

Winter Birding in Iran. Part One, the South.

Contributed by Jos
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The south of Iran in winter is truly amazing - hundreds of thousands of waders on the Persian Gulf, many semi-endemics and specialities in both the Dez valley and the Minab/Jegen areas, assorted raptors and passerines throughout, plus good chances of rarities. My trip began in the area of the Dez River and Karun fish pools, home to delights such as Black Francolin, Iraq Babbler and Pallas's Gull, as well as Black-winged Kites and numerous other birds. I then travelled eastward, stopping briefly at Lake Arzhan, before dropping down to the Persian Gulf at Bandar Abbas. With excellent birding on the Bandar Khamir, Tiab and Qeshm intertidal mud flats and in the superb date groves at Minab, this part of Iran certainly proved the highlight of my trip. Amongst the many attractions, countless waders of about thirty species, good numbers of raptors, plus rarities including a pair of Black Drongos (5th record for Iran), a Pallas's Fish Eagle (14th record for Iran), several Oriental Honey Buzzards, a Black-winged Kite and two Great Knots. The final leg of my trip in the south took me another 260 km to the south-east, visiting the remote Jegan riverine woodlands, a true oasis in an otherwise arid land. A fantastic few hours here, not only finding Sind Pied Woodpecker, but also Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, the very rare Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse and plenty of wintering passerines including Desert Lesser Whitethroats and Mountain Chiffchaff, the latter a bird rarely encountered in winter.

Itinerary and Birding Log. Return to Iran. 17 December. Ping-pong around Europe on flights via Frankfurt and Istanbul, the last leg of my journey to return me to Iran departing Istanbul at 9.30 p.m., next stop Tehran. Fingers slightly crossed that the appalling crash in diplomatic relations might not have any negative results at the awaiting immigration desk. Sushtar & Karun. 18 December. 2.00 a.m., Iman Khomeini International Airport, Tehran. Queues near non-existent, immigration in a good mood, I was through passport control and customs in barely 20 minutes. Out to the throngs of taxi drivers, next stop Mehrabad Airport on the opposite side of the city. Roads as entertaining as ever, the concept of rules clearly not an issue taken too seriously, but arrived at Mehrabad without incident. Dawn on the runways, Jackdaw, Hooded Crow and Rook strutting about, into the air I went again, a one hour internal flight taking me to Ahvaz, heart of the south-west province of Khuzestan. Eighteen months earlier, I had literally dripped under a hyper-humid 46 C, the birding excellent but the conditions the hardest in all Iran. Vowing then to return, I was now fulfilling that desire. An hour later, I was in the historic town of Shushtar, time for the birding to begin. A pleasant 24 C, a quick stroll along the river soon got the trip list up and running – a Pied Kingfisher hovering over an ancient Sassanid weir, Clamorous Reed Warblers grating in small reedbeds, Little Egrets and assorted gulls and waders on a gravel spit just upriver. Skirting the town's edge, climbing over the remains of the Salosel Castle, Graceful Prinias bounced out of scrubby vegetation, my first Afghan Babbler of the trip appeared and White-cheeked Bulbuls chattered and squabbled in courtyard bushes. Some way to the west, I had read of a series of fish pools, pools that seemed to hold great promise. Locating them on satellite maps, access seemed relatively simple, a mere 12 km or so on the back road to Shush and I should be able to see them roadside. It was time to put myself in the hands of Iranian hospitality, I walked to the town's edge and stuck my thumb out. Smiling motorbike rider pulled up, had no idea whatsoever where I wanted to go, but offered me a perch on the back of his bike and off we went. And sure enough, a little while later the pools materialised out of the semi-desert and my first real birding was about to begin. Darn, no sooner had I arrived and first a couple of roadside police spotted me, then two security guards at the pools. Both flagged me over, a camera with an unhealthy length of lens and binoculars, I had fears that I would be refused entry to the pools. More fool me, the police merely wanted to know who I was, the security guards insisting I sat a while and took a tea. The pools themselves were a rather pleasing intro to the birding over the next couple of days – both Marsh and Montagu's Harriers quartered, a Great Spotted Eagle impressed with a slow fly-by, a Merlin doing the same a little later, albeit rather faster! And, in reeded fringes, the first target birds of the trip – family parties of Iraq Babbler. The fish pools turned out to be very good for both babbler species – the Iraq Babbler favouring the reed and damper areas, Afghan Babbler dominating in the drier arid parts. Also, a nice bunch of waders, wintering Wood Sandpipers amongst the haul, but the real crown going to the smart White-tailed Plovers strutting their stuff on an embankment between two pools. No ducks whatsoever, which slightly surprised me, but Common and Smyrna Kingfisher completed the day's trio and, as afternoon sun began to dip, Black Francolins began to emerge, smart males and their accompanying females scurrying from scrub, rarely pausing long enough for any admiration from me! Soon it would be time to head back to my hotel for some well-deserved rest, the previous night essentially a non-event on planes and taxi dashes, but before that the first big bonus of the trip – atop a tree just beyond the pools, a pair of Black-winged Kites. This species was first recorded in Iran in 1998, but since then has begun to rapidly colonise the south of the country, an additional 17 records occurring up to the end of 2010. Well that was a good start. Passing an Isabelline Shrike and a bunch of Spanish Sparrows, it was back to the road I wandered, a car quickly stopping to give me a lift back to Shushtar. End of day one. The Dez River. 