

## Winter Birding in Iran. Part Two, the North.

Contributed by Jos  
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A country of contrasts, leaving the sparkling blue waters of the Persian Gulf, I was soon travelling through sub-zero deserts, mountains decked in snow and exploring the lush wet lowlands of the Caspian. Birding was excellent throughout, starting with Pleske's Ground Jay at Shahr-e-Babek, then a good range of species on Mount Damavand, before descending to Fereydoon Kenar on the Caspian coast, the undoubted highlight being the spectacular Siberian Crane. Thereafter, to round the trip off, I travelled eastward to the Shahrud area, this fantastic finale producing such rewards as Sakar Falcon, Eversmann's Redstart, Mongolian Finch and Pine Bunting.

30 December. Shahr-e Babek. 2.30 a.m. arrival, dropped by the bus on the roadside. Darn cold, the warmth of the Persian Gulf now replaced by the near freezing nights of the Central Iranian Plateau. I had a plan to make a little break in Shahr-e Babek, or more pointedly in the desert 20 km west, but I sure had no desires to sit and freeze while awaiting dawn, so I wandered across to the petrol station to enquire about accommodation. Fixed, half the remaining night was spent trying to sleep on a carpet in a very cold back room, the next half getting warm again by a gas fire in the front office. Kind folks all in that petrol station. As hints of dawn lit the eastern skies out into the chill I walked, wandering the kilometre or so to the Herat road. Stuck my thumb out and got a lift, exactly 18 km along here a band of zygophyllum straddles the road. This is the habitat of Iran's endemic and highly charismatic Pleske's Ground Jay. It is also highly elusive, the bird giving me a day-and-a-half round around in 2010 before I finally got views to please. A cold breeze chilling my nose, the sun climbing from the horizon barely adding a degree of warmth. The walk started. Bar the replacement of a sweltering sun by the cold, the experience much as the year before, the numerous Desert Wheatears also now gone. An hour into the walk, a bunch of Desert Larks the only avian actor to appear and then the area's secondary attractions began to appear – flights of sandgrouse, presumably returning from morning drinks somewhere. Many had the unfortunate habit of flying directly between me and the sun, the silhouettes beyond my identification skills to put to a species. Fortunately, some were more co-operative – a minimum of 60 being Crowned Sandgrouse, but two small flocks offering variety, six going over being Black-bellied Sandgrouse, a later flock of eight being Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, the latter a winter visitor to these plains I believe. I continued my walk, another hour passed, then a scan finally produced the result – a distant sandy orange blob atop a straggly zygophyllum. It had to be the bird! A change of direction in my route, and ten minutes more and the bird was still showing very nicely, a superb adult Pleske's Ground Jay, the black bib showing a treat in the sun. Edged closer, hoped to get photograph, but being a typical Pleske's Ground Jay, it dictated the playing. It hopped off the top of the bush and literally hit the ground running, I never saw it again! An hour of searching, a few Crested Larks and one Little Owl found in the process, but no further sight of the bird, so decided to call it quits, my journey north to resume. Back in Shahr-e Babek town, I took a savari/local bus combination to Yazd, 250 km north. And here I stopped, Yazd is one of the great desert cities on the historic east-west trade route. I stayed in the Silk Road Hotel, simply the nicest accommodation I encountered in Iran – a tastefully restored khan-e-sonnati in the Old City, a most atmospheric place with rooms set around a courtyard, the rooms oozing history with vaulted ceilings, traditional tapestry hangings, ornate wooden doors and walls of sun-baked mud. Nice. 31 December. Yazd. A day off! Hung up my binoculars for the day, wandered the bazaars and narrow alleys of the Old City, paused at the impressive al-Jameih mosque, but most of the day simply relaxed in the courtyard of the Silk Road Hotel. As evening drew in, it was time to start moving north again, I boarded the train for Tehran, a ten-hour journey ahead. At the midnight hour, as 2011 slipped into history, I was trundling across the edge of the Dasht-e-Kavir desert, snoozing quite happily on my berth. Damavand. 1 January. Well, 2012 arrived with a bang, literally! Too many nights on the trot either on dodgy floors or transport, a typical self-imposed lack of meal stops – 3.30 a.m., the train is rolling into Tehran, I take a step into the gangway. Next thing I know, rather bewildered I am regaining consciousness with fellow passengers trying to get me back to my feet – I had unceremoniously collapsed in the aisle, banging my head as I went! And before even getting back to my berth, I did again. Oo er, what a start to the New Year, the kind folk on the train offering me a wheelchair to the station, which my embarrassment persuaded me to decline. A little before 3.45 a.m., I reach the station waiting room. In light of events, I decided it prudent to take a break for an hour, drink a little tea and scoff a chocolate bar. 5.00 a.m., time for the day to start in earnest, a taxi across Tehran to the eastern bus terminal and from there a bus to Polur, a village at the base of Mount Damavand. And what I did not expect on arrival was snow!!! Two days earlier I had been basking in 30 C and now I was standing in a snowstorm! First birds of the New Year, in order, Magpie, House Sparrow, Laughing Dove and Snow Finch, the latter a flock of about 60 circling over a snow-covered hillside adjacent. I trudged up through the snow to the Mountain Federation Centre, the place I hoped to stay. Though still only a little after dawn, all seemed to be closed, a slight spanner in my plans. No big problem though, the village of Reynah lay just 20 km to the north and accommodation was guaranteed there. I could have hitched a lift down the main valley road, but giving my head a quick shake to check I wasn't likely to collapse again, I opted for the more scenic mountain route, a quiet road that climbs for about 10 km, then drops back down to the village. Donning my winter warms, I headed off into the snow, a Western Rock Nuthatch trilling from boulders aside the road. About three kilometres along, something most amazing. Just as I reached a sharp bend, I glanced up to a snowfield on my right to see a Wolf disappearing up the slope, my second of the trip. And as I watched him go, I noticed yet another. And this one was the absolute classic image of a Wolf - a large grey individual, heavy winter coat, eyes intense, just standing watching me, simply magical. Of course, given I was hiking with all my gear, my camera was in the backpack! Quickly unloaded all, but already the Wolf had turned and was now trotting off after his companion, my few shots a poor reflection of the moment. New Year's Day was turning out quite well after all, and just to confirm it, a flock of Shore Larks then appeared pretty much where the Wolves had left from. Onward

