

Iran. Part One, Birding the South.

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Stunning from day one, with Spotted Little Owls performing in the palm groves of Minab, followed by Crab Plovers and Sind Pied Woodpecker east of Jask. After further exploration of the coastal regions, my journey then took me north to the remote deserts of the Shahr-e-Babek region for Pleske's Ground Jay, before swinging westward for a brief stop at the ancient site of Persepolis and further to the dry Lake Arzhan. A long journey westward then took me into the hot sticky lands adjacent to the Dez River, deeply historic and home to such sensational species as Grey Hypocolius and Iraqi Babbler. And thereafter, a fitting finale to the south, a pause in the beautiful city of Esfahan, one of the true architectural wonders of the world.

Itinerary and Birding Log

12 August.

With visa tucked into my pocket, off I went. A straightforward flight down to Istanbul to await my late evening transfer onto Turkish Air for the final three-hour hop to Tehran.

13 August. Minab.

2.30 a.m. arrival in Tehran. Customs and immigration a breeze, straight into a taxi for a dash across Tehran to the domestic airport. 6.00 a.m., Iran Air departure, a two-hour internal flight to Bandar Abbas, the port city at the head of the Straits of Hormoz and heart of the sweltering south.

Stepped off the plane in Bandar Abbas, an immediate assault by hot humid air. From the runway, an Indian Roller flew over, African Rock Martins mobbing, let the birding commence. An hour and a half later, having successfully navigated through taxi drivers and into a savari, I was 125 km east at my first destination. Sandwiched between arid slopes rising to the east and luxuriant date plantations, Minab would be home for the first night. 10 a.m., now settled into the Sadaf Hotel and mightily impressed that air con blasted my room with a nice chill, it was time to jump in at the deep end. Already 35 C and hyper humid, it felt like being whacked with a brick as I walked out of the hotel! North of town, a short stroll from the hotel, date palms stretched as far as I could see, flanking a dry river bed - off I strode, an Eastern Pied Wheatear soon on the list, See-see Partridge, Little Green Bee-eater and more Indian Rollers following in short succession. I was already dripping, sweat drenching my tee-shirt ...this was going to be no picnic in the park! Two scrawny dogs wilted under the first palms, mad dogs and Englishmen came to mind. 'Salaam salaam', friendly locals peered on with amusement as this foreigner staggered by. In the shade of trees, I gulped down most of my water, White-cheeked Bulbuls and Purple Sunbirds flitted, a Ruppell's Fox sauntered off, seemingly bewildered that I'd disturbed his slumber. Laughing Doves everywhere, one White-breasted Kingfisher glared down from a stump of a broken palm. Finding an irrigation canal, I set this as my path, regular stops to plunge my head in the refreshing waters, it had now hit 40 C, the humidity was absolutely stifling. Lacking one night's sleep, unacclimatised and quite possibly already dehydrated, I began to question my sanity. I pushed on regardless, Yellow-throated Sparrow added to the collection. Somewhere in these palms, Sind Pied Woodpecker occasionally lurks, a localised semi-endemic confined to just a few localities in the far south-east of Iran and a slither of neighbouring Pakistan. Search as I did, I was not going to see it this day however - as the early afternoon sun began to pickle my brain, a guy on a motorbike pulled up. Without question I jumped on and off we went, the breeze a relief. A few kilometres up, he dropped me off and I wandered into a village. Much in need of refreshment, my second 'mighty impressed' moment of the day came with the discovery that the village kiosk sold refrigerated milk ...ah, I was beginning to love Iran already! Clutching my litre of milk, I trotted off into a grove to savour my precious find - gulp, gulp, gulp ...then I spotted some eyes peering down - a Spotted Little Owl, what luck!

By now, I needed a break. An asphalt road left the village, so I reasoned it must somehow connect with Minab. Another motorbike pulled up, I jumped on again. After 5km, we reached a junction - he pointed to a long lonely road, the way to Minab. Not disheartened however, I was already learning that Iranians are people of incredible friendliness ...and sure enough, the very first car stopped and took me all the way back to my hotel. Thinking the climate of this southern province might just kill me, I collapsed on my bed. Lulled by the air-conditioning into believing it might have cooled down, I ventured out again at 4 p.m.. It hadn't cooled down at all! I decided to explore wider and hitched a lift 20 km down to the village of Tiyab, a small fishing settlement on a creek leading to the Straits of Hormoz. Most atmospheric, traditional

wooden lunge boats beached on the mud flats, Western Reef Herons and Indian Pond Herons picking their beneath. Another litre of milk downed, the fourth of the day, and I set off to find birds - unfortunately low tide, so most birds probably kilometres away, but Greater Sand Plovers and assorted commoner species suggested more in the offing. As the town came to an end, a boatyard seemed a good vantage point. On the gravel court, a flock of Indian Sand Larks, a truly unexpected bonus, while overhead a Gull-billed Tern circled. Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters next, but the highlight of the day was waiting just to the south. As the sun began to set, the heat mercifully dropping a degree or two, I sat and watched the comings and goings, a Saunder's Tern fishing, Pied Stonechats on saltmarsh opposite and then the piece de la resistance, two Great Stone Plovers emerged onto the mud bank just in front, magical. Giant stone curlews with a stonking great bill, these birds were the perfect ending to my first day, a third appearing more distant. Almost dark, time to get back. Iranian hospitality proved itself again, I didn't even need to start hitching, a car pulled up and asked if I needed a lift. Direct back to my hotel, time for me to sleep!

