

International youth birdwatching project

Field trip to Azerbaijan

25-30 October 2015

Background

Young people doing birdwatching with newfound friends from other countries has the potential of being an amazing vehicle for many good things: international youth co-operation, nature conservation, eco tourism, student exchange and in the long run countering xenophobia and creating better relations between people and cultures.

Azerbaijan is emerging as a most exciting and accessible destination for interested foreigners (and birdwatchers) and is growingly participating in international relations. The local nature conservation community is small but active and some German students and bird researchers have been committed here since the mid 2000's. Over the last years now also several foreign birdwatching tour operators are doing tours here.

So, with this in mind I proposed to the youth committee of BirdLife Sweden that we go to Azerbaijan for some great migration birding, meeting local young birders from BirdLife Azerbaijan and activists and see what we can get going for the future. We will monitor migration at the important bottle neck site Besh Barmag (known from the recent migration studies of Michael Heiss and Kai Gauger) for a few days and also visit Shirvan Nationalpark together with our local friends.

Our vision, if we may dream, is an established research/eco tourism field station at or near Besh Barmag filled with international young bird and nature activists and supported by organizations, companies and authorities.



Besh Barmag birdwatching area by the Caspian Sea. April 2012. Photo Tomas Axén Haraldsson

Co-working

Several partners and stakeholders are active and invited in this and we hope that the network can grow and be sustainable. This trip in October 2015 is to be seen as continuing the work by our German and Azeri friends and also to be a pilot to see what can be done and how it is perceived.

- BirdLife Sweden, including the youth committee, and its tour operator AviFauna are the main backers of this trip.
- I plan and lead the trip and the work around it.
- On site we will meet BirdLife Azerbaijan and Nature Friends for field visits and social activities.
- Baku-based travel agency Caspian Tour is our logistics partner.
- German bird researchers and students from the Greifswald University are involved in our discussion forum.

Costs and finance

For this trip is all shared-cost based for the participants with some sponsoring from BirdLife Sweden and the costs for the leader are covered by AviFauna.

For the any future arrangements we hope to arrange support from various sources and apply for funding well in advance.

Flights, visa and accommodation

We use Turkish Airlines this time with convenient and cheap flights from Stockholm and Copenhagen via Istanbul to Baku at around 300€ return trip.

Visa is arranged by Caspian Tour and handled digitally – we receive an e-visa.

For accommodation we are breaking new ground in terms of birders visits to Azerbaijan and Besh Barmag – we will stay in a private house near Siyazan, the closest town to the bottle neck site. Previously birders have been confined to camping or hotel stay in Baku. Hopefully this house can be used in the future for similar visitors.



"Caspian" Stonechat is an exclusive local bird that we hope to see. Photo Kai Gauger.

Besh Barmag

Besh Barmag is mainly known as the sacred rock formation, on a ridge overlooking the Caspian Sea coastline, and pilgrimage site within Shia Islamic belief. It's also a roadside resting place with cafés and shops.

Its ornithological values were discovered some years ago by the German researchers and has since been monitored during several spring and autumn periods, see www.birdingaze.blogspot.se for more information.

The geographic features are the main cause for the so-called bottle neck effect on migrating birds – the foothills of the Greater Caucasus reaching out towards the Caspian Sea, leaving a narrow coastal plain as corridor between a vast sea and a vast mountain range. At Besh Barmag this corridor is at its smallest with about 2.500m width.

The main viewing points to monitor the migration of birds is on the low grassy ridge where the dry coastal plain descends towards the beach and (spring time) lagoon. From here we can see both sea bird flocks, the movements on the sky, over the hills and the resting birds around.

About the project leader

The initiative holder and leader of this engagement is Tomas Axén Haraldsson from Sweden. Tour guide, Middle East experienced, youth leader and birdwatcher since 25 years back. Contact me at tomasharaldsson@hotmail.com for queries or thoughts around this project.

Tomas Axén Haraldsson