I continued my walk, the snow abating and the sun then appearing, a winter wonderland of sparkling snow and mountains all around. A flock of Alpine Choughs wheeled and sang their melodies, a single Red-fronted Serin dropped onto exposed thistle heads. Kilometres passed, the altitude becoming ever higher, three Golden Eagles appeared in succession, a covey of 25 Chukars went hurtling down the slope. At the 10 km mark, just as I reached the highest point on the road and was getting a bit tired of lugging my rucksack, the first car of the day finally came along. I was quite thankful that he stopped, even more thankful that he gave me a lift down to the village of Reynah. I rented a room in the village, actually a whole floor, had a deserved cup of coffee, then despite certain misgiving regarding my health, I decided to explore the terraced orchards and field plots below the village. I had expected Syrian Woodpeckers and maybe flocks of Shore Larks and Crimson-winged Finches &ndash; I did find three Syrian Woodpeckers, but there were none of the latter two, nor any other flocks of mountain passerines. I did however see another Golden Eagle, find a bunch of Tree Sparrows and, a right little belter, a male Eversmann's Redstart, bird of the day. It was now approaching 4.00 p.m., a cold wind was whipping up across the mountainside, I could add altitude, low temperatures and the rather hard trek to my list of things that were half killing me. I ached from head to toe, time to call it a day. I toured the village shops, acquired assorted yum yums, then retired to my accommodation. A little after 4.00 p.m. I was in bed, one of my more memorable New Year's Days finally over. I slept till next morning! Damavand. 2 January. Assault on the high altitudes, back in full health and better equipped for the Alpine zone than when last here, I decided on a climb to the mid-slopes of Mount Damavand, snowy vistas with the 5600 metre peak towering above in a swirl of cloud. Not really a day of many birds, the abundant wheatears and buntings of the summer season long departed, but Chukars were in no short supply and, with a total of seven during the day, Golden Eagles offered frequent company, one particularly engaging immature attempting a Chukar hunt just beneath my position. Followed fresh Wolf tracks through the snow for much of the morning, first a pair, then later a lone individual, but no sightings today. At 2500 metres, the Chukars began to whittle away, and from there up, only a flock of Twite, the Golden Eagles and, at one particularly dramatic moment, a Lammergeier low overhead, the haunting silhouette first appearing from the slopes above, the immature bird then soaring over my position, dropping down into the valley below. At 3000 metres, with birds basically non-existent and further outward progress requiring the crossing of fairly deep snow drifts, I turned back, choosing a return route that would take me into a deep vegetated valley. Flocks of Chough fed on the turf, a few Rock Doves too. I had hoped for an accentor, maybe Alpine, maybe Radde's, but scored on neither. As I again approached civilisation, the first stunted orchards and poplars began to appear, and there, bold as brass, on a broken limb of a fallen trunk, a second Eversmann's Redstart, better views than the day before and again a cracking male. Also notched up another Syrian Woodpecker, and after hearing several on the slopes, finally got to see an Eastern Rock Nuthatch, nicely complemented by a Western Rock Nuthatch some ten minutes later. Late afternoon, with most of the mountain birds seen (potential Crimson-winged Finch, Rock Bunting and Finch's Wheatear being the notable exceptions), the call of the Caspian lured me on. I packed my bag and strolled out from the village, destination Fereydoon Kenar, a small town on the south-east shore of the Caspian Sea. Though not so far, I expected the journey to be rather complicated, necessitating the transit of several towns en route. A car stopped and offered me a lift to the main road some 5 km down the valley &ndash; but then it turned out that this was three students heading to the Caspian Sea, how lucky was that? And not only to the Caspian, but to the town of Mahmoud Abad, just 25 km from Fereydoon Kenar! So, I arrived nice and early, booked into what seems the only hotel in town, the plush enough Sultan Hotel. Fereydoon Kenar. 3 January. If Fereydoon Kenar means anything to the outside world, it means Siberian Crane. The recent history of this species is a sorry tale of decline and impending extinction. Even two decades ago, the entire western population of this species had already dwindled to small remnants that wintered in India and north Iran. After years of falling numbers, birds failed to return to India in 2002. Iran now held the entire wintering population of the world's western Siberian Cranes. All wintered at Fereydoon Kenar. Despite concerted attempts by Iranian and international conservationists to boost the population, the decline continued - ten birds in 1994, 7 in 2000, 5 in 2001, 3 in 2003, dropping to a single pair from the winter of 2006/2007. On 9 January 2008, the female died during a storm at Fereydoon Kenar. And from that date, a single lone male represents the last known individual of the western population of this species, the bird returning faithfully each successive winter. In 2011, he returned on 25 October. Anyhow, left the hotel pre-dawn for the wetlands just south of town. Stepped into the street ...oo er, heavy rain! Back to bed for two hours! Later, the weather now better, I headed off again, walking the five kilometres to the favoured locality of the bird. Much to see en route &ndash; Citrine Wagtails and Water Pipits in waterlogged fields, Common Kingfishers and Cetti's Warblers in ditches, Marsh Harriers criss-crossing the area. More alarming however were the myriads of poles rising from virtually every field &ndash; poles that carry illegal aerial nets in the migration seasons, kilometres and kilometres of nets rising ten metres into the air to pull down any passing bird. The scale is both staggering and depressing. The whole culture of Fereydoon Kenar seems to revolve around the hunting of birds, the aerial nets the worst aspect of it, the regulated system of 'damagh' the most positive. The damagh are rice paddies that are specially flooded in winter to attract wildfowl. Done for the purpose of hunting, the Fereydoon Kenar damagh stretches for two or three kilometres and is surrounded by woodland edge where the hunters deploy funnel traps to catch the wildfowl. The hunters strictly regulate the area to prevent disturbance and shooting is not permitted. Though a fairly hefty annual toll of birds must be caught, the numbers are apparently controlled and the created wetland is now one of the best areas on the south Caspian coastline &ndash; over 100,000 ducks and geese tend to be present at any one time, plus vast numbers of waders, herons and egrets, as well as Cormorants at roost. And this is where the Siberian Cranes have wintered since the 1970s at least, a haven created by hunters, the hunters themselves never targeting the cranes. I arrived at the southernmost pool to begin my exploration &ndash; very boggy tracks, a muddy quagmire, but I soon found a little path to overlook the damagh. And what an amazing spectacle it was, dabbling ducks by the thousand, Greylags also, plus immense flocks of Lapwings and Black-tailed Godwits, again both numbering thousands apiece. A quick scan of this first pool revealed the absence of the