14 August. Minab to Jask.

Day two, rose pre-dawn for a return to the date palms - it did not take long to understand that success on this trip to Iran would frequently depend on being in the best areas for the first three or four hours of the day. And a good start it was, a mere 28 C as the sun rose, Indian Silverbills chattering away in bushes, Indian Rollers and Little Green Bee-eaters heralding the new day and, no sooner had I entered the palm groves, my second Spotted Little Owl of the trip. Then another, and another ...a family of Spotted Little Owls! Rather photogenic, of appeal to mobbing birds too - White-cheeked Babblers, Purple Sunbirds and a couple of Syke's Warblers all in attendance. Further along, Graceful Prinias, my first Afghan Babblers of the trip (a recent split from Common Babbler), plus Ring-necked Parakeets and two White-breasted Kingfishers. T'was now past 10.30 a.m., the heat was soaring again to its giddy heights, I sought the canal to dunk my head.

No Sind Pied Woodpecker, but I had one more possible site for them, so rather than slave under the midday sun, I returned to the sanctuary of the hotel, enjoying another couple of litres of milk on the way. A productive way to utilize the hottest hours I decided was to travel onward, so bidding my air-conditioning farewell, off I went. Destination two, the remote Jegen woodlands, 255 km further to the south-east. Took a savari to Jask, then chanced my luck hitch-hiking again - the road east a quiet affair, winding its way some 400 km to Chababar and then onward to Pakistan beyond. Brown-necked Ravens circled above, I gazed around at the stark desert slopes on all sides, a pick-up came driving along - my saviour, a Baluchi, took me 30 km to a small village. Declining an offer of overnight accommodation, another wait got me a lift the final few kilometres to the road bridge at Jegen.

No water in the river, but scattered trees stretched north and south, mostly acacias, old and gnarled. A Lesser Grey Shrike scattered small birds from scrub, African Rock Martins soared. I pitched my tent as the sun began to sink, the next day would be very good I thought to myself.

15 August. Jegen and Soorgalm.

Dawn in the Jegen woodlands, a pleasant 30 C, a trace of high cloud and humidity relatively low. In acacia and tamarix, great fuss from White-cheeked Bulbuls, Grey Francolins already calling beyond. So was the dawn chorus, added effects by Laughing Doves and Little Green Bee-eaters. Set about my day's wanders, a certain woodpecker high on the much-wanted stakes. Eastern Pied Wheatears sentinel on twisted skeletal boughs, Red-wattled Plovers strutting on sun-baked muds, exploding into alarm at my approach. Much activity in the dusty bushland - abundant Purple Sunbirds, Yellow-throated Sparrows also proving so. Movements from the depths, out pops a Rufous Bush Robin, the first of four over the next couple of hours. Productive birding here, random ambling notching up many birds, including both Syke's and Eastern Olivaceous Warblers, several flocks of Afghan Babblers, one flock of Rose-coloured Starlings and, after extra fodder with Indian Rollers and Hoopoe, finally a tap-tap-tap some way distant. Set off in pursuit, a Grey Francolin scuttling away as I went. Arrived at the place of tap-tap ...silence! A dead tree adjacent held a Little Green Bee-eater on top, a Laughing Dove midway down. I scanned nearby trees, nothing. I looked back at the dead tree, Little Green Bee-eater still on top, but all change midway down - gone the dove, one smart Sind Pied Woodpecker in its place! A couple of quick photographs and then off it went, me following. More Rose-coloured Starlings, more Yellow-throated Sparrows, then I relocated the key boy, now part of a pair - male and female Sind Pied Woodpecker edging up opposite sides of a small scraggy trunk, playing peep-po around the tree at each other, then shuffling up again.

Excellent, it was barely 8.00 a.m. and I'd found my target, a species I thought would be far more elusive. With my next destination requiring a hike of 20 km across desert, or so I thought, it seemed prudent to make best use of the still

relatively cool morning. So I returned to my tent, decamped and headed up to the road back to Jask. Only had to wait about 15 minutes for a car to come and he stopped, to Jask he was going. I only wanted 12 km however, the point where a small dead-end track went down to the small village of Soorgalm and to the sea beyond, 10 km to the village and 10 km more to the sea. I did not expect any vehicles on this road, I started to walk, the temperature now 35 C, but a light breeze holding the humidity at bay. Crested Larks ran between stunted tufts of vegetation, a Bonelli's Eagle laboured through hazy sky distant. Fortune smiled down upon me - I had walked little more than 2 km when a dilapidated pick-up came trundling along and took me to the village, my long slog now thankfully slashed in half. Four Rose-coloured Starlings in the village and a lonely track leading out, drifting sand creating mini dunes to block its way, forlorn-looking camels browsing acacia thicket.

From the village, a most friendly guy emerged. Did his best to persuade me the folly of wandering yonder, invited me in for refreshment, but bid me well as we parted and I continued my walk. A few minutes later, this time upon a motorbike, he was back, 'I will take you' ...Iranian kindness in action again. Rather nervy going over little sand dunes perched precariously upon the back of a little motorbike, but time went by and there appeared the blue waters of the Gulf of Oman, intertidal flats and patches of mangrove lying to the east and west. Rather bemused that I might want to be left in such a desolate albeit beautiful spot, off went my friend, a smile and wave as he vanished back into the sands inland. I sat on the beach and pondered - 15 km to the west, across featureless desert and shimmering flats, lay one of Iran's richest mangrove forests, largely undisturbed and sometime haunt of Goliath Heron amongst its other riches. Did I really want to stagger all that way and camp, eking out my meagre water supply till next day? Did I hell! Exactly where I was suited me just fine - with Western Reef Herons, Indian Pond Herons, Spoonbills and Greater Flamingos all plodding the shallows adjacent and waders dotted to the horizon, there was plenty to keep me happy for a while. Ospreys passed over, squatting down onto the beach, Saunder's Terns buzzed small creeks.

