

Return to Iran 2014, the Enchantment Continues

Contributed by Jos

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Following on from my successful trips to Iran in summer and winter, this trip saw me returning for three weeks between April 4 and 26 to savour the best of spring. Building on previous trips, the aims of this time were to seek out some of the more elusive specialities (particularly Caspian Tit, but also Black-headed Penduline Tit and Basra Reed Warbler), to travel across the remote Dasht-e-Kavir desert and to generally have a whole bunch more adventures in this excellent country.

DAY LOG

4 April. Travel to Iran.

Late evening Vilnius, Lithuania. Into the skies for a 20 minute flight to Minsk, courtesy of Belarussian Airlines. A seamless one-hour transfer and then onward to Tehran, a four-hour flight that arrived early morning local time. 5 April.

Roodbarak. Welcome to Iran, huge queues at customs, but a polite smile from the immigration guy and I was in, albeit taking two hours to get through the airport. With a taxi direct to Tehran's western bus terminal, I was soon aboard a comfy bus and admiring my first birds of the day, a Common Myna poking about on some scrubby grass and hoards of House Sparrows playing suicidal games with the manic urban traffic. The bus was heading to Chalus on the Caspian Sea via the ultra-scenic trans-Alborz road, snow-capped peaks and lush valleys soon replacing the chaos of Tehran. About 30km before Chalus, I departed the bus and hitch-hiked up to Roodbarak, a village at the gateway to a tranquil side valley nestled beneath the towering Alum Kuh mountain. Here, rising high to the left and right, superb tracts of stunted Hycathian forests hugged the precipitous slopes, splendid-looking habitat and hopefully home to my number one target on this trip, the highly localised Caspian Tit. Barely had I arrived in the valley and there was a flash of red on an old stone wall …jeeppers, it was a Wallcreeper, what a good way to start the birding! As I admired this little fellow, a couple of Black Redstarts also hopped about on boulders and a Semi-collared Flycatcher flitted in small trees aside the stream. I got the idea I was going to like this valley!

Lugging my rucksack onto my back, I began my walk up the valley, primarily looking for somewhere to put my tent. Quite a lot of Grey Wagtails along the stream, one Dipper too. About three kilometres beyond the village, I found my camping spot – near the stream, out of sight of the small road that trundles up the valley and, most importantly, a stone's throw from the Hyrcanian forests all around. By now, middle of the afternoon and feeling a little jaded from the previous night's travel, I was tempted to just go straight to sleep, but instead decided on a quick foray in the forests. Oo er, it was rather tough going – not only were the forests on semi-vertical slopes, but the ground was a loose mix saturated by melting snow. I spent as almost as much time sliding down as I did climbing up!

No Caspian Tits to report, but a good selection of other common woodland birds – mostly a typical European mix, including Wrens, Robins, Dunnocks and assorted thrushes, but also a little eastern flavour with Red-fronted Serins zipping over and both Rock Buntings and Western Rock Nuthatches on some of the outcrops dotting the area. Also lots of Great Tits, Blue Tits and Coal Tits …hopefully the next day would bring one more to this family. With a Golden Eagle overhead and Common Redstarts singing from up the slope, I retired into my tent, a much need rest in order. 6 April. Roodbarak. A bright crisp dawn, blue skies and a pair of Alpine Chough soaring above. I shuffled out from my tent, Rock Buntings flitted up, a Grey Wagtail bounded off down the stream, it was time to resume my search for Caspian Tits. Two years earlier, Swedish birders had found a pair further up the valley, but with the slopes looking even worse there (equally steep, made of the same slushy mix, but also sporting a fresh layer of snow on top), I sure didn't fancy hiking those slopes! In the valley bottom, dozens of Red-fronted Serins fed in scrubby patches, Rock Buntings called from boulders and Chiffchaffs sang from all over. Chaffinches were abundant and, a little unexpected, a flock of 12 Bramblings also appeared streamside. Further up the valley, a small side track wound up the slope seemingly to an old quarry …now that seemed an easy option, I thought, far better than breaking my neck on the other slopes! Bounded by woodland, the track arched up the slope for a kilometre or so and initially proved rather birdless, a few Dunnocks about the only thing seen. Then however, two small birds flitted along the weedy edge of the track, I flicked up my binoculars and, stone me, feeding on the ground, two quite super Caspian Tits in all their glory!

Rather more similar to Willow Tits than Sombre Tits, these were most engaging little birds. And I was in for another treat. It soon became apparent that the birds were nesting in a twisted old tree just up the slope, the nest hole about two metres above the ground. After the pair found by the Swedish birders, this was only the second ever nest found for this little-known species – over the next half hour, I was treated to superb views as the birds zipped back and fro.

Walking further up the valley, feeling rather happy I would not need to climb the slopes, I then encountered another Caspian Tit feeding in trees adjacent to the main track and later another individual in bushes aside the stream near my tent! Also found a couple of Water Pipits, a female Black-eared Wheatear and stopped on more than one occasion to admire the mass of butterflies – Queen of Spain Fritillary, Painted Ladies, Red Admirals and Clouded Yellows. By now however, approaching midday, the weather was on the change – great wafts of fog and cloud were rolling up the valley, the temperature began to drop and rain certainly looked imminent. Most content with my Caspian Tits, I decided to a good time to exit the valley, taking my tent down just as the first spots of rain began. Walked down to the mountain track and, ten minutes later, a car came trundling down and gave me a lift. From Roodbarak, I hitched to the Caspian coast and then took a savari (shared taxi) east to Babolsar, a nondescript seaside town. Drizzle for much of route, but cleared just as I arrived. Spent the late afternoon watching the rather stormy Caspian Sea – one Marsh Harrier along the coast, flocks of Caspian, Black-headed and Little Gulls offshore. Spent the night in a hotel in town, the most expensive accommodation of my entire trip at 19 euro! 7 April. Babolsar. After the splendour of the Alborz mountains, the Caspian lowlands are a bit of a shock – sprawling towns and featureless flat agricultural land

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⋯not exactly my cup of tea! Dotted across however, there are a number of wetlands of importance, including Fereydoon Kenar, site of my earlier success with wintering Siberian Crane, and here just 10 km further east Babolsar, summer home to Black-headed Penduline Tits, my target for this day. The plan of action was simple – minimising my time in this part of Iran, I would get to the pools at dawn, see the birds and then leave. Good plan, just someone forgot to tell the birds! The day started well enough with a virtually non-stop chattering mass of sparrows marking my hour-long pre-dawn walk to the pools, the flocks a real hotchpotch of three species, House Sparrows dominating in the urban areas, Tree Sparrows and Spanish Sparrows taking over as I exited town. Arriving at the wetlands however, with the sun just breaking the horizon, my first impression was, well, pretty naff! No chirping flocks of birds, no flotillas of birds drifting across serene waters ⋯the grand total of birds on view amounted to one Coot and two Moorhens! Never mind, at least the penduline tits should be fairly easy to find, I thought. Essentially two semi-reeded pools surrounded by embankments, I simply walk the banks and, sooner or later, bump into the desired birds. Humph, three hours later, after two very careful circuits of both pools, I was fairly confident there were no penduline tits of any description present! To give the site a little credit however, I did actually manage to notch up a fair selection of other birds, including several Purple Herons, both Marsh and Montagu's Harriers, an Osprey, a flock of Garganeys, three Kingfishers and quite a number of both Cetti's and Moustached Warblers. As for the Black-headed Penduline Tits however, I could only guess I was a week or so too early in the season. I decided to depart, maybe I would return later in the trip. By late afternoon, travelling by savari from city to city, I reached the small town of Aliabad. Fairly attractive in comparison, with wooded hills rising to the south and the snow-capped eastern Alborz beyond, this would serve as base for a little exploration the next day. With Common Swifts and assorted hirundines whirling above, I checked into a bargain-basement four-euro a night hotel for two nights. 8 April. Aliabad (Shrinabad Valley). Detained by the police! I had grand plans for this day, a trans-Alborz trek from the Caspian lowlands up and over the snowy peaks to the semi-desert on the other side. Though the route theoretically was over 50 km, I imagined it would be fairly simple to hitch-hike to the last village on the Caspian side and thereby save 30 km. So it was, another bright dawn, a Little Owl and Hoopoe in the agricultural plains outside Aliabad and then a very European mix in the dense beech woodlands – Great Spotted Woodpeckers, Nightingales, a couple of singing Willow Warblers and the like. Hitching and walking, I soon started to make altitude, the bird mix altering subtly with a Red-breasted Flycatcher appearing as the woods began to thin, Red-fronted Serins and Rock Buntings populating stony meadows and an impressive hoo hoo marking out an Eagle Owl. At the 30 km mark, I reached the village of Shrinabad, the end of the road, the route onward a rough summer-only track leading up and through the peaks, I hoped eventually to juniper forests sometimes home to the highly elusive White-winged Grosbeak. A dozen Common Whitethroats sang out, and as I ascended, my first Hume's Lesser Whitethroat of the trip too.