Siberian Crane, but seven Glossy Ibis and dozens of Great White Egrets and Little Egrets made for nice viewing. Wildfowl present in approximate order of abundance, Teal, Mallard, Greylag Goose, Pintail, Gadwall, Shoveler, Wigeon and, in much lower numbers, Ruddy Shelduck, Common Shelduck and Pochard. And in amongst the flocks of Lapwing and Black-tailed Godwits, I managed to pick out an additional eight species of wader. Time to move to the central pools I thought, the ones where I supposed the Siberian Crane might be lurking. The path became even more muddy & I was now effectively sloshing through a water-mud cocktail, just hoping not to slip over. And then the path ended at a flooded hollow with a hunters' camp beyond! Ahead, I would have to wade through water and I would have a chat with the hunters. Neither happened & whilst I stood and admired a Pallid Harrier sitting looking rather dishevelled in the rain, one of the hunters spotted me. I cannot say he was very pleased to see me & he was, in fact, the first Iranian that I have ever met that welcomed me with an angry expression, waving arms and a tone of voice that made it very clear that I should depart rather rapidly! I slipped and sloshed all the way back, then decided I should try to see if I could find a way to overlook the central section, preferably without encountering another hunter camp. I walked for quite some hours, adding Bluethroat and a very nice local race of Long-tailed Tit, but seemed to be getting nowhere as regards seeing the pools again. Most paths ended in water, others just veered off in the wrong direction. About mid-afternoon, with clouds growing darker again, I was walking along a small embankment between two paddy fields, beginning to think I would not be seeing this bird, when I saw a small distant section of one damagh off to my left & I scanned and, low and behold, wading in the shallows right in the middle of my view, the Siberian Crane! Well, he was too far off to truly appreciate, but there did seem to be a path that would take me closer to the pool, yet keep me concealed to avoid disturbance. And of course that path took me right into a hunters' camp! I did not expect another angry hunter, so quietly walked on through, meeting one old guy who was friendly enough and even pointed me in the best direction to see the Siberian Crane. And so I sneaked along, reaching a matted screen of reeds aside the pools. I peeped over & babbling Greylags, flotillas of Teal, Mallard and Gadwall ...and one most magnificent Siberian Crane. The rain started a little heavier, I rattled off a few quick photographs, then retreated to a small shelter to watch the crane at more leisure. And then another hunter came along. And he was the second Iranian I have ever met who welcomed me with an angry expression, this one being even more peeved than the guy in the morning! Not really sure why, I had been told to ask the hunters where the crane was if I couldn't find it, but it seemed to me they weren't about to start offering out tourist information. I opted to leave, the stony-faced hunter watching me go, having already threatened to confiscate my optics! Walking back, I paused to watch some Spoonbills and a Greater Flamingo, then noticed one pool might actually be viewable from a public road. I strolled along and so it was, the northernmost pool could be seen from the roadside. Friendly locals stopping to chat, Pygmy Cormorants amongst the offering on the pool, it was just a pity that the Siberian Crane could not be seen from this point. Day over, I returned to my hotel, a tad embarrassed at the volume of mud caking my shoes and trousers. I tried to sneak past reception best I could that they might not notice, a total wasted attempt, the hotel's owner invited me over for tea! Fereydoon Kenar. 