With a nice breeze, to the waders I turned my attention. Again the tide was not in my favour, distant dots I chose to ignore, but close at hand, a grand little selection - Terek Sandpipers common enough, Greater and Lesser Sand Plovers strutting alongside Kentish Plovers, a nice trio for comparison, plus all the regulars, including Marsh Sandpipers, Little Stints and Turnstones. A bit of squinting and out there shuffled bulky white blobs far away - relocation was necessary, I knew what they would be. Walked a kilometre or so along a sand bar, in front of me there two of them walked, the mother of all waders, splendid Crab Plovers. Seen them in five countries now, but never do they fail to impress, a wader of charisma and style. All was well with the world, the Osprey sat nearby, Great White Egrets winged over, Sandwich and Gull-billed Terns squabbled over the surf, but with early afternoon edging on, I decided to hike out. Taking a north-west bearing, lots of lovely desert should pass my way I supposed, Hoopoe Larks and Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse potential compensation for the gruelling walk I know it would be. Half an hour I walked, a small dust cloud then appearing on the horizon, hurtling directly towards me. Unbelievable, it was a car - a pick-up full of Baluchi fishermen to be exact, all on the way back from the coast. Out they turfed one guy from the front, in they plonked me. Not a common word spoken, but happy they were, big grins and much chatter. Twenty kilometres later, we pulled into a simple mud-brick compound - into a cool dark room I was directed, the door closed behind me. Not a kidnapping, but an obligatory stop for chai. Iran was humbling me again, here at the heart of Ramadan, when they themselves could not eat or drink, there I sat in their spartan home, their only concern the welfare of their guest, lunch whipped up, a never ending flow of tea alongside. Not for the last time on this trip, I felt a pang of shame that I come from the 'enlightened' West, a West that vilifies this nation without knowing a thing about its people, land or culture. Yet never a hint of animosity from a single Iranian on my whole trip, just simple plain warmth and welcome. Back to my unexpected tea stop however, eventually I supposed it time to venture out again and began to thank my hosts. Not a thing of it, they ushered me back into the room and vanished. 'Oh well', I thought, 'looks like I'll be here for the day'. Somewhere in our limited communications, I'd explained that I was returning to Bandar Abbas, over 340 km to the north-east. My 'captors' returned with another guy in a another pick-up, 'Minab, sells fish'. From the desert wilds, these guys had found me a lift, what gents.

So it was, I made it back to Bandar Abbas in time for a little evening birding. Along the seafront, incredibly humid and sticky, the sun began to set, gulls and terns putting on a most majestic show to end the day. In a swirling mass, 150 Slender-billed Gulls dallied over the waters, a few Caspian Gulls too - but it was the terns that most impressed ...Gull-billed, Sandwich, Swift, Saunder's, Whiskered and Black, all rather nice. A small creek bulged with Black-winged Stilts, Terek Sandpipers pushed their way through, Marsh Sandpipers tenderly picked at the fringes.

Night fell, Brown Rats loitered on muggy street corners, but it was air-conditioning and litres of milk for me again, another splendid day over.

16 August. Bandar-e-Khamir.

40 C again, humidity much the same, another day of birding 'punishment' in store. For today's wanderings, I took a savari out of Bandar Abbas to the west, travelling approximately 90 km or so to the small town of Bandar-e-Khamir. Whilst the town itself is of little appeal, the shallow Khuran Straits offshore, separating Khamir from the island of Qeshm, are famed for the Harra Sea Forest, an immense mangrove forest of some 9000 hectares, the largest in the Persian Gulf. Just before reaching Bandar-e-Khamir, the green expanse stretches out. I jumped out of the savari and began to explore - access by boat would be preferable, but with some scrambling about, Red-wattled Plovers, Indian Rollers, Eastern Pied Wheatear and Southern Grey Shrike all encountered in the process, I finally managed to find a few vantage points. Birds similar to those of Soorgalm - a lot of Western Reef Herons and Indian Pond Herons, Spoonbill and Greater Flamingo, but here a few choice extras - amongst the tangles of mangrove roots, with White-breasted Kingfisher as a backdrop, three splendid Striated Herons, plus out in the channel beyond, a steady to and fro of a few terns - Swift Terns predominant, but at least two Lesser Crested Terns too. As the mid-morning sun began to crucify, the call of milk lured me away, flagging down a motorbike to take me the last few kilometres in Khamir itself. Found a shady place to gulp my nice cold milk down, Little Green Bee-eaters swooned in the heat, a Syke's Warbler flitted in the shrubbery above.

Beyond blue waters beckoned, a pier jutting out and an old building offering the hope of shade. And out there I did sit and lay for a few hours, eight Crab Plovers edging closer with the rising tide, an Oystercatcher feeding on exposed sand, eight Terek Sandpipers nosing beneath fishing boats grounded and waiting the high tide. Eventually, fancying a change of location, I spied a motorbike passing nearby, he spied me and off we went ...unfortunately straight back into town, not the next pier as I'd hoped (I reminded myself I really should ask where they are going before blindly jumping on!). Not wishing to walk all the way back out again, I decided on a return to Bandar Abbas, so headed for the centre, the idea to catch a savari back. A local architect had other plans, seeing me walking under the shade of palms, he reversed back and offered me a lift ...a tour of the delights of Bandar-e-Khamir followed, a trip out to sulphur baths, then a hole where a meteor hit Earth and finally a stop for ice tea. Humbling me yet again, he then point-bank refused to allow me to pay my taxi back to Bandar Abbas, giving the money direct to the driver. Though savari taxis are reasonably inexpensive, this type of gesture just astounded me every time - I had expected great things of Iran, having heard so many good stories, but here I was at the end of my fourth day already in awe of the people, just nice.

Hot and sweaty back in Bandar Abbas, admired the gulls and terns again, returned to my cushy air-con pad, added more milk to the fridge, jotted up my notes and retired to bed, felt very content.

17 August. Bandar Abbas, Northbound.

With the main birds already seen and already sure that I would be returning to Iran at a future date, I decided to leave the offshore islands of Qeshm and Hormoz to a cooler season, so this was to be my last morning in the oppressive heat and humidity of Bandar Abbas. Just after dawn, already 34 C, I settled myself down at the mouth of the Gursuzan Creek for close encounters with waders - a half dozen Terek Sandpipers, four summer-plumage Curlew Sandpipers and a Lesser Sand Plover just a few metres distant, with a good selection of other waders and waterbirds not far behind, including Greater Sand Plovers, a bevy of Western Reef Herons and my second House Crow of the trip. Just up the creek, plenty of Black-winged Stilts, three Marsh Sandpipers too, plus a Citrine Wagtail with two White Wagtails.