Taking a much needed breather, I sat upon a rock and gazed up - the peaks did seem an awfully long way away! However, just then a motorbike which had been zigzagging up and down various tracks came bouncing along and stopped. Not the usual friendly look upon his face, but instead a rather stern look and a demand to see my passport. Now, staying in a hotel in Iran, it is obligatory to leave your passport in reception, so I gestured towards Aliabad and said 'passport hotel'. This did not amuse my new chum and after some attempted discussion, it now clear he was the village policeman, he ordered me to get on the back of his motorbike. I refused, something he didn't seem to like either! After some protestation, he trundled back towards the village and 15 minutes later was back with reinforcements, two more police in a car. Ah, thoughts of reaching the summit were fading fast. An hour we sat there, innumerable phone calls going back and forwards, a translator asking me to please get in the police car and return to Aliabad, they just wanted to check my passport. The fact they could check it themselves seemed to cut no ice. Did my best to do a little birding while sitting there, a bunch of Common Buzzards and a few Stonechats the only highlights, then understanding my trans-Alborz trek was over, I decided to accept the 'offer' for a free lift back to Aliabad. A full police reception awaited me at the hotel, two senior guys and a translator and they already had my passport! Most apologetic they were and tried to say they were just concerned for my safety. After another half hour, they asked to check my room, but retracted the request when I asked if this was for my safety too! Then, with smiles, they handed back my passport and I was free to go ⋯what a waste of time, but to be fair, they did offer me a lift back to the village.

Rather than the Shrinabad valley, I decided to better spend my afternoon on the forested slopes just south of town ⋯and what a good decision it was, I bumped into an absolutely superb flock of Red-breasted Flycatchers - quite obviously migrants, virtually all were males and they numbered at least 55, quite a sight indeed as they flitted out from every branch in sight. Also, one Pheasant, presumably true wild stock, rather than the introduced birds of western Europe.

Spent the night in Aliabad again, the police phoning middle evening to apologise for disturbing me during the day! 9 April. Into the Desert, Touran. The Dasht-e-Kavir desert, the wildest and most remote of Iran's deserts, basically hundreds of square kilometres of salt flats, fringed by rock and tracts of sparse Zygodium vegetation. Very much an area I wished to travel through, the wilderness occupies a vast expanse of north-eastern Iran and is home to a mouth-watering array of exotica such as the world's only Asiatic Cheetahs, Persian Wild Asses and the enigmatic Pleske's Ground Jay. Having hitch-hiked from Aliabad to the northern extreme of the desert, it was however with a certain degree of foreboding that I tackled this leg of my trip – as I stood at a lonely road junction waiting for a lift south, with 900 km of even lonelier road ahead, not only did I have no idea if there would be any cars using my intended route, but I was also only carrying two litres of water and, more importantly, did not have the required permit to visit Touran Protected Area, my first planned destination. Two Hoopoes and a Laughing Dove kicked up dust, a Golden Eagle soared to the north, occasional Crested Larks nearby. Adjacent, a little scrubby bush offered shelter to a couple of cross-desert migrants – one Red-breasted Flycatcher and one Semi-collared Flycatcher. How long would I share their company, I wondered. My hope was to get a lift to a village 80 km distant, then if no more cars walk the remaining 30 km

to Touran. I would then monitor the road to see whether to push further south into the depths of the desert. In Iran things have a tendency to work out even if you think they won't — after a mere 20 minutes of waiting, a car came by and stopped, a smiling face appeared at the window and gestured me to get in. He was driving way to the south and could drop me at the Touran Protected Area! Well, that was a stroke of luck, now I'd even be able to do some desert birding before dark! Dropping through the last mountains before the open desert, flocks of Chukar Partridge scuttled up the slopes and then the open expanse began, a most impressive road sign warning of Cheetahs. It was time for me to bid my lift farewell and set off into the desert. Having no permit, my strategy was to absolutely avoid the reserve headquarters, a few kilometres down a side track, and to simply hike away from the road and generally stay out of sight. 'Just nip back and photograph that sign first', I thought. This decision was to be my downfall! Only a kilometre or two back, so off I went, Eastern Pied Wheatears and Desert Larks along the road, one singing Southern Grey Shrike. Just short of the sign, while I was a few dozen metres into the desert, a car happened to come by and immediately stopped. Uh oh, that was bad timing, a ranger! Showing my passport didn't pacify him too much and soon he was on the phone, two more rangers arriving in about ten minutes. Jeepers, I could see where this was going, I was about to be detained for the second time in two days! And sure enough, the police were called and half an hour later they arrived. After another bit of discussion, I was bundled into the car and 30 km we went, back to the village I had happily passed through earlier in the afternoon! Lots of discussion later, most of which none of us understood, they photocopied my passport, asked something about GPS which I prudently agreed I did not have and then they asked where I wanted to go. 'Back to Touran', I replied, 'then south'. This did not seem a problem, so I then asked them to take me back — which, bearing in mind I still had no permit, they rather surprisingly agreed to do! Ah, all's well that ends well. The police guys drove me 30 km back, then looked rather bemused as I asked to be let out near the original Cheetah sign to finally take my photograph. I then hiked directly east away from the road, vanished over a ridge and for good measure hiked a couple of kilometres south too. No way the ranger could find me now! I set up my tent in a most attractive shallow wadi, then set out for a little late evening birding — as the sun was beginning to set, Desert Wheatears singing their scratchy songs, three Eastern Olivaceous Warblers flicking their tails in thickets and one stunning Orphean Warbler a bit of surprise. I retired into my tent, a great place to spend the night, the wind rippling my flysheet, a Little Owl calling some way off. 10 April. Touran. A gorgeous morning, the sun rising over swathes of *Zygophyllum* stretching to the horizon and already the songs of desert birds floating on the gentle breeze.