19 December. On my earlier trip, I had sat here on the banks of the Dez River, an hour after dawn, my tee-shirt already drenched as I sweltered under sauna-like conditions, Grey Hypocolius flitting overhead, Iraq Babbler scurrying into the tangles of unforgiving riverine thicket. Three hours or so and I'd had to admit defeat, the rewards had been great, Egyptian Nightjar amongst the haul, but I had been wilting. Fast forward to the present, I was arriving half frozen – donning a mere cotton shirt, I soon appreciated the folly of hitching a lift on the back of a motorbike in the chill pre-dawn hours of mid-winter! At the girder bridge over the Dez, I disembarked, eyes rather watery, hands a tad numb. Waved goodbye to the rider who'd given me a lift and began to appreciate the birding paradise that is the Dez – flights of Cormorants and Cattle Egrets leaving roost, immense clouds of Wood Pigeons descending for a morning bathe in the river. A Pied Kingfisher on the struts of the bridge, the highly distinctive Mesopotamian Crows cawing on posts adjacent. I walked out onto the bridge, first mega bird of the day swung into view – a cracking Pallas's Gull almost

beneath the bridge, what a super monster! I was already beginning to feel warm, but early rays of the sun brought additional welcome warmth, it was time for the day's exploration to begin. Off I stumbled into the dense riverine forests. Minutes later, in a landscape now dominated by Robins, Song Thrushes and other avian refugees from colder lands to the north, so too the exotics began to emerge. First, a family party of Iraq Babblers, their bubbling calls rising in excitement as they flocked in to eye me over. Next up, the first Black Francolins of the day, a whirl of wings and the birds arcing away to land in cover far away, rare indeed I got more than a brief glimpse of these things on the ground! Also, Black Redstarts of both semirufus and the Caucasian race, plenty of White-cheeked Bulbuls, a few Bluethroats and, common throughout the day, Graceful Prinias. I had hoped to find Grey Hypocolius again – but as the hours passed, it would seem they all depart the area in winter, I had to console myself with the possibility that birds might disperse towards the Bandar Abbas area, giving me the opportunity to encounter them later in the trip. Still, no shortage of both Afghan and Iraq Babblers, small flocks seen with much regularity – the Afghans again almost entirely in the more arid areas, the Iraqs in the denser thickets near the river. By mid-morning, with temperatures climbing towards a pleasant 24 C, I decided upon a cross country hike to the Choqual Zimbal pyramid - the atmospheric pearl of the ancient Elamite Kingdom, an impressive set of structures surrounding the pyramid, all standing on a hillside bluff at the junction of arid desert and the Dez River valley. Ten kilometres stood between me and the ruins, ten kilometres of rather difficult terrain – think vegetation, occasional ravines, Raptors were beginning to rise, a Greater Spotted Eagle the highlight, Long-legged Buzzard and Marsh Harriers also present, several Sparrowhawks too. Following the river as much as possible, I also stumbled across a couple of White Storks, plus a cormorant roost containing about 120 Great Cormorants and perhaps a dozen Pygmy Cormorants, several of the latter also dotted elsewhere along the meandering river. About midway, I detoured into a small area of agricultural land, the dry soils of one field being tilled by a tractor. And alongside that tractor, a treat – not only White Wagtails and a few Water Pipits, but 12 top-notch hyper-smart White-tailed Plovers, nicely complimented by similar number of Red-wattled Plovers. Very nice they were too. The tractor boys did their best to invite me to their home for lunch, but I persisted – Choqual Zimbal had been one of the casualties of the heat on my earlier trip, it wouldn't be this time. Six kilometres more and, in temperatures rising quite considerably, I arrived. Mighty impressive it was too, not really what I would call a pyramid, but standing in splendid isolation on the desert edge, the structure was certainly imposing enough to impress a cultural numpty such as me. An old guy guarding the site gave me a little water, then back I began to walk. A passing motorbike eased the walk, giving me a lift some five kilometres or so. I was just about to consider hitching the remaining few kilometres back to the road bridge when I spotted another Black-winged Kite! Oo, and a nice photogenic one this time. Deciding it was a good omen, I opted to veer away from the road and walk all the way back – and a very good move that turned out to be, not only adding Long-legged Buzzard and a pair of See-see Partridge, but also surprising a Wolf in a dense area of scrub. Or maybe that should be a Wolf surprised me! I did hope to find Grey Hypocolius, but search as I did, I located none – I guess they truly are summer birds here. A good day coming to an end, I returned to the river bridge, admired the Pied Kingfishers a while, then hitched back to Shushtar.