Midday, boarded a bus for the 440 km hop to Shahr-e-Babek, deep in the desert hinterlands and the locality I hoped to find Pleske's Ground Jay, the be-all and end-all of my trip to Iran. One hour into the journey, back to Bandar Abbas we had to go - the bus was turned back at a road checkpoint for carrying contraband as best I could understand. Boxes offloaded, off we went again, only to meet a road accident in the rocky mountains - road blocked! 40 Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters wheeling in the sky, a European Roller heading south, progress was painfully slow. Arrived in Shahr-e-Babek at 10 p.m., pleasantly cool. Didn't even bother trying to find a hotel, walked out into the desert and camped.

18 August. Shahr-e-Babek.

Pleasantly cool fell to a downright cold during the night - a mere 9 C prior to dawn, not a temperature I was expecting nor was particularly equipped for! My chosen campsite was rather nice too - not the open desert I had presumed the night before, but more wasteland on the town's edge, a less than scenic pit just nearby full of rubbish! Ah well, it was time to get up anyhow, not admire the local views.

Today was Pleske's Ground Jay day, or at least I hoped it would be. For a species that is Iran's only endemic and high on the priorities of any visiting birder, detailed information on where to find it are painfully lacking. There are several vague references to the species in the vast remote Khar Touran National Park, a locality that would truly be fantastic but require vehicles and prior organisation, but otherwise the best information I had was the 1999 report by Jerzy Dyczkowski who had seen them somewhere in a 60 km loop south-west of Shahr-e-Babek.

At the best of times, Pleske's Ground Jay is not the easiest of birds to find - not only is it localised, occurring only where *Zygophyllum* grows, but it also doesn't like to fly, rarely perches up and is fond of quietly running off through the *Zygophyllum* at the approach of an observer, none of which are highly conducive to the successful finding of this bird! Dawn and dusk offer the best hope, the bird being more active and also occasionally perching on small bushes, a great help in a land of vast semi-desert. Four days would be enough I reckoned, many scores of kilometres then covered.

To narrow my searches, all of which would be done on foot, study of satellite images suggested I might focus on two areas - about 30 km north of the town, then about the same to the west. North was the easiest to get to, a simple hitch from my camping spot, so off I went. A half hour later, I was at a most exquisite of desert vistas - hanging in the early

morning sun and bathed in a delicate light, a rolling plain reaching out to distant horizons where jagged peaks scraped the skies. Vegetation scant, a patchwork of small succulents and hardy shrubs dotted every metre or so, bare sand and stones between, I could already see birds flitting. Though I already had doubts as to whether Pleske's Ground Jay would be here - the vegetation seemed too low and I didn't think it was *Zygophyllum* - I set my path regardless, a walk to a small hummock a kilometre or so away where I could leave my bag and then wander at will. Six hours I walked at this locality, the temperature rising to 36 C, but a very tolerable 36 C, the humidity here virtually non-existent. Desert Wheatears and Crested Larks abundant, one flock of Lesser Short-toed Larks, a single Desert Lark and one small flock of Black-bellied Sandgrouse, but not a whiff of anything that hinted at the elusive endemic. One Cape Hare, or at least I presume it to be this species, various lizards of assorted size and shape, but I had to concede, I was in the wrong place.

Hitching back to Shahr-e-Babek, I then headed west on the road to Herat - just 18 km along, I found habitat that looked perfect - expansive *Zygophyllum* steppe, the scraggly bushes up to a metre high, devoid of leaves and nicely spaced out, soft sands the background. A deserted building some half a kilometre distant would serve as base, depositing my bag there to walk huge arcs through the steppe. Less birds overall than at the northern site, quite possibly due to the mid-afternoon heat, but still a few Desert Wheatears, plus a Southern Grey Shrike and, after a number of kilometres, our sandgrouse rising from the ground, Crowned Sandgrouse this time. Four hours of trudging the *Zygophyllum*, still no Pleske's Ground Jay, a slight degree of concern began to creep in, coupled with a rather larger dose of fatigue from so many hours under a hot sun! Still, planning to camp in the old building, I would have dawn and dusk, by far the best time. I wandered back to my new home, a well-earned rest in order. A snooze of an hour or so and off I went again, my body rather protesting further onslaught. With only an hour or two of daylight left, I decided on a relatively short loop, after which I would return to camp, then sit and scan. I walked towards the road, five Black-headed Buntings appearing in a bush, but otherwise all quiet, a Desert Wheatear the only exception. I'd had enough for one day, I turned to return ...then froze in my tracks! From behind a *Zygophyllum* bush not eight metres distant, out stepped a Pleske's Ground Jay, a flash of sandy plumage, black and white back, long down-curved bill and black bib ...wow! I glanced down to check my camera, then back to the bird ...crap, it was gone! Where? I looked in every direction, edged forward, scanning non-stop ...but nothing, I had lost my jewel, I can only imagine it turned and ran like hell! A mix of relief, amazement and frustration simultaneously swept across me - after nigh on 12 hours searching, I'd finally found the bird, only to be graced with, at best, a two-second view of the bird. Two highly memorable seconds, but still it could hardly be deemed satisfactory, I even wondered for a moment if I had been hallucinating!

I searched till dusk, no joy. I needed more, I still had some days to play with. I slept well that night, another day under the sun was on the cards.

