherry groves and gorges south of Gazor Khan suddenly seemed an attractive option. Dozens of Crag Martins in the gorge, my first Western Rock Nuthatches of the trip, loads of lizards, all followed suit. As for Alpine birds however, an almost total blank - I was at about 2000 metres, clearly higher altitudes would be needed.

A short break in my penthouse suite, the tatty rooftop offering a panorama over the village square and mountain tops beyond. Then it was to higher lands I ventured, taking the small steep road out of the village and directly up. Walked a kilometre or so, seeing Linnets and a small flock of Twite en route, then some kindly folk passed in a car, stopping and taking me to the village of Khoshkal, altitude 2500 metres. And on the slopes here, across boulders, meadow and scree, way up above Alamut and Gazor Khan, were the birds I sought - by no means abundant, an hour or two of scrambling about, slowly the birds revealed themselves. Persian Wheatears, then Northern and Black-eared Wheatears, then a scruffy Finch's Wheatear, a good collection in all. Chukars launched off the steep slopes, a Tawny Pipit too, then a couple of buntings gave me a good run-around ...had expected Grey-necked Bunting up at these altitudes, but when I finally found them on the deck, there was no doubt, Oortolan Buntings they were! Began to descend, a rather faster activity than the slog up, almost running at stages. In cover on the sides of a deep valley, quite a lot of activity, Chiffchaffs flitting, Common Rosefinches diving into the depths, a Hume's Lesser Whitethroat making an appearance. Somewhere, a Green

Woodpecker yodelled, overhead a brief bevy of raptors to distract - a Common Buzzard, a Hobby circling for quite some time, then one after the other, just a few minutes apart, two Levant Sparrowhawks, both cruising rapidly down the valley, Bee-eaters scattering, Red-fronted Serins rising and vanishing over the brow. All too quickly, I was almost back at Gazor Khan, one slightly tricky slope (in reality a crumbling cliff) testing my nerves and head for heights, little pebbles tracing the route I would tumble if my footholds gave way.

It was now evening, onto my rooftop I settled. Common Ravens tumbled over, a pair of Golden Eagle drifted in skies turning a delicate shade, an Alpine Swift appeared amongst a flock of its more common brethren. The evening's highlight, however, was just three metres distant, a most energetic Syrian Woodpecker pounding out figs on a branch hanging over my rooftop.

Day over. Time to recuperate from the night before's bus journey, a few hours to prepare the legs for the assault that would surely follow the next day, the plan being to cross the high Alborz on foot.

27 August. Alborz Trek - Salambar Pass.

If it didn't kill me, it would be one of the highlights of my trip to Iran, so went the rationale. Inspired by tales of mystical hikes by Freya Stark in the 1930s, my goal was to hike from the Alamut Valley over the Alborz Mountains, via the 3200 metre Salambar Pass, and thereafter down to the Caspian Sea. Two or three days I reasoned, camping en route, hitching a lift when I got to the roads on the other side.

As with the Alamut Valley, I had no information whatsoever regarding the birdlife and precious little more on the actual route - Lonely Planet dedicates a page to the hike, describing flower-filled valleys, waterfalls and a land 'geographically compelling, scenically stunning and culturally fascinating'. I was hooked, the little details such as no road, the potential danger of being washed over a waterfall 'to certain doom' and the many hours I would have to walk hopefully being compensated by encounters with Radde's Accentor at least.

So it was, at dawn I left the village of Gazor Khan, an Eagle Owl calling on the crags beneath Alamut Castle, a Red-breasted Flycatcher in the cherry orchards and both European Bee-eaters and European Roller active lower in the valley. Seven kilometres down from the village, at the small road that runs up the Alamut Valley, I hitched a lift to Garmarud, about 15 km to the east and the starting point of the trek. Red-backed Shrike and Syrian Woodpecker both in the valley. High cliffs soared above, Garmarud very much the head of the gorge that would mark the beginning of my day's walk. Common Ravens overhead, one Golden Eagle too, Eastern Rock Nuthatches roadside, bunches of House Sparrows in

Garmarud.

The sun was already hot, along the twisting track I began to walk - on this day, I would follow a gravel road that snaked its way up the mountain. How far this track went I was not sure, it being pushed further every year, the days of mule trains and lonely hikes soon to be a thing of the past. Sooner than I had anticipated, as I was to later find out. Black Redstart on the rocks, one Green Warbler in trees aside the stream, more Eastern Rock Nuthatches.

Concerted effort needed, so I was finding out, this was one steep, hot hike! 'Whose stupid idea was it to climb this mountain?' I pondered. I had anticipated a climb of some six hours on this first day, hoping to reach high altitude grasslands at Pichebon. I am not a fast hiker, worse still I frequently stop to look around, I soon realised six hours was a fanciful hope, this was going to be much more!!! However, any qualms I may have been harbouring soon evaporated - quite unexpected, up the bumpy track came two 4WDs, both crammed to the brim, a party of Iranian tourists!