Karun Fish Pools. 20 December. With appetite wettened a couple of day before, I decided for a return visit to the Karun fish pools, a full day to explore the system that seems to stretch several kilometres. Arrived a little after dawn, a Smyrna Kingfisher atop a road sign, a Common Kingfisher on a bridge, new security guards on duty gave me the once-over, a quick chat on their mobile phone and permission to enter was granted. For the first three hours, sightings were pretty much as a couple of days before – both babblers in periodic flocks, skittish Black Francolins, the smart White-tailed Plovers. The only additions of note were good numbers of Bluethroats and a Moustached Warbler in the reeds. Slowly working north-east, the pools seemed to continue for ever, good numbers of Little Grebes present, but nothing astonishing. Then way off in the distance, flocks of birds were dropping from the sky, some circling, some rising. Quite hot by now, but pushed on, detours to the route continually forced upon me by deep channels criss-crossing the pools system. Another security guard spotted me and came zooming over on his motorbike, no questions whatsoever, but he immediately understood my intended destination. Instructing me to jump on the bike, off we went, five or ten bumpy minutes later, we pulled up at a half-empty pool, the fish being harvested. Half empty of water, but absolutely crammed with birds – numerous herons, egrets and waders all jostling for position. A few words of greeting to the site manager, then settled down to enjoy the offerings – a grand total of 180 Little Egrets, 95 Great White Egrets, 160 Grey Herons and 80 White Storks, plus one Black Stork in their midst and oodles of waders. The site manager suggested I had a look at the next pool too, so I did. Even more waders! Spread across the two pools, a minimum of 300 Kentish Plovers, plus an assortment that included Avocets, Black-winged Stilts, Temminck's Stints and a few Lapwings. And three Pallas's Gulls too, nice. A little while later, it was time to head back to Shushtar, fortunately pretty much the same time as the site manager decided to leave. He gave me a lift back to the main road, an easy lift from there back to town. In the late afternoon, I packed my bags and departed Shushtar, the Khuzestan leg of my trip now over. Ahead a bus of rather many hours, travelling into the night.

Dasht-e-Arzhan. 21 December. Dasht-e-Arzhan, some 40 km west of Shiraz and high on the central Iranian plateau, is a not a very warm place at night - even in my camping days back in August, I'd woken up rather cold! This time it was just downright freezing - ice on roadside pools, a light dusting of snow on higher slopes. I had no tent, not even a sleeping bag, my arrival time was 3 a.m. and I was pretty sure this village had no hotel. After 10 hours on the bus, I really did fancy a little sleep. And fortunately that's just what I got. Before I even got time to start shivering, Iranian hospitality kicked into action again – one of the 24 hour restaurants that serve the busy Shiraz to Bushehr road had little eating platforms out back, carpeted affairs raised off the ground with tented tops and a gas heater inside. No blankets, but plenty of big cushions and, thanks to the kind guy who had seen me jump off the bus, mine for night. What a nice man. Even dressed in all the clothes I could muster, I can't say it was very warm, but it sure beat the alternative. Tea and breakfast arrived at 7.00 a.m., a bright sun was beginning to rise over the high crags. Time for the birding day to begin. A sometimes shallow lake, Dasht-e-Arzhan is a large hollow of flat grassland, a permanent stream

running through the centre, bordered by extensive reeds and headed by a grove of pollarded trees. In summer, it had been an oasis of wheatears on the flats and a rich mix in the reeds and woodland. In winter I had no idea what to expect. The woodland turned out to be virtually devoid of birds, but arriving on the grasses, things were much better. Gone were the wheatears, but in their place flocks of distant passerines wheeling. Dumping my bags in a convenient patch of sedge, I crunched across the still frozen ground and began to follow the stream out into the grassland, twists of mist rising over the flowing water. Bluethroats hopped out, a couple of Moustached Warblers worked the reed bases, Water Rails squealed and several Moorhens darted for cover. Also Marsh Harriers quartering nearby, both Little and Great White Egrets rising from shallow pools and, a nice surprise, three chunky Purple Gallinules ambling out from a meander in the stream. Corn Buntings, flocks and flocks of them, circled from the grasslands to reeds and back again, these were to be the most abundant bird of the day, many hundreds clearly wintering in the area, Yellowhammers also present in smaller numbers. With the rising sun, the wetter areas of grass were rapidly thawing, water again beginning to trickle through. On these areas, several dozen Water Pipits, a couple of smart Citrine Wagtails and a selection of waders, Common Snipe, Lapwing, Green Sandpiper and Common Redshank the most abundant, but a Temminck's Stint and Black-tailed Godwits also amongst the others. Also, both rather unexpected, one Common Shelduck and a little later a pair of Ruddy Shelduck. Raptors were also now rising, both Common and Long-legged Buzzard present, so too a female Montagu's Harrier. The best of the bunch however was a flock of eagles that began to rise from beyond the reedbed and climbing on developing thermals, five splendid Steppe Eagles, a further distant eagle probably of this species too. Arzhan was proving better than I had expected, and just then it got even better – from an area of rank vegetation, as Skylarks and yet more Corn Buntings flitted each and every way, up flushed a bustard. Houbara Bustard is, I believe, the more frequent bustard in Iran, but with white flashes extending across the bulk of the wings, this was a Little Bustard, a slightly lesser prize perhaps, but still a most magnificent bird. Tee-shirt weather now, a couple of hours and more I spent wandering, three Penduline Tits in the reeds, a flock of Spanish Sparrows too. Then it was back to the village, a quick hitch later and I was on the move again, the night's destination the nearby city of Shiraz. Arrived in time for a late afternoon/evening stroll around the covered bazaars and sidestreets of this historic Iranian city. Transit Shiraz-Bandar Abbas. 