19 August. Shahr-e-Babek to Persepolis.

Dawn saw me back at the site of my two-second wonder, but bar Desert Wheatears and more Black-headed Buntings, nothing bigger than an Agama Lizard scurried. I worked the bushes a good while, then gazed southward - this habitat went on forever, more Pleske's Ground Jays had to be out there, waiting to be seen. In the sunrise hour, a steady to and fro of sandgrouse - at least 30 Crowned Sandgrouse, plus four Black-bellied, all most welcome. Distant, three Cream-coloured Coursers flew low, seeming to settler, long wanders to the south added a Bar-tailed Desert Lark, as well as more frequent Crested Larks. Still the Ground Jays eluded me. Two hours passed, I decided to return to retrieve my bag and then relocate further down. On the way back, I followed a dry stream bed, more in the hope of early returning Desert Warblers (a passage and winter bird here) than anything, but this was to be my recipe for success. Almost back to the road, at most 500 metres short, on a sandy plain aside the stream bed, my luck was in, two Pleske's Ground Jays feeding like big overgrown Hoopoe Larks! And they didn't leg it this time! Fantastic views, an adult and immature, probing the sands, then one flitting up onto a bush and calling a long rapid 'pee-pee-pee-pee-pee'. Amazing. Ten minutes and more, I had the honour of their company, the two birds feeding, but moving rapidly, often vanishing only to reappear someway distant and rarely where I expected. Inevitably, soon I lost them, but I was happy - views had been good, I'd even managed a few record photographs.

Not bad. I'd allowed four days to see Pleske's Ground Jay, I'd done in little more than 24 hours. Time to move on, I didn't imagine I would get better views than I had already had. Way to the west, perhaps 400 km by road, lay the city of Shiraz and 40 km north of that, the ancient ruins of Persepolis, my next destination, a cultural detour to my birding itinerary.

I had originally planned to return south to Sirjan and take the main road to Shiraz, but given how good the hitch-hiking

was, I thought I'd chance the more remote, but surely more beautiful, mountain route passing through the Bavanat Valley and dropping almost directly to Persepolis, thereby also avoiding getting bogged down in Sirjan and Shiraz, both cities of some size. Getting to Herat, the first town on route, was easy enough, I was already on the correct road. And from Herat, I met a most wonderful couple - a young husband and wife, both of whom worked in the local hospital and were on their way to visit the husband's mother, who conveniently lived half way to the Bavanat Valley! Simple charm and kindness oozed from these two, I cannot forget the kiwi ice-cream they so kindly shared, along with plums, warm bread and other goodies! And when it was time for them to turn off my intended route, they flagged down a passing truck and organised a lift for me, right through the Bavanat Valley and down to Safa Shahr, a small town on the main Esfahan-Shiraz road and an easy hop for me to Persepolis.

Persepolis, ancient city at the heart of the Archaemenid Empire, heyday 500 BC. What a grand city it must have been, still today most impressive - monumental columns and gateways, imposing statues and tombs cut into arid cliffs. Culture collides with birding, between gazing up at detailed reliefs and squinting in the hot sun, a fair bit of wildlife to distract from historic overload - running and creeping over the monuments, perching upon a carved falcon's head, Eastern Rock Nuthatches two'a'penny, highway masks prominent, piping trills echoing around the site. On some stump of a column, highly significant in historical context I am sure, an Eastern Pied Wheatear perched to flit down and snatch tasty morsels nearby, while Crested Larks scurried about and a Lesser Grey Shrike made an appearance just nearby. The best of the lot, however, was reserved for the ladies' loo - unfortunate as not the best place to be sat with a telephoto lens! Aside eight Desert Larks, which flitted from toilet top to rock and back again, this most unique of des-res was home to a family of Indian Grey Mongoose, the whole tribe of them basking in the sun on the small lawn outside, retiring underneath for shade and cover when disturbed. Fortunately, Persepolis, despite its splendour, is not teeming with tourists, so between the occasional visitor to the loo, I managed a few photographs without arrest!

Cattle Egrets and Hooded Crows in the lands beneath, my jaunt to Persepolis was over, I hitched into Shiraz for a night in a hotel - naturally, budget end of the market, but still air-con and fridge, plenty of place to store milk yet again.

20 August. Lake Arzhan.

I had um'ed and arr'ed over visiting Lake Arzhan right up to the moment of going - the scant information I had (an I.B.A. notification) suggested that whilst good for wildfowl after the winter rains, it would most likely be a dry dustbowl at the time of my visit. Still, I reasoned, it was basically on my route and the surrounding open woodlands, on steep rocky slopes and dominated by Persian Oak, were said to hold good concentrations of Upcher's Warblers.

Just 40 km west of Shiraz, I arrived on site at the rather late hour of 10 a.m., a quick glance confirming my suspicion that the lake would be dry. I guessed I would stay here an hour or so ...I didn't, Lake Arzhan turned out to be one of the big surprises of my whole trip, 24 hours later I was still birding the area! It was a fantastic little oasis - from the clutter of roadside restaurants, food stalls and small shops catering on the busy Shiraz-Bushehr road, a permanent spring brings life to the otherwise parched area. Flowing through a coppiced woodland, a stream then flows out across the dry lake bed, curling to a final halt in a fairly extensive bed of phragmites, wet marsh and occasional open patch of water. Adjacent, with nomad camps and cattle wandering, the remainder of the vast lake bed is a dusty concoction of trampled turf, weed scrub and thicket. And there were birds everywhere!

Leaving my transport, expecting virtually no birds, I had wandered first into the woodland - a Spotted Flycatcher popped up, then another. 'Ooo birds', thought I. Then more birds, the woodland was heaving, undoubtedly a mix of migrants and residents, seeking shelter and seeking the cool waters of the stream. Before very many minutes, I had settled myself in amongst a flock. Spotted Flycatchers continued to hawk from low branches, but all around a right flurry of action, non-stop birds circulating in loose association - a Rufous Bush Robin low down, several Olivaceous Warblers, three Plain Leaf Warblers, a humble Blackbird and then, a swing of a long dark tail, an Upcher's Warbler, the only one I would see on this trip. From the shade of the trees into a sunny glade, the stream was a magnet to thirsty birds, another buzz of activity - Moorhens and a Water Rail in emergent vegetation, a right chatter and twitter coming from tall dead trees, the boughs positively alive with stacks of Goldfinches and, quite unexpected for me, at least 35 Desert Finches flitting in and out, real

smart birds.