Confident my camping site was not going to be discovered, I left my tent in place and set out to explore, hiking an arc of about 10 km through prime habitat for Pleske's Ground Jay — though for understandable reasons, avoidance of the road also dictated my route! Super birding from start to finish, numerous Desert Wheatears, quite a few singing Bar-tailed Desert Larks, several Scrub Warblers spinning their tail as they churred from scrubby bushes. Two Golden Eagles drifted over, a Pallid Harrier quartered hillside flanks and, flushing passerines in their wake, two Barbary Falcons went bombing through. Also assorted migrant passerines looking most out of place, a Red-breasted Flycatcher sitting on a rock, a male Common Redstart in a gully and a couple of Eastern Olivaceous Warblers in scrubby thickets. The kilometres edged by, my meanders took me down the paths of recent flash floods, desert flowers pushing through the arid soils, a myriad of butterflies rising as I walked, Painted Ladies most. Still no Pleske's Ground Jay! One bird I did see though, and one I had not really expected, was Asian Desert Warbler, a pure gem of a bird. By the end of the walk, I had bumped into no less than eight of these little stars, some chortling out their little songs. Deciding I'd pushed my luck enough with the exploring without a permit, I packed up my tent and made a last hike slowly advancing on the road, birding all the way. Several Southern Grey Shrikes, one tortoise plodding along, but still no Pleske's Ground Jay. Ah well, I'd try again further south! And with that, I walked up to the road and waited for a car to come. Perhaps half an hour later, a car duly appeared, stopped and off we went, the kind folk going to a small desert village of some dozen or so houses about 60 km or so south. I was immediately invited in for tea, and lunch, and it would seem to stay for several days. No English spoken, but the entire family, three generations in all, seemed delighted with their unexpected guest, so much so it genuinely seemed to pain them when I made efforts to depart! Getting out of the village was an adventure, two more families tried to drag me in for lunch, then a posse on motorbikes tried to capture me and again bring me back for further meals. Eventually however, I was trudging along the road alone in the desert, a very unexpected Black-winged Pratincole appearing around the remnants of a flood pool, six Green Sandpipers too. A couple of trucks came along and I was on the move again, or I was until they stopped to cook up dinner and tea! Still, a flock of European Bee-eaters circled as we ate, and soon we were driving south again. 300 km further down the road, as dusk approached, they dropped me at a road junction. A Long-legged Buzzard hovered over salt flats adjacent, Crested Larks scampered about, I hitched another lift for about 20 km and then jumped out to set up camp, night was spent on a bed of salt. 11 April. Southbound! What a stark terrain I had chosen to camp in, a surreal lunar-like landscape of salt-encrusted badlands and rugged wadi. I sure was not going to find any Pleske's Ground Jays here! A quick walk revealed a few Eastern Pied Wheatears and Desert Larks, but I decided I would use the day to push further south. Through endless plains of salt and rock, highly arid and mostly devoid of birds, I hitch-hiked over 600 km, passing through the oasis town of Tabas and onward to Yadz, the end of this particular desert. Crag Martins, Common Ravens and Desert Finches on route, White-cheeked Bulbul in Yadz. Making the most of my travel day, I then took a bus a further 260 km, arriving at my destination well after dark. Managed to get a lift a few kilometres more and then I was there, the spot I wanted to be, I set up my tent just off the road for another night under the stars. 12 April. Day of the Pleske's, Mark II. Two days after my first attempt, and over 900 km further south, time for another try on Pleske's Ground Jay, this time 20 km west of Shahr-e-Babek, my happy stomping grounds from previous trips. So here I was, at dawn gazing over arid plains dotted by *Zygophyllum* bushes stretching out forever. Out there, somewhere, my elusive quarry lurked. Though mostly terrestrial, Pleske's Ground Jays do sometimes sit atop bushes at dawn, so the basic strategy was to walk a massive loop, stopping to scan every few hundred metres. Desert Wheatears — plenty, so too Bar-tailed Desert

Larks. Also a couple of pairs of Southern Grey Shrikes and one Turkmenistan Shrike, but an hour and a half passed and not a hint of the target bird. A few Crowned Sandgrouse flew over, Lesser Short-toed Larks rose in song, I found a migrant Finch's Wheatear …and then a glimpse of something buffy-sand colour landing distant. Didn't seem right for a Pleske's Ground Jay, but I headed that way anyhow, I had an idea what it probably was. And indeed it was, a Cream-coloured Courser, never a bird to be sniffed at.

With the courser vanishing, I scanned again …and then looked a little more intently, far far way, a distinctive orangey blob atop a bush, dropping to the ground in a flash of black and white wing. Now Pleske's Ground Jays are notorious runners, I remember my first ever Pleske's, not 3 km from this very spot, at the end of a very long day of searching, I finally managed a split-second glimpse of a bird before it sprinted behind a small bush and simply evaporated, leaving me to half wonder if I had actually been hallucinating! Fast forward to the present, I didn't fancy my chances of locating this bird – it was probably already running away from me with at least half a kilometre headstart! This bird however had not been reading the 'Guidebook to Ground Jay Behaviour'! When I arrived, it was indeed running, but rather than away, it was heading directly towards me! 'Er, perhaps it has not seen me', I thought, quickly squatting down in the ground. But it had seen me and, totally contrary to what they should do, came sprinting right up to me, finally halting about four metres distant! I was absolutely transfixed, what a stunner of a bird. And there, for about 15 minutes, I was absolutely privileged as the bird one moment hopped up onto bushes, the next back onto the ground to feed. And so went on the show, the bird slowly circling me, occasionally darting off, then wandering back in for another look.

Eventually, curiosity satisfied, he meandered off and with that, I began a slow walk back towards the road. Half way back, stone me, more Pleske's Ground Jays, this time a more typical pair that (a) ran away when they saw me and (b) appeared to be nesting in a thick bush. A red letter day indeed, I left these latter birds in peace and continued my way, two Desert Finches flew over, a pair of Trumpeter Finches fed in a streambed, I reached the road. Not yet midday, but with all target birds seen at Shahr-e-Babek, I thought I'd try to hitch back to town and then perhaps catch a bus to Bandar Abbas, 400 km further south. This day however, the birding gods were truly smiling down upon me, the very first car that came along that quiet road stopped and was not just going to Shahr-e-Babek, but all the way to Bandar Abbas! A most friendly guy too, our route included a detour into the mountains for lunch at his farm, a stop that also added Rufous Bush Robins, flocks of Black-headed Buntings, a few Red-rumped Swallows and the first Little Green Bee-eaters of the trip. To top it off, he asked me to drive the last leg to Bandar Abbas, an experience it has to be said in Iran. At Bandar Abbas, I bid my farewells and took a savari to Minab, arrived near 9 p.m., muggy and 32 C! 13 April. Minab. Mad dogs do the midday sun in Minab! On my previous summer trip, I remember the place as a sweltering furnace, temperatures little short of 50 C and a humidity to knock you flat. Birding was certainly a challenge! Mid-April, gentle spring breezes, temperatures a pleasant 30 C or so, humidity a mere sniff. Bah, some hope, the place was a stinking 43 C, far hotter than I had been expecting! Still, with Little Green Bee-eater sallying out from palm fronds and Indian Rollers dropping to the ground in a riot of vivid blues, the dawn hours proved most enjoyable, a Spotted Little Owl also peering down from a palm stump and a few dozen Purple Sunbirds zipping all over the place, perfectly decked out in full breeding plumage. My plan of action this day had been to walk through the palm groves west of town, then cut across to the Persian Gulf further west again. Though I had not banked on the heat, I stuck to the plan, White-breasted Kingfishers and Pied Stonechats soon falling by the wayside, Grey Francolins scuttling off through the scrub and flocks of Yellow-throated Sparrows and Indian Silverbills barely batting an eyelid to the sun already beginning to scorch. Little purple patch a hour or so in, first a Black-winged Kite flying over, then singles of both European and Oriental Honey Buzzard passing over, the former settling in a palm for a while. Also three Shikra and, oddity of the morning, a Plum-headed Parakeet! Not listed on the Iranian bird list, either as an unlikely vagrant from the Indian Sub-continent or as having established introduced populations, I suppose escape is the most likely option, but sitting there munching young mangos, he certainly did not look out of place! By now, middle of the morning and not exactly cool, commonsense would have dictated a pleasant siesta in my air-conditioned hotel ...but off to the coast I went instead, deciding to try and reach a stretch I had not visited before. Reached a dusty road, I stuck my thumb out and all too soon, perched upon the back of a motorbike, was bumping across an old riverbed, meandering through a village and then heading across a stark salt pan, the shimmering land virtually devoid of birds. I had expected to walk the last 12 km, but the kindly gent would have none of it ...with a child on the petrol tank and me on the back, on we went, three to the motorbike over the pans, via hints of saltmarsh and all the way to the blue waters of the Persian Gulf and, mercifully, a sea breeze to stifle the relentless sun. One litre of water, one big coastline empty of people, the gent dropped me off with a smile, albeit looking rather confused as I walked off, a lonely figure vanishing into a rather inhospitable world! I however was in my element ...a gorgeous coast and, as I gazed out, full of birds. Dalmatian Pelican off yonder, a couple of Greater Flamingoes, Western Reef Herons and Great White Egrets a'plenty, but my eyes were on the waders - though the tide was unfortunately out, still plenty to see ... amongst the masses, Greater and Lesser Sand Plovers in their summer glory, Terek Sandpipers scampering about, a Broad-billed Sandpiper amongst the Dunlin and, a pleasing addition, a single Great Knot too. Though this latter bird winters in small numbers, I had not expected to find one on this trip! Also plenty of Oystercatchers, Bar-tailed Godwits and other common species and, albeit distant shimmering blobs, two Crab Plovers on a sand bank. With Gull-billed Terns constant companions, time to turn my attention to other terns, I thought. Scan as I might, I totally failed to find any of the large terns, but a good dozen or so 'small' terns zooming about, most regrettably quite distant. I sat on the beach, gently sizzling away under the early afternoon sun, and squinted at the terns ...Little or Saunder's? It certainly took a degree of imagination for some of the more distant birds, but as odd birds appeared nearby, two evolved into quite clear Saunder's Terns, whilst another was certainly a Little Tern. Before going totally doolally in the sun, I eventually settled on the opinion that the majority were probably Saunder's Terns. And with that, my water long finished and the prospect of a 12 km hike back to the nearest village still