22 December. The coastal waters, islands and lowlands bordering the Strait of Hormoz held great promise to be the best, most exciting leg of my planned journey – a sub-tropical feast of vast intertidal mudflats, extensive mangroves, luxuriant date groves, backed by arid mountains and semi-desert. It was the lure of this region that had really pulled me back to Iran, the temptation of Terek Sandpipers and Crab Plovers by the bucketload getting me licking my lips before I even bought the ticket! Bandar Abbas, the city at the region's heart, however, is rather a long way from Shiraz, so enough of dillying around in the hinterlands, I boarded a bus to do the journey in one foul sweep. And so it was, nine hours on the bus this day, over endless folds of mountain contortions, through barren desert flats and umpteen dusty village. Saw barely a bird of note, the one notable exception being yet another Black-winged Kite, and arrived in Bandar Abbas after dark, so roll on the next day. Bandar Khamir. 23 December. A gentle introduction to the delights of the area, taking a savari to the small port of Bandar Khamir, some 60 km or so west. Glorious weather, a pleasant 28 C, blue waters sparkling off to the left as I arrived, a strip of green mangrove hugging the coast. Jumped out of the savari six kilometres short of town, began a hike towards the distant waters, a bit of rocky slope to navigate, then a patch of dense acacia scrub. Camels taking a very careful nibble of the acacia buds, Purple Sunbirds zipping past like demented feather balls, seeming to be never ending quarrel with the next sunbird along. Purple Sunbird, a bit of a rubbish name – rare indeed do they ever live up to the name, a better name would be 'Yellowish-with-a-bit-of-purple-smudging-on-the-brest Sunbirds'. Also in the acacia scrub, very aptly named Little Green Bee-eaters, birds of pure beauty, plus Afghan Babblers, an Isabelline Shrike and, low over the canopy, African Rock Martins. As scrub gave way to salt pan, I sat atop a dirt embankment, had my morning coffee and planned my assault on the mudflats stretching ahead. The tide was unfortunately already in, but with binoculars, I could see waders dotted all along, so I really could take my pick – the most sensible option seemed to be to walk eastward directly into the sun for a while, then double back and bird along the water's edge with the sun now in my favour. And what a nice selection was waiting for me, though the truly large flocks were off roosting somewhere, amongst the assorted Curlews, Whimbrels and Redshanks, I was to see the first of the ranked masses that would come to characterize the next days – Terek Sandpipers simply everywhere, not in flocks but pretty much evenly scattered from the beachfront to the water's edge and to every nook and cranny in nearby mangroves too. Maybe 60 or so at this first little point. Also Marsh Sandpiper, bunches of Kentish Plovers and good numbers of Greater Sand Plovers too, a few Lesser Sand Plovers mixed in. Like a parting of the waves, these sand plover flocks were very nice, the birds simply walking each way to let you walk straight through to continue your route. One big bulk of shaggy bird blocking the way ahead, my first Dalmatian Pelican of the trip. To his right, Western Reef Egrets paddling the shallows, stately Great White Egrets too. Onward, the mangroves approaching – I had seen Striated Heron here in 2010, but none this time – plenty more Western Reef Herons, a few Indian Pond Herons stalking abundant mudskippers. A slight flit amongst the smaller birds, a Shikra had come swinging in, landing atop a convenient pole just adjacent, the nice chin stripe showing a treat. With the tide high, the mangroves were not at their best, so I decided to relocate a little, walking down to the town and seeking out the pier that cuts out into the bay. Here I would await the falling tide, Gull-billed Terns and Heuglin's Gulls close company to pass my time, one Osprey too. And as that tide fell, exposing a sand bank opposite and trillions of lungfish and crabs, so the true stars came out to play, first two or three, then ten or so, then more and more, the grand total within an hour a splendid 250 Crab Plovers all strutting their stuff, the bold blacks and whites of adults frequently trailed by a rasping youngster. Shouldn't forget the Terek Sandpipers too – as far as the eye could see, a few here, a few there, my counts pretty meaningless, but perhaps 200 now laid out in front of me. Also Oystercatchers, a Spoonbill, a small number of Greater Flamingoes and three fly-by Ferruginous Ducks. A buzz of gulls over the next pier to the west persuaded me to take a stroll that way too, the sun now beginning its afternoon dip. A

policeman at the one end of the pier and a soldier at the other end both came over for a chat, a Western tourist sporting a telescope, telephoto lens and binoculars is not an everyday event on the shores of the Strait of Hormoz these days, a bit of peering at birds through the scope, a lot of oos and arrrs as they borrowed my binoculars and I was on my way, settling down for a late afternoon sunbathe at the pier's end. Three Caspian Terns at close quarters, but nothing much new. A little bit of chatting with some locals, then back I started to wander, still time for a last few treats – three Indian Sand Larks at the beach front, hopping about amongst bits of broken boats, then my first Desert Lesser Whitethroat of the trip in a small bush. Got back to town, two Alpine Swifts cruising the skies above. My first day in this region was over, not bad for the gentle introduction. With that, I caught a savari to Bandar Abbas, a small flock of House Crows there to welcome me back. Qeshm Island. 