Out of the woodland margins, a touch of sunbathing, largely to dry out trousers after an inadvertent step near the stream, a nice marshy hollow promptly found. But what a glorious spot to sunbath - European Bee-eaters swooping, a Hoopoe quietly probing nearby grass, the Desert Finches now sharing thistleheads with the Goldfinches. Up high above, clouding in swirls above towering cliffs, an immense flock of Choughs, 200 strong and tumbling down to the lakebed, scattering to forage amongst the cattle dotted in the distance. Through the black masses, hurtling bullets, 15 Alpine Swifts soared out from the cliff tops, arcing out into blue skies. Plenty of birds to watch, all sides and overhead.

Butterflies numerous too - Silver-washed Fritillaries common, Clouded Yellows and Red Admirals reasonably so, plus quite a number less familiar - various blues and browns, plenty of a big Greyling type I have yet to pin a name. T'was now 35 C, but most pleasant, I decided to follow the stream out across the lake bed - a snake of water and reed, birds abundant all the way. Plenty of Yellow Wagtails, no shortage of Black-headed Buntings and at least 60 Corn Buntings, plus dwellers of the deep reed, one Great Reed Warbler, several European Reed Warblers and at least three Moustached Warblers, typically the latter very much creepers of the reed base. Rising Mallard and circling Marsh Harriers hinted of riches deeper in the marsh, but as afternoon turned to evening, out into the parched grasslands I chose to wander. A Northern Lapwing eyed me warily, surely this locality must attract a Sociable Plover or two on passage. Not his day however. Instead the glories went to Isabelline Wheatears, at least 25 scattered in my immediate environs, a Northern Wheatear thrown in for good measure. As dusk approached, Common Starlings came flocking in, 800 or so settling in the reeds, smaller numbers of Barn Swallows also present. Isabelline Shrike and Lesser Grey Shrike both occupied the remnants of an old fence, the sun was setting.

Night fell, under the coppiced trees I pitched my tent. A reward for my excellent day, I walked up to the roadside restaurants to treat myself to a meal, my first in Iran! A huge helping of rice, kebab and assorted sidelines, my stomach did not know what had hit it.

21 August. Lake Arzhan, the Road to the West.

Lengthy journey westward today, venturing into true lands of heat despair, a festering humidity that would hit the roof, a cocktail to sap the juices.

First however, excellent hours on the Arzhan grasslands, following the trace of the stream, winding down towards the phragmites marsh. With the early hour, much activity in the reeds - European Reed Warblers at least 15, Moustached Warblers five and Great Reed Warblers two, plus Moorhens all the way and squeals of Water Rails. Early sorties in the morning sun, European Bee-eater woke from slumber on wires overhead, while Desert Finches and Black-headed Buntings, 40 of the latter, dropped in to drink. Flocks of Chough and dozens of Isabelline Wheatears punctuated the grasslands, two Lapwings and two Tawny Pipits too. New birds this morning included a small lock of Calandra Larks and a couple of Common Snipe rising from the marsh, but the glories of the day went to a superb male Little Bittern. Convinced his camouflage was a tad better than reality, this engaging character froze at my approach - gentling wobbling in line with the sway of reeds, he would have indeed been difficult to spot at a distance. At just a few metres away however, he was a little plum, just standing there for admiration, a most fine specimen of a bird.

A quick nosey around the coppiced woodland, Plain Leaf Warbler and Isabelline Shrike up for the taking and then it was to the road to begin my trip to the west.

Hitch-hiked all the way, a trip of 550 km through arid rugged lands and down onto the hot desolate plains of southern Khuzestan Province, blighted by the ugly consequences of lying above the bulk of Iran's oil and gas. Hard on the eye, the landscape a Mad Max'ian play of oil flares, industrial spill-over and pipelines, all quite unattractive and hardly enhancement to a flat nothingness of desert, vegetation absent. Coupled with a heat and humidity oppressive to the point of bubbling brains, the local tourist board I am sure have an uphill struggle to sell the delights of this region! And at its heart, the city of Ahvaz - an industrial sprawl, vast and featureless, its only appeal being both Night Heron and Pied Kingfisher as I crossed a city bridge, mayhem on the roads one side, a calm deep flow of the river the other. I arrived in central Ahvaz just before dusk - temperature was a staggering 46 C, the humidity was off the scales. I was dripping, sweat flowing, I had no intentions of staying in this place. To a savari station I went, one hour and a bit later, I checked into a mercifully air-conditioned hotel in the historic town of Shush, next day was going to be a struggle I began to appreciate!

22 August. The Dez River, Burning Paradise.

In contrast to its southern parts, the north of Khuzestan Province is a gentle land of unassuming attractiveness, quiet rural villages and ancient cities of the Elamite Empire. In common with the southern parts, it also swelters under a burning sun to almost unbelievable degrees, summer temperatures frequently rising to 50 C, humidity hitting a crippling 80% ...but even in this sticky state of affairs, the birding remains simply phenomenal.

Before battling the climate however, I had already faced a challenge on my quest to see such delights as Iraqi Babbler and Grey Hypocolius. Pre-trip planning had turned up precisely nothing with regard localities for any of my target birds, a Birdlife document merely mentioning a '55 km stretch of the river' being good, but not a single report seemed to exist to fill in any additional details (and one, Jerzy's 1999 epic, searched, yet failed to find the key birds). I was on my own. I resorted to google satellite images - from the comfort of my living room, a virtual trip down the Dez allowed me to practically pick out where habitat seemed better, where it looked hit and miss, where I would be totally wasting my time. I settled on the area just north of the ancient ziggurat pyramid at Choqa Zanbil, not only did the mosaic of old oxbows and river loops appear to be a carpet of dense vegetation, but it also allowed relatively easy access, a road running between the historic cities of Shush and Shushtar crossing the Dez River exactly where the habitat seemed at its best.