ahead, I turned and began the long walk. Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters nesting in a bank, Indian Sand Larks flitting across the flats, on I trudged, two kilometres, three. And then appeared my saviours ...coming towards the coast, a car full of young Iranians. Big happy faces and lots of chatter, they turned the car around, plied me with cartons of juice, fruit and cashew nuts and then proceeded to drive me all the way to the village, i.e. in the opposite direction to where they were going. Dropping me off at a main road, they waved and returned to their original route. Ah that was nice. Having spent far too long in the sun, I then waved down a car and returned to Minab town, quite enough for one day, the luxury of air-conditioning awaiting. 14 April. Minab. The global range of Sind Pied Woodpecker is not exactly extensive - a slither of mostly inaccessible territory extending from south-east Iran across to southern Pakistan. On my previous trips, I saw the species along the Jegen River, east of Jask. However, despite spending considerable time in the palm groves at Minab, this rather uncommon woodpecker always eluded me at this location. Not wishing to travel the 150 km or so to Jegen this time, today I decided was 'day of the woodpecker', a concerted attempt to locate the species at this, its most westerly known outpost.

Effectively wasting the cooler dawn hours walking the wadi up to the reservoir east of town (devoid of birds other than See-see Partridge, flocks of Afghan Babblers and migrant Black-headed Buntings), I then plunged into the depths of the palm plantations, zigzagging a route via lush clumps of mango trees. Moderately cool, Indian Rollers eyed my path and a slightly unexpected Night Heron emerged from roost. Three Pied Stonechats too, plus the usual assortment of White-cheeked Bulbuls, Purple Sunbirds, White-breasted Kingfishers et al. Several Indian Mongooses trotting along as well. An hour or so of wandering and then a rather distant 'keek keek keek' seemed to be echoing out of a particularly dense grove of mango trees. 'Hmm, that sure sounded like a woodpecker' I thought. Off in pursuit I went, arriving at the trees to total silence. Sitting on an embankment overlooking the trees, the minutes drifted by, Purple Sunbirds flitting around, a couple of Indian Silverbills too. Then a tap tap tap, the bird was still there! But boy, was he a bugger to see! Sat there half an hour and the best I got was fleeting glimpses of the bird edging up central trunks, briefly appearing in the open on a dead branch, then vanishing again into the lushness of the great mangos. Sind Pied Woodpecker, not exactly a stellar performance, but at least I had finally located one at Minab, I would return again the next day! Also Spotted Little Owl in this clump. After the luxury of a siesta, I then hitch-hiked to Tiab in the late afternoon, a fishing village surrounded by creeks and saltmarsh. A fair scatter of birds here - Red-wattled Plovers, Indian Sand Larks, etc - but I was really looking for one bird in particular. Favoured the creeks just downchannel of the village, accessible by a long detour to the south, the target was the fabulous Great Stone Plover. On my winter trip, I had seen 18 lining this very creek, so I had high hopes. Passing a small pool, Temminck's Stints fed in the shallows, Kentish Plovers nearby too. A Pied Stonechat sat atop rubble and then, as the sun began to set, I reached the creek. A wailing 'keer-lee' rang out from the opposite bank. So evocative, traditional lengeh fishing boats straddling exposed mudbanks, a setting sun shimmering in the haze, and directly opposite, two quite resplendent Great Stone Plovers strutting out from the saltmarsh, one taking to the wing and flying over to land directly behind me. A nice way to end the day, I thought. And with that, I walked back to Tiab village, hitched a lift to Minab and celebrated with a felafel dish cooked on the street. Day over. 15 April. Minab. Dawn on the road, hitch-hiking to the coast a few kilometres beyond Tiab. A couple of pretty quick lifts and the glistening waters of the Straits of Hormoz were stretching out before me. One small hiccup, the guy who gave me a lift decided to drop me off at the police post adjacent to the fishing camp ...hmm, thought I, remembering back to a detention at this very spot two years earlier! No real issues this time though, a bit of chat and explanation that I just wanted to watch birds and the captain in charge seemed satisfied, I was free to go. And a glorious morning it was, a rising tide pushing the birds in and a fresh breeze keeping the temperatures at bay. No real surprises amongst the waders, but with Terek Sandpipers and both Greater and Lesser Sand Plovers numerous, plus abundant Oystercatchers, Kentish Plovers, Bar-tailed Godwits and Curlews, it truly was a pleasant morning. Also an assortment of other waders, including several Broad-billed Sandpipers, my only Marsh Sandpiper of the trip and my only Whimbrels. A pretty impressive 125 Great Flamingos formed a nice backdrop, four Dalmatian Pelicans punctuating the flocks. Heuglin's Gulls offshore, Gull-billed and Lesser Crested Terns plied the beach, a whole bunch of 'small' terns worked an inner lagoon, about 40 in all. Again, these were a mix of Saunder's and Little Terns, though Little Terns did seem in the minority. Also found a Great Stone Plover near some saltmarsh, had a couple of Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters flying about and, in a tiny clump of young mangrove, found a couple of Syke's Warblers. With the tide now high and most birds departing, I returned to Tiab village and thereafter to Minab. After enjoying another little siesta to avoid the early afternoon sun, I then took a final wander through the palm groves - top birds, one Sind Pied Woodpecker about 300 metres from where I'd seen one a couple of days earlier, a total of four Spotted Little Owls and two Little Swifts buzzing around. 16 April. Bandar Abbas. Very much a travel day, even though I had not intended it to be! Catching an early morning savari to Bandar Abbas, my idea was to check into a hotel, then spend the morning along the seafront and afternoon at Bandar Khamir, an area of mangrove and mudflats an hour or so east (and excellent site for Striated Heron and Indian Pond Heron, etc). As often seems to be the case however, the first three budget hotels that I tried in Bandar Abbas were all full. Though the city was considerably enhanced by screaming flocks of Pallid Swifts, plus a few Little Swifts, I really didn't fancy plodding the already-swelting streets trying to find somewhere to stay, so made an impromptu decision to simply walk the seafront west of the centre, then catch a taxi to the bus station and push further west. Bandar Abbas seafront, nicely renovated since my last visit, is very pleasant. Seawatching from one of the many benches soon notched up an assortment of gulls and terns - Slender-billed Gulls fairly commonplace, two Swift Terns hugging the coastline, one Caspian Tern too, plus Sandwich Tern and singles of both Saunder's and Little Tern. The best birding however was at a small creek just east of the city centre - a bunch of Whiskered Terns did not surprise me, nor the assorted Little Stints, Sanderlings and Turnstones, but I certainly had not been expecting a flock of 175 Red-