4 January. Dawn on the Caspian Sea. Not exactly one of the world's seawatching hotspots, but nice enough for an hour or so. Trained my scope on dots near and distant in the vague hope of a diver or skua, but nah the highlights were to go to gulls - several dozen engaging Little Gulls, an assortment of others. With Great Crested Grebe the tops of the rest, soon I decided it was time to quit my beach and have a quick look at the damagh wetlands again. I absolutely had no real desire to encounter the hunters again, so returned to the northern pool only - eight Pygmy Cormorants in a vast soup of Great White Egrets, Spoonbills, Greylag Geese and dabbling ducks. Already, Marsh Harriers were out in force, Water Rails squeeling from the reeds edge, Cetti's Warblers emerging here and there, a Black-necked Grebe diving just off the bank. A little to the south of the Fereydoon Kenar damagh lie a few large pools, as well as a wildlife refuge, I really should have gone off to explore these, but for some reason I decided to move on - in hindsight, I really should have given this site a full second day. Or better still, travel eastward to the Miankaleh Peninsula, a Ramsar site incorporating Gorgan Bay, the latter one of the richest bird localities in all the Caspian. I however was to abandon the Caspian lowlands, my plan being to shift further to the east, to the frozen plateau lands around Shahrud. Before that however, a meeting with one very important gentleman - in the quaint wooded surrounds of Tardiat Modares International Campus in Noor, I was finally going to become acquainted with a longtime contact Mahmoud Ghasempouri. A good guy in a nation of good guys, it was a pleasure to meet Mahmoud, quietly spoken, humble and generous, we had a brief time together, but a tour of the campus added a very Palearctic mix of Blue Tits, Robins, Great Spotted Woodpeckers and Wrens, plus seven Dalmatian Pelicans hugging the adjacent coastline. I was then handed over to Mahmoud's colleagues for a trip to the nearby city of Amol, from whence onward I travelled, a long journey into the night. Over the high snowbound Albroz and down into the hinterlands, my stop for this night the sub-zero city of Semnan. Shahrud. 5 January. An all round naff day, woke late, sat on transport half the morning on the hop from Semnan to Shahrud, then froze most of the afternoon as I made a half-hearted attempt to explore the outskirts of this desert town. Half-hearted because it was bitterly cold, not climbing above freezing, and there was a nice chill wind to make sure you appreciated it! Very few birds about, Common Ravens additional to the standard selection of corvids, plus a little roadside possee of Shore Larks and, the first I have seen on this trip, a White Wagtail of the personata race. Being so cold, I opted to top up my rest levels, returning to the hotel about 4 p.m. Abr. 6 January. Minus 11 C, a stunning hoar frost turning the world white, a freezing fog drapsing hillside and vale. Plans to visit the renowned Touran reserve, home to remaining Asian Cheetahs and Persian Onager fell by the wayside, I had instead set my sights on the high juniper forests of the eastern Albrov. Assuming the forests were not debecked in metres of snow and hoping the remote Abr village would be accessible, I departed Shahrud with a thermos of coffee, my binoculars and camera and a highly optimistic hope that I might just find a Caspian Tit or even White-winged Grosbeak. To be honest, I was not even sure I would find Abr village. Puffball personata White Wagtails shivered in the morning chill, me too, but soon a guy stopped to give me a lift - up the main road towards the high tops we went, the kind driver turning up his heater full blast. According to satellite maps, my turning should only be about 20