A fantastic bunch of guys, a group of friends from Qazvin out for the weekend. Shifting luggage and squeezing one of them into an impossibly small place in the back, I was installed in pride of place, the front seat in the lead car. Hot sweaty slog now replaced by a comfy lift, I was impressed. And what nice folk they were, eagerly welcoming me in, happy to have another member in their group, almost immediately inviting me to spend the whole weekend with them, a tour right down to the Caspian Sea on offer. Had I not been travelling in some of the most beautiful landscapes in Iran and knowing there were many birds just waiting to be found, I would have accepted their offer, a fun trip I am sure it would have been. Instead, I explained my interest and requested a lift as far as the road went. It was then that it dawned upon me ...they were going to the Caspian - the road had been pushed right up and over the pass, a track now linked the two sides of the mountain chain! Indeed, that was the case. The long and the short of it, I cheated - rather than hiking up, I opted for a lift all the way to Pichebon. And the cushy life didn't end there - arriving at Pichebon, both cars pulled over alongside a stream. 'Breakfast', they declared, 'you join us'. So, where I had been expecting hard graft all morning, here I was, sitting on soft grass, a spread of melon, grapes, chocolate and other goodies before me. Cheers guys, truly appreciated.

With more offers to join them, or come and stay in Qazvin at a later date, eventually our farewells were said, their cars resumed the climb towards Salambar Pass, I was now on my own. On my own in habitat that looked just amazing, time for the birding to commence!

A small grassy plateau with a stream running through it, Pichebon was quite alive with birds - the grassland and the rocky slopes adjacent, both harbouring species new for the trip. Wheatear bonanza on the grass - totals of at least five Isabelline Wheatears, 40 Northern Wheatears, ten Black-eared Wheatears, six Finsch's Wheatears and, on the rocks, three Persian Wheatears, a mighty fine haul. Also Water Pipits and Yellow Wagtails, a few Chough and one Rock Thrush, not to forget a bunch of Rock Sparrows and a Black Redstart. One Hobby overhead, one Red Fox trotting across the meadow.

Peaks towered above me, little patches of snow lingered across the valley, I resumed my hike. Up and ever upwards! One more hour, perhaps another. Salambar Pass and its historic caravanserai directly ahead, my altitude was 3200 metres, the temperature sat at a comfortable 20 C, but the weather was now a tale of two halves - sun and blue skies from whence I

had come, a swirl of cloud and mist hugging the precipitous lip of the pass, the cooler damper airs welcoming the traveller to the hinterland of the Caspian, warning of a climate less certain, perhaps threatened a nasty shock. A rest at the caravanserai, the views quite stunning, both to the north and south, then a wander up to a rocky knoll beyond. Hoped this would harbour a Radde's Accentor, or Alpine Accentor at least. As licks of fog threatened to engulf my path, two Golden Eagles drifted through the ghostly murk, most atmospheric. On slopes lower down, a flock of perhaps 150 Chough danced, touching down for mere moments, before all rising again to fill the air, ciao-ciao echoing from the valley. Very few species on the knoll, one small flock of Linnets and, rather more impressive, one very big flock of Shore Larks, a minimum of 280 feeding in the lea of a brow, quietly rooting along between stunted growths and exposed pebbles.

I crossed the pass onto the Caspian side of the mountains - an immediate transformation! Suddenly I was in the middle of fog, it was decidedly cool and all too gloomy! Jeepers! More vegetation too, a small patch of herb and scrub just below the pass seeming to be full of birds - one flitting Chiffchaff, a family of Rock Thrushes, several Red-fronted Serins and two small birds that promptly dived into the depths of the herb fields. Hmm, they looked interested, thought I squatting on a rock to await their reappearance. Not long to wait, out one hopped, a corking little Radde's Accentor, sporting Whinchat-eyestripes and a warm buffy unders. My first Radde's Accentor in near two decades! Along he hopped, all too quick to flit back into cover if I shifted my position, then out he would come again. A few distant photographs, the gloom of fog not aiding the attempts too much, then suddenly across the track he flew, the second bird right behind him. Down the slope they both went, destination more scrub a hundred metres below. I had no desire to clamber down, the thought of coming back up again a good enough deterrence!

Rather chilly and now early afternoon, the thought of camping at this altitude no longer appealed quite so much, especially as the clouds seemed perfectly capable of producing rain, something I was certainly not equipped for! Downward, as the fog lifted for a while, I could see the new track that snaked down the valley, an torturous route of hairpins and rock cuttings, the road doubling back on itself time after time. I opted for a more direct route, a simple run straight down the steep slope through shrubs and over the occasional boulder. Surprised a Golden Eagle on one rock, surprised myself by nearly stepping on a small snake, flushed an unexpected Green Sandpiper. Birds however on this side seemed few and far between, an occasional Red-fronted Serin here and there and that was about it. At 4.30, the weather took an ominous turn, a heavy wet cloud cloaking the entire mountainside, visibility dropping to a mere few metres at times and not leaving me with any strong desire to camp anymore. Through the afternoon, an occasional vehicle had trundled down the track, one every half hour or so, I thought it prudent to return to the road and seek a lift.