24 December. With the United Arab Emirates and Oman on the one side, Iran on the other, and access to Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait dependent on it, the Strait of Hormoz is the politically most sensitive body of water in the world, a strategic bottleneck controlling the entrance to the Persian Gulf and 40% of the world's oil supply. Early morning Christmas Eve, there I am shooting across the waters in a speedboat bound for Qeshm Island, a journey of about 25 km past supertankers and cargoships anchored in the sheltered waters awaiting permission to enter port. Sparkling blue water, but few birds. Half an hour later I was in Qeshm town, the job to find a hotel with vacancies rather harder than I expected! After rather much walking, I found a little place on a hill overlooking the town, chucked my bags then decided to waste no time, the intertidal flats on Qeshm are of international importance to wintering waders, some excellent birding lay ahead. Before even leaving town, the birding was not bad – on irrigated road islands, dozens of Water Pipits scampered between sprinklers and an Indian Roller watched down from a street light, while just off the main promenade a whole jumble of terns congregated on the poles of fish traps set in the intertidal waters. Parked myself on one of the well-placed benches and scoped out to the throng – five species of tern all together, Swift Terns the most numerous, Gull-billed Terns and Sandwich Terns coming in at second and third, with Caspian Tern and Lesser Crested Tern taking the last two positions. Also several Cormorants, dozens of Heuglin's Gulls and a few Western Reef Herons. Keeping the legendary Hara Mangrove forest for the next day, I then decided to hitch to a random spot some 10 km east of town, two arid peaks dropping down to an extensive area of mudflats, mangrove off yonder. Walked across a saltpan and followed a sandbar to a craggy overlook, one Isabelline Shrike on the way, two Desert Wheatears too. Adjacent, a couple of Egyptian Vultures dropped onto some waste land, a flock of 18 Dalmatian Pelicans flapped a lazy beat into a thermal rising off one of the peaks. Humongous gatherings of waders again, Terek Sandpipers ringing in at about 50, Crab Plovers at maybe 140, but in simply unimaginable numbers, hundreds and hundreds of Greater and Lesser Sand Plovers scattered from beach to eternity, Kentish Plovers also in their hundreds. A couple more Dalmatian Pelicans floating by, a string of pink dots signifying Greater Flamingoes in the far distance. Marsh Sandpipers also quite abundant here, at least 40 quite close, a concentration not seen elsewhere. Well, what a nice way to fritter away the remaining part of the day. Added three more Indian Sand Larks on the walk back, plus my only Tawny Pipit of the trip. Didn't hear too many Christmas carols that night, not even a hoot of an owl to compensate. The call to prayer at the mosque, assorted car horns and the general noise of the street, Christmas Eve my style. Qeshm Island. 25 December. Not much Christmassy about this morning - left the hotel at 6.30 a.m. into a warm breeze, a sun edging the horizon, a glorious day ahead. A few street vendors already unpacking wares, taxi cruising to snatch up early passengers. Got to the main coast road, arriving just in time to have a Striated Heron do a morning fly-by. I then stuck my thumb out and I was on the move again, a quick lift taking me to the town of Dargahan, a short wait and then another lift to the village of Laft. Laft is quaint, a small historic port with the traditional lence cargo boats tied at the quayside, a maze of small alleys leading off and a skyline of ancient badgirs and minarets over mud-built buildings. To the immediate west, the vast Harra Sea Forest, 9000 hectares of mangrove, intertidal mudflat, blus waters and tens of thousands of birds. Or at least there would have been tens of thousands of birds had I not arrived at high tide, the sand banks covered and the bulk of birds off a roost somewhere. A stroll around town and then I began my wanders, first a walk of several kilometres to the south - birds not overly abundant, but a nice little roost contained a good assortment. I wondered what the stink was, until I spotted a dead camel a couple of metres to my side, so moved along a little then settled to enjoy the little collection sitting just yonder. Both sand plovers again congregating together, Kentish Plovers dotted about too, but the better prize today was amongst the roosting Dunlin. Only a small flock of Dunlins here, about 400, but scattered through them, smart little stripey jobs - a minimum of 45 Broad-billed Sandpipers, a real treat for Christmas morning. Hormozgan Province is a very important wintering area for this species - borne out by later observations, it would appear that Broad-billed Sandpipers actually account for about 10% of the calidrid flocks. With vast swirling flocks of calidrids often seen on distant mudflats, the actual totals of Broad-billed Sandpipers is anybody's guess. When they are sat just metres ahead however, they are superb. An Shikra over, noisy Caspian Terns adjacent, I sat a while and waited for the tide to finally turn. A Hume's Lesser Whitethroat, my only one of the trip, put in an appearance, so too Desert Wheatears and Desert Lark. I wandered back to town and to the tidal flats further north. By now, the waters were finally retreating, expanses of mudflat appearing, waders galore immediately claiming them. After having to deal with an enthusiastic youngster who wanted to show me his abilities to do wheelies on his motorbike exactly where the waders were gathering, I then had a right jolly time. Today's Terek Sandpiper count clocked the 400 mark, but the bird I was more interested in was Crab Plover. Only 60 or so present at this early stage of the falling tide, but wanting photographs I decided it was time to take off my shoes and go for a slop through the deep muds. Not a very timid wader, it worked a treat - the tideline was rapidly vanishing into the distance, but one pair of very co-operative birds hung on for me, a stately adult and squawking youngster. Nice. Back on shore, a Steppe Grey Shrike perched on driftwood, an Egyptian Vulture hung over a low crag adjacent. T'was now time for me to hitch-hike the 50 km back to Qeshm Town, Christmas birding over. Minab & Tiab. 26 December. Qeshm departure, official speedboats weren't running, perhaps too early in the morning, so with a bunch of others I was herded down rocks to a small speedboat waiting in the shallows. Sat with assorted cargo, it really felt as if we were smugglers as we motored back across the Strait of Hormoz