km, and sure enough, on a cold desolate top, a sign to Abr appeared in the gloom. I thanked my driver, jumped out and headed off, ahead on a very lonely road leading into a blanket of freezing fog, small flocks of Shore Larks on the ice-crusted verges. A villager soon gave me a lift and, bar sliding off the road midway, we arrived in the snow-decked Abr without incident, the mountain above barely visible due to rolling banks of fog. Declining an offer of breakfast, I trudged off into the snow, somewhere up there lay the juniper forests, the habitat of my quarry for the day. I soon appreciated this was all going to be a little fanciful however - to see a White-winged Grosbeak would first require the seeing of a juniper tree ...and in the fog, I really had little idea which way to hike. Stumbled into odd junipers here and there, little stunted things, hardly likely to be dripping in avian goodies I thought to myself. The snow got deeper, wisps of fog continued to slink through the valleys, a bunch of Chukars winged down the slope, a Golden Eagle launched off a crag. A deep gully lined by trees held promise, but I slid almost to my waist in snow to get there, brrr not so warm. And in its welcoming habitat, a grand total of one bird! A nice bird however, a first-winter Eversmann's Redstart, my third of the trip. Upward would mean ever more snow, and given I actually had almost no idea if the forest was a kilometre or ten, I decided to hike back down and explore the orchards adjacent to Abr village. A horrendous pack of ferocious dogs penned me in on the way down, four sets of snarling barking jaws surrounding me, edging in, trying to get behind me, not so pleasant. After a stand-off of some minutes, as I tried to calm them, all but one slowly got bored and wandered off. The last persisted, backing off to about four metres, but not letting up with the show of teeth and vocal power. A small rock tossed at this last straggler persuaded him to go. Down at the orchards, the sun now breaking through the fog, drifts of snow prevented full investigation, but a nice collection in the mosaic of fruit trees, poplar stands and field plots - a flock of Red-fronted Serins, two decent sized flocks of Rock Buntings, a couple of Choughs and heaps and heaps of Shore Larks, a total of about 180 noted. Also, associating with the Rock Buntings, a small bunting which initially got me scratching my head - it turned out to be a totally out-of-habitat, out-of-season Reed Bunting, most weird to see on snow-covered high alpine slopes.