A pick-up stopped, I jumped in the back, off we went. Colder and colder it got, damper and damper it became, heavy rain really looked on the cards. I decided to stay aboard for as far as he was going. Rather a nervy journey in places, thick fog and what I presumed to be sheer drops on occasion, down the mountain we crawled. At the village of Yuj, deciduous forest began to appear, the valley sides well-wooded. Two Dippers on the stream, a few birds along the roadside - Chaffinches, Coal Tit, Great Tit and Eurasian Nuthatch, could equally have been in my back garden!

As we descended, slowly the mountains fell away, the land now opening out, patches of farmland appearing and thereafter the beginning of a town, we had clearly reached the coast of the Caspian Sea. After rather many kilometres through nondescript suburban sprawl, the car stopped, smiling guys suggested this was as far as they were going. I jumped out and they turned off into streets going somewhere. Hmm, I had absolutely no idea where I was, not even knowing which city I was in! There was perhaps 20 minutes of daylight left, I had no clue as to where a hotel might be and the sky still looked an evil colour - this was not a very good situation, I decided.

Fortunately, I had been dropped beside a rather busy east-west road, so presuming it had to be the main coastal road, I stuck out my thumb and hoped for the best. Iran being Iran, all too soon a truck stopped. In I jumped, blurting out something about the town of Rasht, hoping it was indeed the way he was going. About 40 km along the road, now totally dark and me not entirely sure where this driver was going, I spotted a roadside hotel, better stay here I thought. Said goodbye to my friendly truck driver and hoped the hotel had a room. It did, but the hotel owner had other ideas for me. After showing me a room which I thought was pretty deluxe in itself, he then proceeded to slash the price saying I was a welcome guest in Iran. All was agreed, I paid and was about to head for the room. Suddenly his face lit up - 'please, you

stay in our villa, same price for you'. Far too much luxury for me, several rooms over two floors, cable T.V. and a balcony with views to the Caspian. I thanked this nice gent for his kindness, hung up my tea shirt and was quite ready to sleep. Outside, the rain started ...and boy did it rain, absolutely torrential, I was sure happy to not be in my tent!

28 August. Bandar-e-Anzali.

Dawn on the Caspian coast, the overnight thunderstorm over, a bright start to the day. Strolled out onto my balcony, discovered it overlooked a scrubby overgrown garden, the actual Caspian Sea off to the right. I noticed a few birds flitting about, so dragged out a chair and sat a while ...so followed the easiest and most laid-back birding of my entire trip to Iran, the bushes and shrubs proving most productive. No shortage of Common Whitethroats and Chiffchaffs, small flocks moving through. But in amongst them, surprise after surprise - first a couple of Common Nightingales hopping under the bushes, then a big chunky Sylvia lurking low, out it popped, one Barred Warbler, another following a little later. Then a Red-backed Shrike on a bramble, then a small sandy Sylvia on the deck, a female Menetries's Warbler. To my right, a Great Cormorant flying over the sea, to my left a Common Cuckoo over bushland. With the addition of a Willow Warbler, I had now seen six new birds for the trip and I hadn't even left the balcony! And then it was seven, the Red-backed Shrike suddenly lurching across the garden and chasing a second bird, both ending up in the same bush - immature Red-backed Shrike on the top, immature Masked Shrike tucked in at the base, very nice indeed!

Said farewell to my luxury pad, flagged down a passing savari. In an hour or so I was in Rasht, in another half hour in Bandar-e-Anzali, my destination. A rather sprawling city along the Caspian shore, Bandar-e-Anzali boasts the sea to its one side, the huge Anzali lagoon to its other. It was to this lagoon that I had come - stretching some 20 km east to west and fringed by vast reedbeds, it's a positive oasis to freshwater birds, Whiskered Terns and Night Herons immediately apparent, flying over channels through the city. There was however a snag - bar renting a boat, it seemed nigh on impossible to access the open lake, paths and tracks either not reaching the lake or coming to an abrupt halt at a wall of reeds, three metres high! Numerous attempts to reach the lake, all to no avail - egrets and herons flying above the reeds mere tempters of what lay beyond. Rather frustrated, I left the city westward and took a small road to the left about 5 km out (at Kalivar). Following a track behind some sewage works, finally I glimpsed a few pools, a cloud of Little Egrets rising as I approached. Not the lagoon per se, but rather excavated pools, perhaps part of the sewage farm, they were good nonetheless - Squacco Herons on every bank, Purple Herons in the shallows, two Purple Gallinules plodding across emergent vegetation. Also Marsh Harriers above the reeds, Whiskered Terns hawking, Common Kingfishers in the channels and a number of waders, including Wood Sandpipers and Little Stints. Beyond this small opening however, I found no further access, the reeds an impenetrable barrier. Eventually, I gave up and walked to the Caspian Sea, some 3 km to my north, Short-toed Larks, Hobbies and European Rollers en route, Little Gulls on arrival.