necked Phalaropes! These were a treat, a tight flock feeding just off the beach and rising to swirl around every now and then, sometimes spooked by a Gull-billed Tern swooping in to grab morsels in their midst. Also added a House Crow to the list while in Mandar Abbas, as well as 12 Common Mynas, but by mid-morning I was aboard a bus heading towards Shiraz, one Black Kite seen just west of the city, one Short-toed Eagle some 100 km or so later. Arrived in Shiraz about eight hours later to a pleasant cool evening, the altitude killing off the heat. 17 April. Dasht Arzhan An hour or so west of Shiraz on the main road to Bushehr and Ahvaz, Dasht Arzhan is a convenient stop-over on route to the humid Khuzestan and the Iraqi borderzone. Situated in an upland bowl, this small wetland proved pretty productive on both my summer and winter trips, so I was keen to sample the spring glories, guessing it might well hold quite a good range of breeding and migrant species. So it was, at about 8 a.m. I hopped off a westbound bus and wandered down through the tea stalls to the open grass meadows that surround the central marsh. Immediately impressed with the appearance of a flock of Lesser Kestrels, the eight birds hunting across the grasslands all day, joined on occasion by wandering Marsh Harriers and a single Montagu's Harrier. After dumping my bag in the depths of grassy tussocks, and waving to a shepherd tending goat herds, I set off to explore. With Red-billed Choughs tumbling in the skies above, a multitude of smart Yellow Wagtails squabbling in wetter areas and a splendid male Ferruginous Duck rising from the small stream trickling down through the meadows, I slowly meandered towards the central marsh. Much noise from assorted frogs, plus squeaking Water Rails and chattering Clamorous Reed Warblers, the walk was certainly a pleasant affair, all the more so for the Red-throated Pipits flushing up and for a pair of Ruddy Shelducks. At the last relatively dry patch of grass, with European Bee-eaters drifting over and Lapwings bombarding stray Hooded Crows, I paused to scan the central marsh - shimmering in the midday heat, some rather interesting blobs appeared to gravitating around one particular patch of distant reed. Squinted best I could, and was pretty sure of the some of the identities, but decided a little sloshing was in order, paddling through a few hundred metres of wet meadow to get a little closer. Lost my shoes more than once, and added European Reed Warbler and Sedge Warbler to the trip list, and then eventually got to a point where the blobs materialised into actual birds ...and nice they were, a small colony of breeding Spoonbills, one Great White Egret standing just in front and two Dalmatian Pelicans alongside. Just for good measure, Squacco, Grey and Purple Herons flew over and a Black Kite appeared over the marsh behind.

By late afternoon, I'd explored a good chunk of the site, so ambled back towards the road. Lesser Kestrels were still hunting the grasslands, large numbers of Common Swifts now also swooping low. With little desire to move on, I sunbathed a while and waited for dusk, pitching my tent to an almighty din of a million and more frogs competing for choral supremacy! 18 April. Dasht-Arzhan to Shush. After the shock of waking to an ice-encrusted tent, a light mist from the marsh freezing my flysheet solid, I spent the first hour or so wandering around waiting for my tent to thaw and then dry! Still, with Purple Herons and Red-rumped Swallows flying over and exploration of a small woodland revealing both Common Nightingales and migrant Marsh Warblers, it was certainly not a hardship. With tent packed and a coffee downed, the rest of the day was effectively a travel day, the plan being to reach the historic city of Shush in the Dez Valley, a mere 680 km west. Hitched the first half, then got a free lift on bus for the next leg, finally swapping to a scheduled bus for the stretch between Dehdasht and Ahvaz, the latter the gateway to the Dez Valley. A petrochemical world of gas flares and pipelines zigzagging in all directions, bathed in a humid haze and sweltering under one of the hottest suns in all Iran, the industrial city of Ahvaz and its flat grey hinterland are a sight indeed, a pseudo post-apocalyptic vision that actually has some appeal in its total lack of attraction. Pied Kingfishers on the river, Black-winged Stilts and Red-wattled Plovers on roadside pools, White Storks nesting on pylons quite some distance to the east, all was not devoid of birds, White-winged Black Terns and European Rollers also seen, but regardless I was not going to stay in Ahvaz! I navigated across the city and, to a setting sun, got in a savari for the hour-and-a-half ride to Shush. A pleasant town, fairly quiet with a river meandering through and historic sites rising from the centre, Shush would serve as base for the next couple of days, the Dez River area being one of the birding hotspots in Iran. Checked into a hotel with air-conditioning, a required luxury in this neck of the woods, and reviewed my strategy for the next day, I had high hopes for one very special bird. 18 April. Masrae Seh, Dez River.

Tracking down the specialities in Iran is far from straightforward – very little information exists and the status of many species is poorly understood. On my first trip to Iran in 2011, even sites for the country's endemic Pleske's Ground Jay were basically a mystery and many an hour I scrutinised satellite maps to try and locate good birding areas, both for the jay and for other species throughout the country. Prior to this latest trip, still virtually no information existed for Basra Reed Warbler, one of my main targets. Primarily a breeder in the Mesopotamian marshes of Iraq, a handful of records did exist for Iran, but unfortunately concrete details were painfully scant. In 2012, Swedish birders found a singing bird 'near the village of Masrae Seh', but were regrettably unsure of the exact locality and could only describe it as 'about an hour north of Ahvaz'. In my pre-trip planning, I struggled to even locate Masrae Seh (!), so what hope I thought for a patch of marshland somewhere near it! Falling back to my strategy with satellite images, I spent a few hours scanning vast areas of the lower Dez Valley and lands adjacent to the Iraq border in the hope of locating areas of suitable habitat. Discounting a swathe of marshland right on the sensitive Iraqi border, I finally pinpointed a possible site some 40 km north of Ahvaz and drew paper maps with possible access routes and tracks, adding GPS coordinates for use in the field. Googling every possible spelling variant of Masrae Seh, I also finally located this village and was pleased to find it lying pretty close to the marshland I had identified. I still however didn't rate my chances too highly ...I was not absolutely sure that my identified location was actually marshland and even if it, it was certainly going to be challenge to find a Basra Reed Warbler - a fairly rare small bird with only a dozen or so records ever in Iran, secretive in nature and inhabiting a habitat largely inaccessible, plus it would be stinking hot within an hour or two of dawn! Gee, I thought, why was I even bothering? So it was, an hour before sunrise, I was hitchhiking down the main Shush to Ahvaz road watching the GPS on my mobile phone to see where to jump out. At the appointed