So it was, several weeks later, I was about to discover the success of my internet rambles. I had intended to camp somewhere near the river bridge, but with night temperatures remaining in the 30s and the air almost oozing water, I deemed it not the most pleasant of options, half believing I would wake to find my tent a melted blob of grease, me

swimming somewhere in its remnants! So instead, leading a life of luxury, I indulged myself in the comforts of air-conditioning 60 km away in the historic centre of Shush, a Elamite city dating back to the 3rd millennium BC.

Not wishing to stack the birding cards ever more against me, nor harbouring secret desires to endure the hottest parts of the day, I considered it a very good idea to be on site pre-dawn. Thus splashing out on a private taxi, a grand total of about five euros, so it was, I arrived alongside the River Dez at 6.40 a.m., the sun yet to climb. Habitat looked splendid, dense riverine thickets gradually giving way to open acacia woodland. It was perfect - all my target birds just had to be here, the only question being whether I could find them before the heat and humidity knocked me for six and sent the birds into deep cover. A large red globe shimmered on a heavy horizon, the sun edging its way into another day, temperatures stood at 30 C, sweat dampened my brow. Time to start the birding.

Black Francolin trotting along the road, a good beginning. Night Herons gawping down into the languid waters, Pied Kingfishers on the struts of the river bridge. Waved a goodbye to my taxi driver, headed off into the bushland, Wood Pigeons everywhere, hundreds and hundreds of them, a good dose of Collared Doves too. Started in the more fairly arid acacia woodland, White-cheeked Bulbuls in every tree, Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters hawking and, fussing around an old oxbow, a group of Mesopotamian Crows, members of the Hooded Crow clan, but the greys replaced by an almost white. The sun was now clear of the horizon, perspiration was already beginning to drench my tee-shirt, sticking to the open areas hoping for a Grey Hypocolius, I pushed on. A flock of babblers scuttled across the scrub, 'Oo' exclaimed I, squatting myself down aside the dense shrubbery into which they had vanished. Scolding, then brief views, occasional tails and tawny flanks. I tried to jigsaw together enough to cinch an i.d. - size, jizz and habitat all pointed to Afghan Babbler, but this was also the lands of Iraqi Babbler, number two (after Pleske's Ground Jay) on my Iranian most-wanted list. Alas, it was not to be, up they popped, chattering babblers, then running across to the next cover, most certainly Afghan Babblers. Onward, pigeons and doves flushing in all directions, Common Whitethroat and Olivaceous Warbler in acacias, then two Syke's Warblers too. Another oxbow, another species of top quality - on mud, dried and cracked, two most resplendent White-tailed Plovers, true classy birds. Soon after, came across a Green Toad, a splendid little critter, bold green splodges on a sandy background. Crawling through the leaf litter in pursuit, I was sure a mucky pup by the time I was done, my soggy tee-shirt now a delicate replica of the lands around, plenty of leaf matter adding pattern.

8.00 a.m. now, all three of my main target birds (Iraqi Babbler, Grey Hypocolius and Dead Sea Sparrow) yet to fall. It was time to tackle the riverine thickets, a dense mat of near impenetrable scrub covering the river banks and adjacent twists of lost truncated river spurs. Following paths of Water Buffalo, the mighty beasts spooking me on one occasion when I came face to face point blank, into a new world I ventured - a mosaic of microhabitats from deep dark tangles to open sunny patches, birds everywhere. Still plenty of Wood Pigeons and White-cheeked Bulbuls, but now it was time of the stars to shine - Dead Sea Sparrows adorning bushsides in good numbers, mostly females, but these most distinctive miniatures of their more familiar cousins. Rufous Bush Robins here and there, Great Tits common and then, in a jizz quite distinct, major league success - a party of Iraqi Babblers, smaller, warmer in colour and devoid of much of the streaking of Afghan Babblers, they also lacked the typical babbler style of running and flying from bush to bush, here more creeping about in the undergrowth. Mopped my brow, sat and admired these birds, rather dark under those bushes, but managed a few photographs nevertheless.

Super, thought I, only Grey Hypocolius to go. Clambering back out from the bushes, I didn't have long to wait. As I emerged into the startling brightness of the acacia zone, over flew a Grey Hypocolius! A few minutes later, there sat four, and not long after, a family party ...they were everywhere! Why hadn't I seen any earlier? Surely now time for a welcome break, the heat and humidity beginning to punish. I found a shady spot overlooking the river, Rufous Bush Robin and Common Nightingale both foraging in cover adjacent. A half hour lazing with the river before me, wonderful. Red-wattled Plovers on shingle opposite, Pied Kingfishers occasionally past, Turtle Doves amongst the steady stream of overhead pigeons and doves. Eventually, I dragged myself up, the sun now exceeding 40 C. In and out of the riverine habitat I wandered, plenty more birds seen - a clear division of habitat, both Afghan and Iraqi Babblers appeared relatively common, the Iraqi Babblers exclusively in dense thickets, the Afghan Babblers all in the hot dry wastes of the acacia bush. By midday, with tallies somewhere in the region of 30 Iraqi Babblers (six family groups), 12 Grey Hypocolius and at least 40 Dead Sea Sparrows, I decided it a good idea to go to see the ziggurat at Choqa Zanbil, a most impressive

pyramid I supposed. Only 7km, a good hike I thought.

Two kilometres on, temperatures rising ever more, a Yellow-throated Sparrow and White-breasted Kingfisher added to the list, I got into a right tangle of vegetation, my way becoming a battle against bush and thorn. 'Sod this', thought I, not a scrap of tee-shirt now left dry, I really didn't need to see a pyramid, impressive or otherwise. I had to concede, with a heady 45 C not far off, the temperature, or rather the humidity, had finally beaten me, it was time to head back.