Jeepers alive, snakes on the beach! In and out of the surf, just along from where I sat, two orange-bellied individuals slithering up and down, hunting in the sea, basking in the sun. In the sea, must be sea snakes! Hmm, I thought, but shouldn't they be confined to tropical waters? I also recalled that many sea snakes are highly venomous, frequently deadly. Thus, whatever they were, it was with some respect that I sneaked in to grab a few photographs, the bigger of the two rewarding my efforts by emerging from the sea with a fish in its mouth! Around paddlers and swimmers, guys and girls, enjoyed the sea. Should I warn of snakes in their midst? I did not.

Only later did I find out their identity - Dice Snakes, totally harmless relatives of the Grass Snake. Iran does however have several species of sea snake, all on the coasts of the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman - it is recommended not to play too closely with these, death a possible consequence with some of them. Snake excitement aside, a steady stream of birds also - Black Terns common, a couple of Sandwich Terns, both Armenian and Caspian Gulls and, in a long straddling line, a single flock of 180 Glossy Ibis, passing west to east about 50 metres out.

Back to town I wandered, photographed a close quarters Night Heron in the fish dock, took a wander through the bustling fruit and veg market, attempted to again passage to the lagoon, no joy. Evening on the town bridge, numerous Night

Hérons back and fro, two Ring-necked Parakeets, three Gull-billed Terns. So ended another day, back to hotel.

29 August. Bandar-e-Anzali & Masuleh.

Bandar-e-Anzali, day two. Attempted to again find a good vantage point to view the lagoon. Walked back towards the naval facilities east of the centre, then cut inland, taking a quiet track along a reeded channel. Night Herons all over the place, literally hundreds of them, a feast for the eyes indeed. Laughing Doves here and there, a few Squacco Herons flying over, one male Little Bittern in reeds and several Common Kingfishers zooming along the channel. Inevitably, my track eventually reached a dead-end, a fly-over Pygmy Cormorant and a few European Reed Warblers the best of the birds at the point I had to turn back.

An old man sat on a bench, mending fishing nets, a few straddle ducks pattering around his feet. Waving me over, he seemed to understand what I wanted - with a few points and gestures with the arm, he sent me on my way, down an obscure path that forked off behind an old house. I wandered down, then it opened out into the ruins of another house. I was now in the midst of the reedbeds, an incongruous heap of soil towered ahead, about four metres high, perhaps offering a view over the reeds to the lagoon beyond. Nope, it was reedbeds as far as the eye could see, but what it did reveal was the path of a new road under construction, a short hop from where I was and leading right through the reedbeds.

Clearly destined to be a southern by-pass for Bandar-e-Anzali, this road finally gave me the birds I sought. I expected to be turned back at a guard post, bulldozers and excavators parked beyond, but with a cheery wave, I was allowed through. Most thankful I was, the next couple of kilometres were simply excellent - a family of Golden Jackals living under of the new bridges, a White-tailed Eagle on a wooded island, Purple Herons and Squaccos common, never-ending processions of Night Herons flying over. A shallow pool, open and fringed by mud, produced yet more - two Purple Gallinules, an assortment of waders including Terek Sandpiper, plus many dozen Whiskered Terns, a good few Black and White-winged Terns too. Some way along, where another bridge had yet to be completed, my journey was over. Night Herons continued to fly over, two Pygmy Cormorants too, plus my one and only Black-headed Gull of the trip. On route back, now becoming rather hot, still birds to enjoy - a Hoopoe, several Great Reed Warblers, one Cetti's Warbler venturing onto open bushes and, all in a single active flock, about 20 Penduline Tits.

Back in Bandar-e-Anzali, the trip back considerably faster thanks to a guy on a motorbike, I reckoned I had seen all that I was likely to see at his locality. A boat journey might well notch up a pelican or two, perhaps various grebes, but with the temperature rising to 37 C and the humidity quite high, I decided it was time to hit the relative cool of Masuleh and its forested hills, about 100 km inland.

Masuleh, a picture-postcard village, another of Iran's secret jewels. Perched one atop another, earthen-coloured houses climb a steep mountainside, the roof of each the front entranceway to the next. No cars here, a maze of narrow paths and steps zigzagging through the quaint village and its small bazaar. Popular with Iranian tourists, seeking respite from the heat of the lowlands, there's a wonderful buzz to the alleyways and teashops, the ever-friendly folk all too keen for you to be part of their celebrations and holiday. Ambled around the town, joined a couple for tea in their tent, watched as my binoculars caused much amusement amongst a party of students.

For the birder, Masuleh is just one of the many localities that offer easy access to the dense deciduous forests that hug the northern flanks of the Alborz foothills. Very much Palearctic in flavour, the bird selection is actually remarkably similar to the offerings in a standard European back garden, Blackbirds and Wrens, Chaffinches and Jays, Great Tits galore. There are however a couple of species that somewhat shatter the garden comparison! On this first afternoon, I found a track that ran parallel to the slope, passing through excellent forest and alive with birds all the way. All of the above birds quickly found, Blackcaps and Bullfinches too. A Green Woodpecker yaffled some way distant. A Red-breasted Flycatcher flicked out from cover and European Bee-eaters hawked overhead, these latter two maintaining a touch of the exotic (even though I have seen both on my land in far away Lithuania). Still, the afternoon was glorious, the setting most stunning and, ensuring I didn't get to nostalgic for European lands, a Green Warbler danced about in the canopy adjacent to my path.