spot, I hopped out and began my walk, the marsh was approximately 10 km or so from the road. I actually managed to hitch another lift about half way, then again with the help of my crudely drawn map and GPS coordinates, I took a small side track that paralleled a canal. An amazing locality, Night Herons abundant, Cattle and Little Egrets too, plus a couple of Pygmy Cormorants flying over. Along the canal, two-a-penny Pied Kingfishers and Red-wattled Plovers, then the first dainty White-tailed Plover. Turtle Doves in scrub, Rufous Bush Robins common and Graceful Prinias scratching out their songs. On I walked, a Grey Hypocolius flew over, singles of both Turkmenistan and Woodchat Shrikes appeared atop bushes, flocks of Black-headed Buntings fed in arid fields alongside, so too Ortolan Buntings and Afghan Babblers. And then, a feast for the eyes, a vast marsh opened out to the left, far better than I had been expecting and absolutely peppered with birds. Wafts of Collared Pratincoles filled the sky, perhaps 250 in all, a breeding colony located a little further along, while on the marsh itself, ranks of Black-winged Stilts paddled shallow pools, along with Grey Herons, a few Purple Herons and an impressive 40 or so Squacco Herons. Whiskered Terns milled in flocks, a Marsh Harrier quartered the reeds and another dozen or so White-tailed Plovers adorned grass flats adjacent. Also, two more Pygmy Cormorants. I however had a problem - though I could see the marsh with ease, I was actually on the wrong side of a canal to access it! Separated by a couple of hundred metres of grass and shallow vegetated waters, the edge of the dense reeds (i.e. potential home to Basra Reed Warbler) were certainly too far away to detect a small warbler hiding away in its interior. Voice of Clamorous Reed Warblers drifted out, a couple of European Reed Warblers too, but without getting closer, I could see my chances for Basra Reed Warbler were slim. With no bridges whatsoever, I basically had the choice of retracking about 4 km, taking a swim or hoping for a bridge further along. With the heat already beginning to build, thoughts of retracking didn't appeal, nor did the swim, so on I went. Red-throated Pipits rose from the track, a Dead Sea Sparrow perched in a shrub, Iraq Babblers moved through reeds. Not far along, to my immediate right, a small patch of reeds clogged a drainage channel, fish pools beyond. I would have barely given the reeds a second glance were it not for a rather splendid male Little Bittern clinging to reed stalks midway up, but as I passed a little melody of grating churrs and sparrow-like chirps seemed to be quietly floating up from the hidden depths. As it registered, alarm bells began to ring! 'Surely not?', I found myself asking. Realising song was always going to be the best way to find a Basra Reed Warbler, I had taken the effort to not only familiarise myself with the song of this species, but also make a copy on my mobile phone for double checking in the field if need be. As it churred and grated away, I sat on a mud embankment and listened, the bird a mere two or three metres distant, but completely invisible. After direct comparison with the recording, there was doubt, I was indeed sitting next to a Basra Reed Warbler! I really couldn't believe it - against all the odds, I had located one! To say I was ecstatic is an understatement, all I had to do now was actually see it, easier said than done. Lying my mobile phone on the ground, I managed to get some nice voice recordings, but it took a good fifteen minutes before I got my first glimpse of the bird, considerably longer to get good views. For the entirety of the time I spent there, never did the bird emerge from the reeds and never did it do anything but clamber about in the reeds a few centimetres above the ground. Had the bird not been singing, there is no way I would have located it! Basra Reed Warbler was the absolute highlight of my trip to the Dez River, but an entirely more remarkable event occurred while I was squinting into those reeds trying to see the bird. Turning to scan the main marsh on one occasion, Collared Pratincoles ever-present and a rich assortment of waterbirds dotted across, my binoculars logged an assortment of heronsSquacco, Squacco, Grey Heron, Little Egret, Grey Heron ...Purple Heron, er no. 'Bloody hell, that's wrong, that's not a Purple Heron'. The bird in question was nothing less than a Goliath Heron! Extremely rare in Iran, birds are supposed to occur in small numbers in the mangroves in south-east Iran and are certainly rumoured to be present in the Iraqi marshes to the west, but I certainly had not expected to see one! Well, what a morning, simultaneous Goliath Heron and Basra Reed Warbler! By the time I had eventually seen the warbler however, I was a little disappointed to find the Goliath Heron gone, probably having simply walked into patches of high reeds just beyond. Oo, I was feeling a little happy. It was also getting rather hot! Walking further, it transpired there were no bridges over the channel, so I never accessed the main marsh at close quarters, I can only assume Basra Reed Warblers breed in some numbers there …or otherwise I was just exceptionally lucky! After a while, I took a side track leading through agricultural fields away from the marsh. Though bird numbers were lower, a few pairs of Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters were breeding in mud banks, Menetries Warblers sang from bushy area and a Pallid Harrier winged its way through. A road that I had identified from satellite images turned out to be a railway, but beyond that I found another smaller road. From there, the sun now burning down, I hitched a lift on the back of a motorbike to a village some kilometres distant and from there back to the main road. I then got a lift back to Shush, arriving early afternoon in time for a short siesta, 60 species under my belt for this morning. Afternoon entertainment was far more tranquil, simply taking a late afternoon stroll on open land behind Shush castle. I had seen Sandford's Fox here on a previous trip, but the honours this time went to a couple of Black Francolins, three European Rollers, three Turkmenistan Shrikes, three Woodchat Shrikes and one Red-backed Shrike. Day over, what a stunner it had been! 19 April. Dez River. You just know everything is okay when the day starts with a male White-throated Robin! And that's just what it did, beginning another excellent day along the Dez River. I today opted for a return to an area I explored on both of my previous trips to this area, namely the dense riverine thickets that border the Dez River alongside the river bridge a little north-west of the ancient site of Choqi Zambil. A fantastic area of overgrown meanders and old ox-bows, the mosaic of arid bushland, damp thickets, patches of reed and open grassflats simply bustles with birds, a truly one of the best localities in all Iran. And so it was, having hitched from Shush via assorted cars and motorbikes, I jumped out at the river and was immediately eyeball to eyeball with the male White-throated Robin hopping about under a bush. Clearly a migrant bird, this absolute stunner was my first White-throated Robin since 1987! And then, exactly as happened on both of my previous trips, I got apprehended by a guard who seems to reside in a small tent by the bridge. No ill-intents however, as on earlier occasions, the kindly old gent simply wanted to share a tea, shoving a kettle of a small fire and dolling out several lumps of sugar to sweeten the brew. Ah, piping hot tea, Rufous Bush Robins scampering about and White-