Also a little assortment of the more familiar, a Robin and Blackbird, a few Blue Tits and Great Tits. No White-winged Grosbeak or Caspian Tit, but still a most pleasing day nonetheless. I hitch-hiked back to Shahrud as the temperature began its late-afternoon tumble.

Bastam Valley. 7 January.

A last throw of the dice, a bright crisp morning, minus ten again, clear skies and sun. Stretching to the north-east of Shahrud, I'd seen a broad valley the day before, carpeted in a mosaic of assorted orchards, tilled fields and stands of poplar - surely an magnet to any passing birds, snow-decked mountains to the north, the vast desert of Dasht-e-Kavir forever south. Here, I would play my dice.

Hitched a lift seven kilometres up to the small town of Bastam, cut across into the valley, and then began my slow meander back. I had some hopes of perhaps a wintering Black-throated Thrush, but also had some expectations of seeing virtually nothing. The dice truly landed the right side up, the day turned out to be a fantastic finale to my trip to Iran, good birding all the way and a few very nice surprises.

Barely a hundred metres down, the first nice bird of the day &ndash; atop one of the many traditional mud enclosures, a very smart Little Owl watching me go, eyes sparkling in the morning sun. Next up, a big powerful female Goshawk powering her way through the valley, the local corvids none too impressed. Not a common species in Iran and my first in the country, I was rather more impressed. A few Chaffinches and Linnets also in the area, then the first Rock Buntings of

the day, a small flock feeding amongst iced stalks, the remnants of a crop now long since harvested. Three Woodlarks in their midst, then they flitted up to a small copse, a degree of bird activity seeming to emanate from that quarter. Circled round, a few Great Tits and the Rock Buntings already visible, three Song Thrushes flying out. Maybe here would be my Black-throated Thrush? I sneaked in and birds galore, all winterers from the north &ndash; a Wren up to scold, then two new species for the trip in rapid succession, a whole bunch of Bramblings, then two Redwings. Not quite a Black-throated Thrush, but on the last day of a trip, any additions to the trip list are welcome, and I was now already on three! On I ambled, admiring the frost-coated landscape, enjoying the peaceful serenity. Flocks of Shore Larks here and there, occasional Rock Buntings every so often. A little to the south, I reached a more open area, plots of cut wheat, mud embankments to channel irrigation water, poplars and orchards more diffuse.

