

## Return to Iran, winter 2011-12. Birding the Persian Jewel

Contributed by Jos

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Introduction A total collapse of diplomatic relations and an atmosphere tainted by mutual expulsions of consular staff and embassy closures, into Iran I arrived for my second visit. Media headlines aside however, the real Iran remained a land of warmth and welcome - excellent birding at every turn and a generosity amongst the population that is second to none. This trip very much built on my previous - whereas the earlier travels had been at the height of summer, enduring sauna-like conditions in the south but generally having an excellent time with all the breeding species, this mid-winter trip focussed on the vast numbers of birds that winter in Iran, most particularly along the Persian Gulf and, later in the trip, in the Caspian lowlands. Additionally, as temperatures and humidity had combined to create a cocktail that had hurried me along in August, I had also planned to linger in a few localities that I had either skipped or visited only briefly on the previous journey, notably sites in the Dez Valley, plus Qeshm Island in the Persian Gulf.

In short, the itinerary was as follows: 1. South-west Iran. Focus on the semi-endemic rich Dez Valley, haunt of Iraq Babbler, Black Francolin and numerous other good birds. Also an abundance of wintering species such as Pallas's Gull and Pygmy Cormorant. 2. Persian Gulf and Islands. Centred on the Bandar Abbas and Minab areas, also visiting Qeshm Island. Teeming mudflats full of waders, including Crab Plovers, Great Stone Plovers and winterers such as Terek Sandpipers et al. Probably the best area in Iran for the potential of something unexpected, this trip's haul including Pallas's Fish Eagle, Black Drongo and several Oriental Honey Buzzards. Also, visited the riverine forest at Jegin River. Touches of the Orient in the bird mix, plus exciting species such as Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse, Sind Pied Woodpecker and Mountain Chiffchaff. 3. Central and Northern Iran. Pleske's Ground Jay territory, a brief stop in the Shahr-e-Babek area to search out this Iranian endemic. Also explorations of the icy foothills and lower slopes of the Albroz Mountains, both at Mount Damavand and further east in the Shahrud region. Lammergeiers and Crimson-winged Finches, Pine Buntings and Saker Falcon amongst the the rich bird mix, two fantastic Wolves the mammalian stars. 4. Caspian Lowlands. Essentially visited one site only - Fereydoon Kenar. A wetland of international importance, it is winter home to tens of thousands of ducks and geese, northern waders and, unfortunately now down to the last known surviving individual, the star of the area, Siberian Crane. For ease of reading, this report is divided into several sections: a. Practicalities (visa, transport, etc). Please refer to 2010 report & updates. [CLICK HERE](#). b. Part One, the South (daily account of birds & localities). [CLICK HERE](#). c. Part Two, the North (daily account of birds & localities). [CLICK HERE](#). d. Systematic List (full list of all birds and mammals seen). [CLICK HERE](#).