In Masuleh, most atmospheric as the evening fell, soft lights across the village, the small mosque most charming. I rented a room in the village, nice views from the window.

30 August. Masuleh.

It's a little surreal to be in Iran looking for Robins and Blue Tits! That was however my day's plan, hiking back into the forests at dawn, following the same track as the afternoon before. Green Warblers quite common, at least 15 seen, also Red-breasted Flycatchers, a minimum of six. Great Spotted Woodpecker and Song Thrush new for the trip, also plenty of Coal Tits and a Eurasian Nuthatch. Three or four kilometres along however, something rather more dramatic - fresh scuff marks on the trail, this was sure not a garden gnome! Claw marks where the beastie had been rooting through the soil too - a Brown Bear had strolled this way during the night!

Green Woodpeckers, Spotted Flycatchers, Blackcaps, all pleasant fare. And of course, both my Robins and Blue Tits! A few hours along, scrambling down a slope better suited to a mountain goat, I decided to take a short cut down to the valley road far below. Grey Wagtails and Wrens along the stream, a flock of ten Common Ravens overhead. I walked back to Masuleh, a flock of Long-tailed Tits at the village to greet me.

Spent the mid-afternoon hours doing a 'raptor watch', which in reality meant basking in the sun on the terrace outside my room, the view a nice panorama over village and valley beyond. I had expected a little passage through the valley, perhaps kites and buzzards, maybe an eagle or two. The result however was not exactly stunning - three Common Buzzards!!!

For evening wanders, I took the steep road beyond Masuleh - scenic but not so productive birdwise. Green Warbler and Red-breasted Flycatcher about best, European Bee-eaters and a Red Fox also welcome. Retired for the day, wandering the back alleys of the village for a while.

31 August. Masuleh & Transit to the East.

With Pleske's Ground Jay and Iraqi Babbler revealing themselves far quicker than anticipated in the earlier parts of the trip, I had now come to the end of my planned itinerary.

'Hmm', pondered I over a couple of days, 'still many days left in Iran, what to do?'

As nice as Masuleh was, I really had no wish to spend too many days looking for birds easier seen from my kitchen window! So, reflecting on the punishing temperatures and humidity that had combined with all the desert and mountain

treks, it seemed that much of my trip to Iran had been a somewhat test of physical endurance ...so, continuing in similar vein, I decided to squeeze in one extra destination - the mighty Mount Damavand, at 5760 metres, the highest mountain in the Middle East, sure to end my trip on a high!

A final morning in the forests of Masuleh, Great Spotted Woodpeckers, Red-breasted Flycatchers and the Green Warblers amongst the goodies, and then it was time to depart, down the valley and to the city of Rasht. From there I took a bus. Only about 430 km east by road, but the congested coastal road, hugging the Caspian Sea all the way and meandering through various cities, hardly makes for speedy travel. Long hours passed, a couple of Black Kites the only compensation of note. I'd left Masuleh mid-morning, but only made it to Amol by nightfall, still 75 km short of Reynah, my starting point for the mountain. No hotel, so camped in a field by the road.

1 September. Mount Damavand.

Heavy dew on my tent, woke at Amol to the rumble of cars on the adjacent highway. Naught doing here, time to pack and head for Damavand.

My standard attire for the previous three weeks, indeed all I had with me, amounted to little more than slacks, tee-shirt and flip-flops, hardly appropriate for a mountain of such serious status. Hoping the ice-fields wouldn't be too treacherous and that the nights wouldn't be minus ten, my plan was to see how far I could ascent, even having delusions that I might reach the summit. That idea didn't last long! Reaching Reynah, with Damavand now apparent in all its glory, I was surprised by the extent of snow on its upper slopes - any climb would entail many hours traversing the frozen top and its ice. Readjustment of plan, hike on day one to Gusfand Sara, location of Base Camp, altitude 3020 metres.

Passing through the village of Reynah, engrossed by the views and birds such as Levant Sparrowhawk, Syrian Woodpecker and Eastern Rock Nuthatch, I made the foolish oversight of not asking the way to Base Camp. Oops, a mistake that was to turn my trek from a reasonably arduous five hours to a mammoth nine hours, albeit nine hours full of birds. From Reynah, I turned right (the correct way is left!) and then found a track that appeared to head straight for the summit. Perfect, thought I, admiring a flock of European Bee-eaters, photographing an Eastern Rock Nuthatch and admiring the first of many Red-fronted Serins. Seriously hard work, the trail zig-zagging ever up, the gradient steep and the temperature about 25 C. Many pauses for birds, flocks of Rock Sparrows, a Red-backed Shrike, a Great Grey Shrike, the first Rock Thrushes of the day. Up ahead, still far in the distance, the snow and ice beckoned. I already suspected however I had taken the wrong route - the climb to Damavand is popular with Iranians, I had even seen some in Reynah village, but the route I was taking was totally deserted, the only company some far-off goat herders. Not one for turning back, I dismissed my doubts, thinking to cut across the mountain at a higher altitude, the correct route had to lay to the south. Abundant birds, Persian Wheatears now appearing, small flocks of Shore Larks and quite a number of Rock Sparrows, plus yet more Red-fronted Serins and numerous Northern Wheatears.