Sometimes however, admitting defeat does its rewards - trudging back towards the road, a shadowy ghost of a bird appeared before me, a nightjar, not just any nightjar, but the queen of them all. I was staggered, many a time I have searched in vain for this species, but here it was, not a bird I had even considered seeing here, one superb Egyptian Nightjar, the large pale member of a family. Round she went, deep loping wingbeats, a flight almost in slow motion. Joy, she settled on the ground, right out in plain view. Took some photographs, admired her a while, then up she went again, swooping to the right, settling again. I left her in peace, most content was I. Egyptian Nightjar, truly icing on the cake.

An hour or so later, down I flopped - I was back in the hotel, air conditioning pumping on full, an hour of snooze I had. No respite in the heat, but ventured out again for a while in the late afternoon - more a tour of quaint Shush and its cultural sites. A Grey Hypocolius appeared in shrubbery, Pied Kingfishers lined up on a wall aside my hotel.

Day over, quite memorable to say the least.

23 August. Shush and Andimeshk.

The Dez River deserves more than a single day. Another day it will get ...but not on this trip! I will return to savour its delights one winter - a season not only seeing temperatures more amenable to full days of birding, but also a time when the Dez plays host to wintering flocks of wildfowl, even occasionally an Anhinga from the dwindling population across the border in the Iraqi marshes of Mesopotamia.

So it was, I planned to travel northward this day. Started off however with a dawn wander on the outskirts of Shush, tracking behind the archaeological site to reach a relatively small area of scrub and damp sedge, just enough to keep me occupied for a couple of hours. Birdwise a reasonable selection, two See-see Partridge running up a rockside, six Grey Hypocolius, my first Fan-tailed Cisticolas of the trip, plus my one and only Stonechat, a female. Highlight of the wander, however, just before the sun came up, a quaint small fox trotting along, quite unfussed by my presence. Poor light, but a couple of shots - one Ruppell's Fox. Both Pied and Common Kingfishers on the canal beside my hotel.

Didn't expect anymore birding this day, thinking it would be some twelve hours and more on the road, the idea being to take a bus far to the north-east. A mere stone's throw from Shush however, in the city of Andimeshk, I discovered that the first bus to my destination departed only in the late afternoon. No bad thing, it meant I had another day at my disposal and would then travel overnight. Furthermore, on the way into Andimeshk, just a kilometre south of the bus station, the road had passed over a broad river, shallow with expansive pools. In the heat and humidity, every bit as severe as the

day before, I walked back to the river, not really expecting a great deal. Marsh Frogs on the way, an Isabelline Wheatear in a field, one White-breasted Kingfisher in roadside palms, but the sight that greeted me at the river was most splendid. Far better than I'd hoped, the mosaic of open water, exposed mud and reed fringe was bustling with birds - waders, marsh terns, herons, the lot. With major road and rail bridges providing welcome shade, under the latter I plonked myself - a trickle of water at my feet, Common Redshanks, Wood Sandpipers and Little Ringed Plovers picking their way along, a shallow pool crowded with Black-winged Stilts, the bridge itself a convenient perch for a dozen Pied Kingfishers and several Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters.

Little Grebes, puffed-up little dumplings, sat out on the open water, Black and White-winged Black Terns overtop and the phragmites etched by a line of herons - at least 40 Little Egrets, one Cattle Egret, one Squacco Heron and three Night Herons. And, new bird for the trip, Clamorous Reed Warblers moderately common, one pair feeding fledged young just a few metres distant. A couple of hours passed, Yellow and Grey Wagtails strutting about, Red-wattled Plovers on the shingle, Hoopoes flying past. Eventually though, I dragged myself up, to the other bridge for a change of scenery. Birds similar, terns in perpetual motion, the Pied Kingfishers now under the bridge seeking shade, but a few grand additions - soaring against a deep blue sky, six White Storks slowly drifting south and, on a pool just east, a whole bunch of waders, including Marsh Sandpipers, Little Stints and, all new for the trip, Temminck's Stint, Ruff and Spotted Redshank.

Whiled away much of the afternoon here, now quite grateful for the lack of a daytime bus. At 3.00 p.m., back to the bus station, all aboard for 620 km ride ahead. Passing through the spectacular gorges north of Pol-e-Dok, one Blue Rock Thrush seen from the bus.

24-25 August. Esfahan.

4.00 a.m. arrival, slept on the grass outside the bus station for a couple of hours.

Time to hang up the binoculars for a couple of days, I was in Esfahan, exquisite architectural jewel of the Middle East. Rare indeed do I linger in a city, rarer still that I forgo a couple of days birding, but Esfahan is truly a rare city - stunning mosques, covered bazaars centuries old and, as a grand centrepiece, the amazing Imam Square. For two days, in ancient streets and alleyways, in courtyards and across its bridges, each a gem in its own right, I truly enjoyed this city. Between walks and wanders, plenty of time to soak up its warm atmosphere, chat with locals and pass the time of day.

An amazing city by day, an amazing city by night. As sun set, Imam Square was the place to be - with architecture and fountains illuminated and local families flocking in to picnic on the lawns and celebrate the break of the Ramadan fast, the warmth of both the Iranians and their culture was most touching, almost a queue of gents and ladies wishing me well, stopping for a chat or to invite me to join their celebrations. Esfahan really sits right up there with the great ancient cities of the world - Rome, Athens, Kathmandu. Naturally though, none of those cities are blessed with Iranians to welcome you in! Er, birds in Esfahan - Little Egrets on the river, White Wagtails here and there, some martins that I failed to identify, either African Rock or Crag (no binoculars!). With reluctance, it was time to leave Esfahan, ahead lay the next part of my trip, journeys to the northern mountains and Caspian coast, another world, another bird-filled paradise. For Part Two, [CLICK HERE](#).