cheeked Bulbuls by the bucketload! Iran at its very best. In this sweltering hot corner of the country though, dawn hours are a valuable commodity, so tearing myself away from my new chum, I set off to explore. Failed to relocate the White-throated Robin, but plenty of other birds ...Rufous Bush Robins singing from virtually every thicket, Common Nightingales also, plus a bevy of migrant warblers, including Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, Green Warbler, Marsh Warbler and Menetries Warbler. For the visiting birder however, there are some rather greater jewels lurking in these quarters ...a whole bunch of fine jewels in fact. And one by one, so they appeared, White-tailed Plovers on a grassy plain, flocks of Iraq Babblers in damper thickets, three Black Francolins scuttling off through the bush and, the cream of the crop, pairs and small flocks of Grey Hypocolius, many gorging themselves on small berries. Wonderful birds all, so too four Mesopotamian Crows, a Dead Sea Sparrow, a few Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters and a pair of Stone Curlews. Also several flocks of Afghan Babblers, a couple of White-breasted Kingfishers and about 40 Yellow-throated Sparrows. On my summer trip, I also chanced upon a roosting Egyptian Nightjar at this locality, but a couple of hours wandering in the same area (unsurprisingly) failed to repeat the event, so as the sun climbed high and productivity began to drop, I returned to the bridge, had another cup of tea and then, slightly reluctantly, decided to quit the area. By early afternoon, I was back in Shush and an hour so after that, I was in the town of Andimeshk north. Boarding a 4.00 p.m. train, my journeys in the south of Iran were over ... in eleven hours, I would be in Tehran. Till then, I relaxed on my bunk, wrote up my notes and pondered my next move, there was still a certain Black-headed Penduline Tit that had eluded me! 21 April. Mount Damavand. 5.00 a.m., woken from my slumber as the overnight sleeper train rolled into Tehran. Took a taxi across town to the Eastern Bus Station, then boarded a bus bound for Amol on the Caspian coast, jumping out at the junction to the mountain village of Reynah, gateway to the mighty Mount Damavand. My base for the next few nights, I rented a room in Reynah, totally confused myself intergrade-type wheatears, then set off for a day of Alpine explorations. Standing stark to a blue sky, delicate wisps of cloud dancing around the summit, the snowy slopes of Damavand looked most inviting and, even though I had zero ambitions to attempt the 5600 metre peak, thoughts of Caspian Snowcocks and Lammergeyers were soon firing me up. Oodles of Skylarks in song, a posse of Alpine Swifts hurtling around the lower slopes, one pair of Pied Wheatears, plenty of Rock Buntings, not bad fodder for the early stages of the climb, but overall the mid-altitude slopes seemed rather devoid of birds, quite clearly still a little early in the season for many of the mountain birds to have returned. As I climbed higher, with both Golden Eagle and Long-legged Buzzard soaring above and Western Rock Nuthatch scrambling about on boulders, I began my scans of the snowfields above, the obvious hope being a Caspian Snowcock strutting across an exposed area. Whilst the diversity and density of birds was far from that I encountered in late summer, a grassy plateau at about 2800 metres was a most pleasant encounter - amongst abundant Northern Wheatears, Shore Larks and Tawny Pipits ambling about on the short turf, the fluty songs of Rufous-tailed Rock Thrushes floated across the hillside, gaudy-coloured males chasing each others across tumbled down stone walls, the more subtle females watching on. Rock Buntings dotted about, Red-billed Choughs high in the sky, the spot certainly seemed a good place to take a break and relax against a large boulder and watch the slopes above. Far to the left, I spied three little dots traversing a snowfield, Iranian mountaineers heading for the summit, a brave move I thought, watching the snow and ice they were to face. One more Golden Eagle over a crag, then as I completed a long slow scan of the mountain side, thoughts of Lammergeyer forefront, a real surprise as two large bulky birds sailed through my field of vision … grouse on steroids, the birds passed over a deep ravine, turning to reveal flashes of white on the wings, Caspian Snowcocks! I'd been hoping to perhaps spot a bird silhouetted on one of the high snowfields, but this pair were quite superb - though distant, the whole setting was most evocative, a prolonged flight of the pair against a patchwork of snow and scree, wonderful. Landing on a rocky slope, soon the birds were lost to view, but I was rather pleased, not least as it gave me good excuse to not climb another thousand metres or so and play skating games on the icy slopes. With this target seen, I began a gradual descent, more Rufous-tailed Rock Thrushes on route, along with a single pair of Persian Wheatears, a few Crag Martins and the occasional Chukar Partridge. Reaching the quiet Reynah - Polur road, I followed this for a while, adding more Rock Buntings and Western Rock Nuthatches, a flock of overhead European Bee-eaters and a rather nice pair of Blue Rock Thrushes. I also found another male White-throated Robin …one in the Dez Valley, one here, the two birds were almost 1500 km apart, but after a 27 year gap between my previous sightings, I had now found two in two days! And with that, seeing a car trundling along, I hitched a lift back to Reynah and spent the last few of hours of the day wandering the orchards below the village - Tree Sparrows fairly common, a few Common Nightingales in song, two Syrian Woodpeckers, but otherwise fairly quiet. I did have thoughts of staying till dusk to see if the area harboured Scops Owls, but laziness prevailed and back to the village I went. Banana and yoghurt for supper, home for night a room I had rented. 22 April. Mount Damavand. Still missing quite a few high altitude species for the trip, Crimson-winged Finches, accentors and Lammergeyers springing to mind, so set off at dawn once again for another hike to the middle elevations of Mount Damavand, taking a slightly more northerly route and ascending to just over 3000 metres. Crisp and sunny early on, a nice selection of birds including Persian, Finsch's and Black-eared Wheatears, Rufous-tailed Rock Thrushes again and a Hume's Lesser Whitethroat. Also bumped into my first Rock Sparrow of the trip, an increased number of Black Redstarts and yet more Western Rock Nuthatches (strangely, in contrast to previous trips to Damavand, I totally failed to find Eastern Rock Nuthatch on the mountain this time). Dressed in fairly light clothes and open sandals, it is a fairly wise move to keep an eye on the weather and, three to four hours into my climb, a mean wind began to whip across the exposed mountain sides, the temperature dropping quite a few degrees. Dropping into gullies, all was fine for quite a while, Shore Larks and Red-fronted Serin added to the day list, but climbing onto a ridge the sight facing me down was none too promising, dark menacing clouds rolling in, obliterating the summit and threatening rain or, given the altitude, probably snow. Jeepers, I thought, it was time for a rapid descend, plotting a route directly down a gully and then eventually down to the Polur - Reynah road. With rain spitting and higher slopes already attracting a dusting of snow, I trotted downward at a fair pace, barely a bird seen until I got to the gully bottom. Climbing over a rock outcrop, a male Blue Rock Thrush bravely sang