10.00 a.m., a couple of hours into my walk, a real purple patch. It all started with a humble flock of Yellowhammers feeding at a field's edge, a few Rock Buntings with them, another four Woodlarks too. This being north-east Iran, Yellowhammers always deserve a careful scan, so that's what I did &ndash; about forty birds, a mix of bright and subtle yellows as I worked through from the left. And then a cold colourless bird, not a hint of yellow, pale fringes to the primaries ...bingo, one Pine Bunting. The flock rose and settled in a hedge, now three Pine Buntings!!! One winter male, two female types. Well that chuffed me no end. All of a hundred metres further, the action continued, a female Eversmann's Redstart perched in a polladed willow grabbing my attention, a fairly confiding individual who seemed content for me to take a photograph. Then all hell broke loose, sat on a mud wall just adjacent, and until then unseen by me, a stonking great Saker Falcon took to the air, scattering a flock of Rock Doves and immediately distracting me from my photo session with the lady redstart. Off the Saker went and then promptly sat itself down on a heap of mud in the middle of one of the fields. Meanwhile, my redstart had now taken offence at being upstaged and had retired to a grove of fruit trees, no longer offering any reasonable chances for pictures. A bird then flew into the top of a poplar overhead, chirping a slight twinkling as it went. And there sat my first Desert Finch of the trip, soon to be joined by three more, cracking stuff.

Could it get any better? With the Saker still in the field, I wandered a little her way, but off she went, low across the field, up and over the next orchard, flushing a large flock of passerines as she went. They settled in a ploughed field, so I followed to check them out. Linnets mostly, but two chunky-billed crackers too &ndash; Mongolian Finches! This latter bird was truly unexpected, there is only one record of this species in Iran in the three decades since 1980! I have to confess however that it was only latter perusal of the photographs that led me to the correct identification. I was losing count of all the new additions to the trip list. And then one more, just a few minutes after a second Goshawk came cruising by, a male this time, so too did a Hen Harrier, a ringtail completing the full set of four harriers on this trip, neat.

Via small flocks of Spanish Sparrows, Meadow Pipits, then Tree Sparrows, I reached a small village &ndash; left I could continue down the valley, right would take me back to the road. Sadly, I was finally running out of time, back to Shahrud I had to go. A Sparrowhawk in town, a bunch of personata White Wagtails on the sidewalks and a Grey Wagtail on a traffic island, in my hotel room I packed my bag for the last time.

At 2.00 p.m., I boarded a bus for the six-hour ride to Tehran, landscapes of semi-desert flying past, occasional Common Ravens, more frequent Hooded Crows. My trip to Iran was basically over, a final battle with the Tehrani taxi drivers and a last game of Russian roulette on the crazy roads of the capital. 8.30 p.m., I was back at Iman Khomeini International Airport.

Departure from Iran. 8 January.

04.10 a.m., a half hour late, I took off into the dark skies of northern Iran, next stop Istanbul, a lengthy stop-over and thereafter Frankfurt and eventually Vilnius.

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Iran had done it again, exceeded my expectations, the birding phenomenal in both the sub-tropical south and the sub-zero north. On top of that, throw in the never-ending hospitality and charm of the Iranian people, the cultural delight of Yazd Old City, plus the big bonus of chance encounters with Wolf, and I guess I have to say, it was a very good second trip to the country. Thank you Iran.

For full systematic list of all birds and mammals seen, [CLICK HERE](#).