just after dawn, the bumpy crossing marked by little more than a farewell House Crow in Qeshm town, a Black Tern sitting on drifting rubbish and a few Swift Terns meandering between assorted cargo ships anchored off Bandar Abbas. Arriving in Bandar Abbas, I made my way across town to catch a savari to my next destination - 85 km to the south-east, the small town of Minab. A slither of greenery sandwiched between arid hills and saltflats, Minab offers some of the best birding on the entire Iranian coast - an excellent range of species in the date groves, plus rich pickings on the intertidal creeks at Tiab, just 20 km to the east. Add to this some of the warmest folk in all Iran, a comfortable hotel within walking distance of the date groves and all was set for an excellent few days. Eighteen months earlier, despite oppressively high temperatures and humidity, Minab had been one of the highlights of my trip to Iran, so here I was back for more - the temperature was now a pleasant 26 C, the humidity basically gone and, after dumping my bags in the Sadaf Hotel, I was back in the date groves. Ah, Little Green Bee-eaters and Indian Rollers, the staples of Minab, so too White-cheeked Bulbuls, Eastern Pied Wheatears and Purple Sunbirds. Zipping about everywhere these birds, most pleasant. A couple of 'buzzards' drifted low through the palms, the glimpses suggesting something a little interesting, but I got nothing conclusive. I wandered on in vain hope of Sind Pied Woodpecker, but instead ran into a flock of Spanish Sparrows in shrubbery, an Indian Pond Heron on an irrigation ditch and a Bonelli's Eagle high overhead. All was very nice, but as the heat climbed, I decided to abandon the shady retreats of the palms to hitch-hike down to Tiab, a coastal area some 20 km to the west. On that trip eighteen months earlier, I had discovered three Great Stone Plovers on a mud bank down there, maybe there would still be present. Arriving, I quickly located the spot, a deep creek leading past a port of traditional lengeh boats. Now, as then, the sun was going to be in exactly the wrong position - if the birds were to reappear as the sun began to drop, they would again be silhouettes. I however still had time to relocate and try to approach from the opposite side ... a small detour that added about four kilometres each way to my walk. A good walk though, one Black Stork flying over, eight Broad-billed Sandpipers in a small channel, seven Curlew Sandpipers too. As I began to approach the mudbank, still purely on a hunch that the Great Stone Plovers would still be there, I found the going was getting ever more gooey, my feet now weighing a tonne due to caked mudflat accumulating in great wads. A flock of 15 Dalmatian Pelicans wafted over, a single and a pair a little later. The creek came into view, two Pied Kingfisher hovering aside a lengeh, a Smyrna Kingfisher on a mooring line. And then all the stopping and sliding paid off. From a clump of scrubby vegetation, out stepped one enormous beak, a head of bold blacks and whites and a body of sleek sandy-grey, a dash of black making up a bar across the wing - Great Stone Plover, a beauty. And then another, and another, and another! Eeks, they were everywhere! Eighteen of the stunners, adorning the banks of the creek left and right, fantastic. With the sun dropping rapidly behind me, I got my photographs, then began the long walk back. Lesser Short-toed Larks on route back, a Citrine Wagtail and Water Pipit too. Distant, 40 Western Reef Herons were dropping onto pools, something to investigate the next day. Hitched a lift back to Minab and retired for the night, rather content. Minab & Tiab. 27 December. What an eventful day! Found Iran's 5th ever Black Drongos, found Iran's 12th ever Pallas's Fish Eagle, found two additional rarities of lesser scale and, in addition to all that, got detained by the military! And I lost my watch. The day had started with an attempt to reacquaint with a family of Spotted Little Owls. Eighteen months earlier, in the depths of the palm groves, I had found the birds basking in the early morning sun on a dead mango tree. If I could find the same tree, supposing it hadn't been chopped down, there had to be a reasonable chance that the owls might still adorn it. My walk began, Indian Rollers and Little Green Bee-eaters dripping off the bushes, White-cheeked Bulbuls everywhere, Purple Sunbirds in full song, I snaked between the palms searching out my tree. A half hour of walking and I found myself on a familiar path, another few minutes down a track between mud walls and huts and there was my tree, still twisting up between date palms. And cor blimey, bingo, there was a Spotted Little Owl sitting on exactly the same branch as last time! Well that chuffed me considerably, I had not really expected such luck. Another couple of hundred metres along, as I paused to admire an Indian Roller having a bicker with a Smyrna Kingfisher, a distinctive sh'weeep sh'weeep caught my attention. And stone me, there sallied a pair of Black Drongos, perching on exposed twigs then swooping out before returning to the same point. Black Drongo has only been recorded in Iran four times before, so a few photographs to record the event, then a celebratory coffee! Onward through the groves, Eastern Pied Wheatears on piles of stones, a Grey Francolin calling, a Desert Lesser Whitethroat making a brief appearance, an Isabelline Shrike pausing rather longer. And then another bonus - sitting atop a palm watching a scrubby field below, yet another Black-winged Kite, my fifth individual of the trip. Though the morning was going well, my intended destination of choice this day was not the date palms at Minab, but rather a return to Tiab to further explore this vast region of intertidal flats, creeks and salt pans. With this in mind, I departed the palms, got a lift on a motorbike to the main road and then hitched the 20 km to Tiab. Checking satellite maps, I had noticed a track that seemed to veer south, then west continuing all the way to the mouth of a large creek where it emptied into the Strait of Hormoz. A very nice gentleman just happened to be going down this track as I arrived, gave me a lift and took me right to the end, a distance of about 10 km. The result was a feast for the eyes, the road petered out at a small port harbouring a couple of dozen traditional lengeh boats, and to each side mud