despite the chill wind, a Persian Wheatear hopped about on a sheltered slope. And then the rain stopped, the skies began to part and hints of blue reappeared. All too soon, the sun was breaking through and I was left thinking, 'Drat, I've just thrown away about a 1000 metres of altitude for nothing!' Well, there was no way I was going to climb all the way back up again, so I decided to spend the next hour or so scrambling around in the gullies near the road. Not a bad move, not only did I find yet another White-throated Robin, but also a very nice Plain Leaf Warbler singling away in a small bush. Additionally, quite a few Rock Buntings, another Hume's Lesser Whitethroat and a Golden Eagle overhead. Well, I hadn't found any accentors, hadn't seen any Crimson-winged Finches and not a hint of a Lammergeyer had gone over, but I decided to return to base anyhow, taking a short rest at base before again taking a late afternoon stroll around the orchards - Syrian Woodpecker drumming again, plus a very territorial pair of Hobbies and a smart pair of Bramblings. Again, didn't stay till dusk to check for Scop's Owls! 23 April. Attempt Two, Black-headed Penduline Tit! In three weeks of wandering in Iran, the days had been one long catalogue of amazing experiences and considerable success. One little blot however did sit in my copybook, the failure to see Black-headed Penduline Tit at Babolsar! Much as I did not really want to revisit the Caspian lowlands, thoughts of departing Iran without at least more attempt of this rarely-seen species were equally unappealing. So, very much a compromise solution, I decided to day trip Babolsar from my little haven in the mountains …hitch to the site early in the morning, hopefully see it, then return to Damavand in the evening! Though theoretically an easy journey, the total distance only about 130 km each way, the road from Damavand to the coastal strip was painfully slow, a torturous meander down a winding road full of total idiots playing suicidal overtaking games. One head-on collision between a bus and a truck en route, plus an second overturned truck further on, slowed things down even further, as did later getting stuck right in the centre of Amol city, not quite certain as to the correct direction out. Regardless, by 10.30 a.m. I was once again walking along the embankments through the rice paddies towards the Babolsar wetlands, sixteen days having elapsed since my last visit, hopefully enough time for the Black-headed Penduline Tits to have arrived! Good first omens, a splendid Baillon's Crake creeping through scant reeds at the point I entered the wetlands. Bad second omens, the skies clouded over almost as soon as I arrived, basically the same as they had done on my first visit! Still, I was here now, so on I walked. Purple Herons again, a Marsh Harrier quartering, abundant hirundines, including quite a few Sand Martins and a Red-rumped Swallow. Exiting the first pool and beginning my walk of the second, I was already beginning to fear there was some sort of curse surrounding these penduline tits, maybe they simply did not occur here every year. Flocks of Whiskered Terns passed overhead, the distinctive kreekk kreekk call echoing out, one part of White-winged Black Terns too. Pool two was proving even quieter than the first, a couple of Northern Wheatears appeared to be breeding on the embankments, a migrant Common Redstart flitted along, but otherwise the full sum of birds amounted to basically zilch! Three-quarters of the way around, having mentally resigned myself to no result, a small bird popped up in the reeds in front …flicked the bins up and got a half-second eyeful of a dark bird, basically a chocolate-rufous back merging into an almost hood of black …Black-headed Penduline Tit!!! But, bugger, no sooner had I fixed my binoculars onto the bird and up it flitted, straight into the high canopy of a large willow adjacent. Relocating slightly, I peered into that tree for ages, but not a sign did I see. I then slowly walked around the tree and scanned from the other side …bingo, a bird feeding right at the top. Then a sinking feeling, the bird was indeed a penduline tit, but an unmistakable European Penduline Tit, complete with highway mask and all! European Penduline Tits breed slightly further west in Iran and certainly occur at this site on passage. For a second, doubts flooded my mind, had I just hallucinated a dark hood? Surely not, I thought. But the bird I was now watching was a pure European Penduline Tit, no question. Fortunately, before there was time for depression to set in, a movement in the canopy just to the right caught my attention …and bam, there was a Black-headed Penduline Tit in its full glory! Ah, a sigh of relief! Watching over the next ten minutes or so, it turned out that there were actually five birds in the tree, three Black-headed Penduline Tits and two European Penduline Tits, neat indeed! And then, suddenly up they all flitted, flying high over my head and off to another set of willows some distance off. Well, that was nice, my final target bird had fallen …I'd even got some photographs of the birds, albeit of dubious quality! Anyhow, with that, I continued my walk around the remainder of the pools - no further penduline tits, but I did add Great Reed Warbler to the trip list and, just as I was about to exit the site, I noticed a congregation of birds in a flooded rice paddy. Sitting to scan, my eyes almost fell out …hundreds and hundreds of Wood Sandpipers! I truly think I have never seen such a large single flock of these dainty birds - a careful count revealing no less than 870 paddling about! Wow, almost as good as a Black-headed Penduline Tit! Also one Green Sandpiper, four Ruff, about 20 Common Snipe and a lone Black-winged Stilt. Fourteen Little Egrets too. And with that, I departed the wetlands, walked a couple of kilometres to the bus station and caught a Tehran-bound bus, jumping out at the Reynah junction again to arrive back in my base just before dark. A good day it had turned out to be! 24 April. Mount Damavand. Buckets of rain overnight, the torrential downpours rattling the windows almost to dawn. However, much to my surprise, a glance outside at sunrise revealed a cloudless sky, gorgeous blue skies and, for the slopes above 3000 metres, a fresh coat of snow. Some years back, I had stumbled across a high-altitude meadow just east of Camp 2 on the popular route to Damavand summit - summer home to herders, the combination of short turf, ramshackle stone dwellings and small pool had proved an excellent locality for birds, wheatears and buntings abundant, plenty of other stuff too. Far too early in the season for the shepherds to have returned, and indeed too early for many of the birds, I decided nevertheless to hike to the site, altitude about 3000 metres. A super start to the morning with the wailing calls of Caspian Snowcocks filtering down from the high tops and the very pleasing discovery of a flock of about 12 Crimson-winged Finches feeding at low altitude. Also a pair of Rock Sparrows at this location and, rather out of place, a single Woodlark. Despite the poor overnight weather and the lower snowline, it was soon apparent that a mini-influx of birds had arrived on the mountain this day, perhaps some also pushed down from higher altitudes. Red-fronted Serins, Shore Larks, a couple of Tawny Pipits, several Black Redstarts, abundant Linnets, all marked my route up the mountain. Also one pair of Finsch's Wheatears in a gully and even a European Roller on one of the lower slopes. At about 2700 metres I began to hit the first dustings

of snow, very picturesque but not too nice on toes in open sandals! Fortunately with a warm sun beating down, many slopes were already becoming snow-free and it was a relatively easy hike up and across to my desired meadow. One more pair of Crimson-winged Finches on arrival, oodles of Northern Wheatears too, plus about 12 Rufous-tailed Rock Thrushes, an unexpected pair of Hoopoes (at over 3000 metres!) and a lot of Shore Larks and Rock Buntings. Four Lesser Kestrels on an adjacent rockface, Chukars calling too. I however had hopes of accentors on this plateau - at least an Alpine Accentor I thought I deserved, a Radde's even nicer. And indeed my luck was in ...after wandering around almost the entire meadow, almost an hour in all, I ventured towards a stone kraal, vacant of livestock but abuzz with birds. Abutting a small bank of snow, the kraal was certainly attracting birds, some feeding amongst the stones of the walls, others flitting down into the kraal itself. A few Shore Larks shuffling around, several Rock Buntings popping up, but then the first glimpse of a small brown bird hopping about on the edge of the snow ...a Radde's Accentor! And then another peeping over a stone wall, and then another, and another! Jeepers, they were all over the place! It turned out that there were at least 12 feeding both inside and outside the kraal, a quite resplendent sight. Stayed with these birds for a half hour or so, me just sitting quietly on a boulder watching the flock come and go, flushed every now and then by one of the Lesser Kestrels venturing too close. By early afternoon, hints of clouds now gathering around the summit, I decided to descend. Found three Plain Leaf Warblers in shrubs near the road, plus yet another White-throated Robin. Bar Lammergeyer and, annoyingly, Eastern Rock Nuthatch, I had now seen all my target birds on Damavand. Just to rub the point in, a pair of Western Rock Nuthatches were hopping about on a big boulder just adjacent, I half expected them to start doing somersaults! Back at base, I took my now traditional afternoon stroll around the orchards below town, Hobbies still present, one flock of Red-fronted Serins, one male Common Rosefinch. And with that, I retired to my room for the evening. 25 April. Damavand to Tehran

Last day of the trip. With most birds seen, I basically mellowed out today, taking a short walk in the gullies south of Reynah (three White-throated Robins, a pair of Persian Wheatears, one Turkmenistan Shrike), then retiring to write up my notes.

Hitched to Tehran in the afternoon, added Ring-necked and Alexandrine Parakeets in the city park (species number 259 and 260 for the trip), then headed for the airport late evening.

26 April.

4.40 a.m. departure from Tehran. Again a four-hour flight to Minsk, a one-hour transfer and then back to Vilnius, home by 9.00 a.m. local time. Trip over.