Several hours into the climb, I reached the head of a valley, the slopes on all sides now steep scree, my path petering out at a summer camp for goat herders. Hmm, no way I was going to spend the rest of the day scrambling up (and more likely down) the scree, time to cut across the mountain. Had a brief pause at the herders' camp, altitude approximately 3500 metres, a small stone hut surrounded by a hundred goats, three surprised herders, a water tap (rather welcome) and an assortment of birds including Rock Thrush, Persian Wheatear and large numbers of Shore Lark. Overhead, a flock of about 30 Alpine Chough performed aerial acrobatics, on the stone hut three Rock Buntings. Then southward, following the slope, trying not to either ascent or descent. Goat paths and later a track aided my way, two Golden Eagles floated over, then a Long-legged Buzzard too. Pretty good birding most of the way, though somewhat patchy, occasional stretches almost devoid of birds, then a mini-bonanza as a whole heap of species occurred together. Chukar flushed off the slopes, Black-eared Wheatears joined the Persian Wheatears, a single Finsch's Wheatear also encountered, but the best spot was a small gully an hour or two along. As I paused for a rest, Red-fronted Serins busied themselves on seedheads, a Rock Thrush sat on a rock, but the two best birds were hopping along the ground between tussocks of vegetation - one Radde's Accentor and, unexpected at this altitude, a Wryneck!

Still eluding me, and very much targets of the day, were Grey-necked Buntings and Crimson-winged Finches, both supposedly common birds on Damavand. I continued my walk, a distant meadow, somewhat lower in altitude, appeared to hold a small camp, it could just be the base camp I supposed, so began in that direction. Two Tawny Pipits added to the day's tally, several Common Kestrels hovered nearby and then, two passerines rose from the slope and vanished



over the brow. Small chunky affairs, they deserved a better look - followed them down the hill and there they were, two Grey-necked Buntings. Excellent, another of the trip's target birds under the belt. By now, late in the afternoon, doubts were creeping in as to whether the meadow I was approaching was in fact base camp - it actually looked like another summer camp for herders. And indeed it was, but just short of it, I scanned the mountainside above and spotted the tents of Alpinists, now truly I was in the right area. At a very high altitude, they had to be at Barghah-e-Sevvom, better known as 'Camp 3', altitude 4230 metres and, more importantly directly above Base Camp. I climbed towards it and, as a ridge fell away, they lay base camp, an assemblage of two or three huts, a few mules and a small mosque built for the benefit of mountaineers. A half hour later, into the camp I arrived, abundant Ortolan Buntings feeding around the mules, a welcoming cup of tea in the hand of one of the guys laying inside a tent.

Nights are chilly at this altitude, so I was more than happy to accept the offer to sleep in the mosque, home for the next two nights, the company an assortment of most jovial mountaineers. Admiring the degree of equipment that the local climbers were lugging up the slopes, I was quite content to conclude that Base Camp was going to be my summit, the birding here quite ample to satisfy me for a couple of days.

2 September. Mount Damavand.

No chance of oversleeping with mountaineers in your midst - up an hour before dawn, stomping about in their boots, chattering about their climb ahead. I couldn't moan though - soon they were stoking up their little gas stoves, a nice hot mug of tea then handed to me, most luxurious, me still tucked up in my sleeping bag.

By the time I eventually emerged into the chilly outside, the first rays of the sun were just beginning to outline the snowy peak of Damavand. My climbers were long gone, now distant dots snaking up scree high above, their next stop, Camp 3, on a ridge still many hours ahead of them. Further up again, climbers from that camp were attempting the summit, picking their way across glaciers.

A beautiful morning, cloudless, windless, soft light. Already, flocks of Ortolan Buntings around mules waiting their loads, Northern Wheatears and Black Redstarts on rocks and Shore Larks feeding at the camp's edge. In contrast to the Alpinists, my goals for the day were far less lofty - my main desire to reach the small plateau I had mistaken for Base Camp the evening before, a little to the south and a few hundred metres lower in altitude. A hillside or three away, plenty of birds en route - several hundred Shore Larks, a number of Rock Thrushes, a Water Pipit and, in flocks of 20 and four respectively, both Chough and Alpine Chough.

Arrived on the plateau to find Isabelline Wheatears and Tawny Pipits running around on the grass, a high-altitude Hoopoe also probing the turf. After a few minutes showing the local shepherd folk my binoculars, they seeming most impressed, I settled down by one of the two pools excavated to water the livestock. The only water in the vicinity, it was abuzz with action - flocks of birds descending to drink. Linnets, Rock Sparrows, Ortolan Buntings, all in abundance. Also one Common Rosefinch drinking, several Crag Martins skimming the surface and, high above, a swirl of Alpine Swifts soaring out from the peak of Damavand, a solitary Common Swift with them.