flats ladden with birds, a rising tide pushing them ever closer. Dalmatian Pelicans, Spoonbills, Western Reef Herons, Oystercatchers by the hundred, I didn't even need binoculars! Time for second coffee I decided, settling down between two of the wooden hulks for my first careful scan. Terek Sandpipers and both Greater and Lesser Sand Plovers in their usual dominant positions amongst the ranks of waders, but also more Curlew Sandpipers here than elsewhere, plus a good assembly of assorted other waders and a few Lesser Crested Terns. A little further on, a small walled compound jutted out onto the river front, the views from there would be fantastic, the sun perfect and an extensive mud bank just beyond. Navigated around the compound, stopping a while for a very obliging Pallas's Gull on the beach and then set my scope up for a nice long gander at the comings and goings on the river front. And perfect it was, several Dalmatian Pelicans loafing in the water, an Osprey overhead and, after a long search of the countless waders scattered before me, suddenly two of my target birds plodding along on a sand spit just about to be swallowed by the tide. With only one record in Iran prior to the year 2000, small numbers of

Great Knot have since been discovered most winters on the coastal flats off Minab. And that is exactly what I was now watching, two smart Great Knots retreating from the rising tide. Eventually up came the water and off they flew, settling in a wader roost further up on the beach. All very pleasant. Further out, on sand bars sandwiched by the pinks of Greater Flamingos, I then spotted a big blob. A big blob probably about 2km away in the murky depths of the heat haze. With the scope it was clearly a *Haliaeetus* eagle and clearly an adult, some white on the tail could be discerned and a pale, almost creamy head. White-tailed Eagle would be rather rare on the Persian Gulf, so the extra-limital Pallas's Fish Eagle had to be a contender too, occasional records of this Iranian rarity having occurred a little further east. And as I squinted to try and make out more detail, so an Iranian soldier found me. Unbeknown to me, the compound against whose wall I was sitting, not only was for the fishermen, but it was also a small military post. Oops. And bigger oops, I did not have my passport with me, something that certainly seemed to miff my new soldier friend. And oops number three, my optical firepower was all pointing out to the Strait of Hormoz, the very body of water that also unknown to me was at that very moment centre stage in the dangerous games of international power play being slogged out, tiddlywinks at a grand scale. My soldier was calling the camp, repeatedly posturing for my passport. I stuck to my eagle, making out a black terminal band to the tail as the bird shuffled, a fairly clean contrast between creamy head and dark back. Despite good light, no pale or yellow bill. It was Pallas's Fish Eagle! Soldier began to pace. I thought it time to make a tactical retreat, packing up my scope and rather long telephoto lens. No chance, just as I got round the front of the compound, I was summoned by another soldier, next rank up it seemed. Very friendly, but I was going nowhere - except into the compound and there escorted to an office, five senior army guys round a table. Oo er, this had potential to be leading towards trouble. Five pairs of eyes showing some form of mystification, faces more ones of surprise than anger. I decided a nice smile would be order. They replied the compliment. Fear not however, despite more requests for my passport and a general non-understanding on their part that hotels in Iran always hold onto tourists' passports, I had little to worry about - Iran is essentially a country of incredible hospitality and these guys were no exception. Lots of smiles, plus tea and biscuits over interrogation, the latter rather limited due to little common language. Two more officer types arrived, more hand shakes, half an hour drifted by, nothing seemed to be happening. I truly hoped upper levels of bureaucracy were not going to become involved - hours could easily turn into days and weeks that way - but then, after I had mentioned my hotel name several times, I think they called and checked who I was, they waved me off goodbye, big smiles as I went. I thought it prudent not to return to my eagle blob, besides it was high tide now, so it was probably gone. Instead I began to wander back, a Shikra on roadside wires deserving a quick photograph, a Booted Eagle circling overhead a few more. Two more soldiers approached on a motorbike, just a wave as they went by, I was to remain a free man. I soon hitched a lift on another motorbike back to the village of Tiab, jumping off just before I got there to look for some fish pools I had also spotted on the satellite maps. I found them with little trouble, they were not amazing, but not too bad either - six Black Storks, about 150 Western Reef Herons and a couple of Black-necked Grebes the highlight. With so much excitement during the day, not to forget the long hours under a burning sun, I decided to head back just after 3 p.m. for a couple of lazy hours at the hotel. And the first car that went by, one of the officers from the military camp! Big smile and big hello, and the nice gent then gave me a lift all 20 km back to my hotel. Perfect end to a perfect day! Minab & Jask. 28 December. Back to the date plantations, a little after dawn. A tad too late for more encounters with the Spotted Little Owls, no sign of the Black Drongos either, but I had a new bunch of treats lined up for me on this day. First was a Blue Rock Thrush atop an old building at the village edge, the next was a confirmation of a bird I thought I had seen in the previous days. Gliding across the canopy of palms, magically managing to always remain mostly hidden, I had several glimpses of a medium-sized raptor, all pointers suggesting Oriental Honey Buzzard, but never a view to confirm it. All that changed today, after a couple of frustrating repeats of birds moving behind palms, out soared my first definite Oriental Honey Buzzard, a female passing straight overhead, right into the line of fire for my camera. Excellent bird, and another newcomer to Iran, the first records only dating back to 1999. In the intervening 12 years, almost 20 more records have occurred, most in this south-east corner of the country. I was certain that all the glimpses I was getting actually related to several birds, so finding an open area, I sat myself on a pile of dirt and had a little sunbathe, one eye to the sky. The tactic worked, no less than four Oriental Honey Buzzards identified during the morning, three females and one smart male. Also noticed up two Shikras, a White Pelican circling with 18 Dalmatian Pelicans and, on a tussock of vegetation just nearby, my only Indian Silverbills of the trip. My nose slightly more sunburnt than before, I eventually decided it time to move on, my chosen route adding a pair of Hoopoes, a total of seven Desert Lesser Whitethroats, one Long-billed Pipit and a smart semirufus Black Redstart. Loads of Spanish Sparrows too, plus a few African Rock Martins passing over. It was time for me to wander back to the hotel, I was planning to leave Minab. Heading south and east from Minab really begins a voyage into intrepid lands - harsh jagged landscapes of arid desert, few settlements, no formal accommodation and, for lands in a line east of Jask, on travel advisories warning against all travel (the region close to the Pakistan border being the one area of Iran where occasional trouble does surface). Just my cup of tea. I shared a taxi with two most delightful ladies for the 210 km hop from Minab to Jask, they seeming most amused that I would be going to a town late in the afternoon that had absolutely no hotel. And indeed it did not have a hotel, a couple of circuits of the essentially one-street town and I began to think it was time to head out into the desert for a rather uncomfortable night not only tent-less, but also without sleeping bag. I still however had a sneaking suspicion that the town did actually have a *mosaferkhaneh* hidden away somewhere, a type of ultra basic guest house, so I began to quiz locals on the street. Responses all seemed in the negative, but then I was bundled into a car and driven round a few back streets, the driver stopping to bang on locked metal gates at a periodic moments. Gates opened at the third place, I had a home for the night! The term 'basic' was actually an over-statement - even by my rather low standards, this place was a dump, the cat picking through the rubbish outside a fitting compliment to my des res this night. Still, who cares if the ragged mattress is on the floor when you're asleep? 29 December. Jegen River. Fled my accommodation at dawn, plans to use it as a

base for a couple of days shelved. Hit the road and hitched to Jegen River, an occasional water course sitting some 40 km east on the lonely road that winds ever on into the dust of Pakistan many many hours away. Few tourists venture this way, the local Balutchi population seeming a little suspicious, requests to see passport a norm. One or two incidents would make me advice caution in visiting this area. For me, however, getting a lift relatively quickly, it was all a side issue – once I’d jumped out at the river bridge, I soon disappeared into the old tamarack woodlands that border the river, venturing north away from a small village that exists to the south. Not another soul disturbed the peace for my whole morning, but excellent birding - Desert Lesser Whitethroats and White-cheeked Bulbuls the most numerous passerines present, Eastern Pied Wheatears, Black Redstarts (semirufus) and Purple Sunbirds also in no short supply, plus Afghan Babblers, a Great Grey Shrike (aucheri) and Brown-necked Raven. One Plain Leaf Warbler was an expected highlight. My main reason to be here however was Sind Pied Woodpecker, a species of very limited global range, its heartland the borderlands of Iran and Pakistan. Took over an hour to find, and then I found two – a male and female travelling together, a similar scenario to my previous visit here. Had hoped to get good photographs, but the birds had other ideas, vanishing behind trunks or into thickets of branches everytime my lens pointed in their direction! Soon however, I was to be distracted my woodpeckers, the liquid bubbling voices of sandgrouse descending to a set of low dunes just yonder, magical. Trotted off in their direction and soon could see them feeding on the ground, 40 Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, a bonus indeed. A short way on, three more sandgrouse on the deck, more Chestnut-bellied I assumed. But, hmm, funny head pattern, nice plumage. Stone me, Lichtenstein’s Sandgrouse! Widely assumed to be an uncommon resident in south-east Iran, there have been nevertheless only a half dozen or so records in the last 30 years, what staggering luck. And it was to continue, after a pair of Bonelli’s Eagles overhead and a distant Steppe Eagle, I then encountered two phylloscs that roused interest – basically Chiffchaffs, but with a warmth of brown totally replacing any hints of green or yellow, even the rump area a uniform brown. With clear supercilium and dark legs, really only one candidate – Mountain Chiffchaff, another bird for which the distribution is poorly understood in the region. Known to breed in the Kalibar Mountains of north-east Iran, its wintering grounds are basically unknown, the only previous winter records being two birds near Bushehr on the Persian Gulf and four birds in January 2005 in these very same forests along the Jegen River. With the sun now burning quite and really not feeling much like mid-winter, bird activity was beginning to quieten down. Time to move on I thought. Ideas to visit the excellent Soorgalm mudflats and Khor-e Khalasi both would require a multi-kilometre across the desert, the potential reward at the end including possible Goliath Heron and Oriental White-eye. Laziness however persuaded me to give it up for another time – time to turn north instead, from the Gulf of Oman and Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea, a journey of 1950 km in front of me. Hitched 40 km back to Jask, took a savari the 220 km to Minab, arriving just in time to connect with an evening bus north to Shahr-e-Babek, another nine-hour slog north. Ahead lay adventures in the north of the country - the freezing deserts of the interior, the snow-capped Albroz Mountains and the rich lowlands of the Caspian coast. [CLICK HERE](#) for this second part of the trip.