A good hour by that pool, enjoying the warmth of the sun, the temperature now climbing towards its daytime high of 25 C. Still however I had not bumped into Crimson-winged Finch, always a nice bird to see, so from the plateau I hiked back to the slopes that I had crossed the day before. Birds much the same - plenty of Chukar, another Persian Wheatear, yet

more Shore Larks, but also no less than eight Rock Buntings and, all concentrated into a relatively small area, six Grey-necked Buntings. Memorable moment of the afternoon however, as I took a breather on a rocky ridge, was a 'conveyor belt' of raptors - each close of the tail of the one in front, and all barely 50 metres above me, over they cruised, the first almost making me duck! Long-legged Buzzard, two Golden Eagles, then another Long-legged Buzzard, what a spectacular chain. Had I been not watching the first bunch disappear over the next ridge along, it could have five in a row - an accipitor passing over moments later, probably a Levant's Sparrowhawk, but views were simply insufficient, me spotting it just in time to watch its bum scooter off!

Anyhow, no Crimson-winged Finch, so for the day's finale, I retired to Base Camp. Crouching down amongst the mules, watching the sun begin to set with one eye, the other admired the abundant Ortolans and occasional Black Redstart and Northern Wheatear, all posing nicely for photograph. So ended another day, back to the mosque for tea, writing of the notes and then to sleep.

3 September. Damavand & Polur.

Delaying the inevitable, Tehran was looming, thoughts of a congested city, an urban mass of chaotic traffic and supposed levels of pollution none too kind, I lingered in the pristine lands of Damavand longer than I really needed, enjoying the fine birding and spectacular landscapes.

So, for today, my task was relatively simple - from Base Camp, hike back down to the valley bottom, returning not to Reynah, but to Polur further to the south. At dawn, I said my final farewell to all in camp, and through the meadows and over rock ridges I went, not following the track, but a rather more direct route, albeit steep. Alpine Swifts much in evidence this morning, at least 55 circling over the peaks, plus plenty of Shore Larks and Ortolans as usual, but also a few added extras to bid me on my way - a pair of Western Rock Nuthatches and a Water Pipit for starters. As I clambered down, Tawny Pipits also on the slope, I flushed a few Chukar, bumped into three more Grey-necked Buntings, then finally ran into the bird that had been eluding me or several days, Crimson-winged Finch. Most anti-social, they immediately upped and flew off, last seen as tiny specks heading towards Mongolia! Down, down, down, slowly the bird mix began to change - greater numbers of Red-fronted Serins, lesser numbers of Shore Lark and Ortolan. New for the trip, six Skylarks marked the end of my cross-country trek, I had now reached the Reynah-Polur road, a quiet meandering road that still offered great potential for birding. A small gully nearby looked most tempting, I sat on the road bridge and scanned the shrubbery, one Plain Leaf Warbler, four Rock Buntings and a Common Rosefinch the results. However, more impressive were the numbers of butterflies - blues, greyling-types, a few Silver-washed Fritillaries and a couple of skippers, there just had to be new species for me! A most enjoyable hour so followed, trying to identify the little blighters, hoping to get some reasonable photographs. For some perverse reason, all the butterflies in that gully found great pleasure in visiting only flowers midway down an impossibly steep scree slope, the result being I would slide past most without hope of getting a picture, wayward stones sending the butterflies into the air before I got within range! Needless to say, eventually, with some rather scuffed ankles, I got a representative selection of photographs - the skipper, a couple of the blues, one of the greyling-types.

Content with the butterflies, I then hitch-hiked a lift down to Polur with one of the occasional vehicles passing by. In reality, I could easily have gone directly to Tehran, but I quite fancied an afternoon's birding along the river, Polur sitting in a deep valley, relatively well wooded and hopefully supporting a few migrants. Stayed at the Mountain Federation's hostel, a large well-located building just before you get into Polur, then set off to explore. Eastern Rock Nuthatches around the village, a large chicken kebab and rice in a roadside restaurant, then a walk northward along the river. Not as productive as I had hoped, probably later in the month would have been better, but still the birding was pleasant - a couple of Hoopoes, a Red-breasted Flycatcher, two Lesser Grey Shrikes, plus more Rock Sparrows and a number of common species such as White Wagtail, Linnets and Goldfinch. Along the stream itself, Grey Wagtails flitted from rock to

rock and, in the shadow of overhanging bushes, another new bird for the trip - first one, then a second, Thrush Nightingale, rather more showy than the average individual back home on their East European breeding grounds!

A deep valley skirting the heights of Damavand, it must get a reasonable passage of raptors, so I presumed. Again, I suppose too early in the season, but still a trickle of birds passed over - first a couple of Common Buzzards, then four Honey Buzzards, another new species for the trip. No eagles of any sort, but another two Levant's Sparrowhawks during the afternoon.

Got waylaid by a most charming family on the way back to the hostel - as I was hauled into their house, a spread of food materialised almost instantaneously, chicken kebab, Kentucky chicken, vegetables galore, desserts that were certainly rather yummy and a supply of tea that could have filled a vault. An hour or so drifted by, my binoculars going for wanders with the father of the house, the warmth of their friendship offered in return. When eventually I departed their home, my stomach was rather full - I'd actually eaten a full proper meal twice on this day, most untypical of me! Late afternoon ambles were basically confined to the slopes above the hostel, not a lot seen - one Lesser Grey Shrike, a flock of Rock Sparrows, a few Northern Wheatears.

#### 4 September. Polur & Tehran.

Perhaps breeders, perhaps migrants, probably a combination of both, a chance wander up one of Polur's small side valleys led to birds galore. In mature gardens backing onto an intermittent stream, almost immediately I was amongst small flocks of passerines - a Thrush Nightingale hopping around on the ground, Green Warblers flitting from bush to bush, one Olivaceous Warbler emerging from hanging willows. Plenty of Chiffchaffs, one Willow Warbler too. Also, bird of the morning, a smart Semi-collared Flycatcher quietly perching on small branches, occasionally taking short sorties. Further along, where gardens petered out in a final finale of tall trees, a Plain Leaf Warbler briefly popped up on a garden wall, while a poplar beyond held both a Syrian Woodpecker and, frequently dropping down onto the ground, two Common Redstarts, the only ones I saw in this trip. Quite content with the pickings, I then spied an isolated clump of trees a kilometre further up the slope. Quite hot by now, I almost decided laziness might be the better part of valor, but somehow dragged myself up there. Not a bad decision - not only did the tree clump offer perching posts for a flock of 70 European Bee-eaters, but it also provided cover for two more Syrian Woodpeckers and a pair of Tree Pipits, yet another new species for the trip! Moments later, the Bee-eaters were scattered, a large female Eurasian Sparrowhawk thundering through. After due rest in the cool shade, I wandered back down, cutting across the village to emerge on the opposite side of the valley. Both Red-backed and Lesser Grey Shrikes en route, also one Cuckoo and four Chough, but for me, the inevitable was approaching - it was now midday, time to hit Tehran! Returned to the Mountain Federation hostel, packed my little bag, hitched a lift. Two hours later, out from my truck I jumped. Traffic everywhere ...downtown Tehran, a cultural experience on the senses. Found my desired hotel, hung the bins up, headed off to the city bazaar. Arrrrr, kilometres and kilometres of stalls, three trillion people, maniac runners shoving trolleys through the crowds loaded with their wares. Gave up on the bazaar, headed out into the streets ...and that truly is another story! Dusk approaching, the Ramadan fast over for another day, found a fast food place, celebrated my arrival in Tehran! 5 September. Tehran. Polluted, sprawling city. Already hinted at, the roads a congested free for all, mapcap drivers thinking nothing of going the wrong way into the face of a traffic onslaught thundering towards them, motorbikes frequently avoiding the lot by zigzagging down the pavement, scattering pedestrians in their wake. More chance of being mowed down in this city than seeing any birds! All that said, Tehran is the beating heart of Iran, for all it lacks in aesthetic charm, it clamours to compensate by adding a vibrant pulse. Whilst in the city, I did pop in to see the artwork adorning the walls of the US Den of Espionage, a.k.a. former American Embassy, most colourful pictures they are too, the Statue of Liberty in all its glory, doves and missiles, an interesting selection. Aside the murals, Hooded Crows and Laughing Doves enjoy the rare patch of greenery beyond the decorated walls. Across town, however, I spent rather more time in the relative oasis of Park-e-Shahr, a block and a half of somewhat calm and tranquillity, a wooded park that allows Tehranis to step out from the mayhem of the city buzz. Not bad for birds all things considering - Ring-necked Parakeets and Common Mynahs finding home, White-cheeked Bulbuls too, their populations undoubtedly arising from escapes. Aside them, the usual Laughing Doves and Hooded Crows, quite a bunch of Great Tits, plus surprise of the day, a Common Nightingale hopping about in the shrubbery. This was my last day in Iran sadly, so nipped back to the bazaar for a souvenir or two, then returned to the park as the sun began to set. Locals relaxing on the grass, a distant muezzin calling the faithful to prayer and, in the skies above, a final finale to my birding trip - all making a beeline to the park to roost, flocks of Ring-necked Parakeets, a pair of noisy Hobbies and, in their hundreds, masses of Rooks, the latter my last new species for the trip, and indeed the last birds of any sort on the trip. 6 September. Departure. 7.00 a.m. departure, lifting into an Iranian sunrise, Tehran slumbering beneath, Mount Damavand rose to the north, my trip to Iran was over. Thank you Iran, you welcomed me in, you left me in awe. A fantastic country, the people, the diverse landscapes, the birds, truly the Land of Enchantment. More information about this trip: [CLICK HERE](#) for the full list of birds and mammals seen on this trip. [CLICK HERE](#) for practical details on visiting Iran.