

Trip report Besh Barmag, Azerbaijan, 1-2 December 2018

flash visit to the migration count & Baku

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During the autumn 2018 the Besh Barmag Bird Migration Count took place. More than three months of daily counting and reaching almost 3 million birds of more than 300 species it was the real breakthrough of this spectacular bird migration site in Azerbaijan. Myself I only got a taste of it this year with a quick visit at the end of the project and delivering the final seminar in Baku.



Logistics

Me and Daniel Yttermalm flew Turkish Airlines through Istanbul to Baku, arriving early morning 1 December and returning in the early hours of 4 December. Smooth flights and maximising the time in Azerbaijan, flight tickets at about 300euro. Upon arrival we were met by the project transfer and we stayed one night at the project accommodation at Besh Barmag and one night at a small inn in the Old City of Baku.

So its entirely possible to visit Besh Barmag for just a few days of migration birding! If avoiding rush hours the drive from the airport to Besh Barmag is about 1 ½ hour and simple hotels are available near the count site. Simple food at stalls and cafés by the rest houses along the highway. Given the current construction of a new highway (and likely new logistics for visiting birders in terms of lodging etc.) please get yourself an update before heading there.

From Besh Barmag its about 2 ½ hours drive northwards to Khinaliq in the Greater Caucasus for mountain birding and equal time southwards to Shirvan National Park for steppe and lake species.

Check out the main portal for Besh Barmag birding, past counts and whats going on:

<https://birdingazerbaijan.org/besh-barmag/>

For the daily migration counts during autumn 2018 see Trektellen (from where the screenshots below are taken):

<https://trektellen.nl/site/totals/1533/2018>

1 December

Landing in Baku by 5:30am and at the airport exit doors soon after, we were met by Rovshan from the team and a driver. The 90 minutes driving through the suburbs and industrial land was quite hassle free and we soon saw the opening coastal plains approaching Besh Barmag. Arriving at "Besh" on a late autumn morning is like being a kid and arrive a some candy wonderland. All around bird migration goes on and there is sound of "clickers" and a quiet talking from the counting team. Happy smiles and hugs with dear friends from previous visits. The weather was mild, visibility clear but windy as it can be here, whipping up sand and dust. The project had been able to erect a simple shelter to shield counters from the worst winds and even a parked minivan could act as fine shelter.

Seabird migration was rich and passing low over the choppy Caspian Sea were constant flocks of ducks, often in spectacular variety. Incredible daily total for some species, for example over 500 Red-crested Pochards! A nice flock of Little Bustards passed just below us along the dunes. Passerine migration was hard to detect and numbers small. Some larks were resting on the nearby field and we were thrilled to find a White-winged Lark among them, a lifer for me! Another highlight was the regular flocks of gulls among which we could pick out Great Black-headed Gulls in different plumages.

As migration wined down in the late afternoon we returned to our base and enjoyed a few beers, dinner and nice chats in the evening.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WPFIXm6ptmA> the Little Bustards flying by!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6o1lfr-HvT4> resting and feeding White-winged Lark 😊



White-winged Lark resting next to the count site in very windy conditions...



Minivan acting as wind shelter. "Russian salad" as picnic lunch prepared by the project kitchen! Daniel is in his happy place.



Spectacularly mixed flocks of ducks were heading south in big numbers! (photo by Hazel Watson a few days earlier)

Besh Barmag

Saturday 1 December 2018

Counting period: 07:35-17:30 ☐

Count type: all species

Weather: wind: 5-7 SE, temperature: 7-10 °C, clouds: 5/8-7/8, visibility: 10000 m.

Observers: Kai Gauger, Gabi Caucal, Gunay Bahramzada, Leyla Muslim, Gerd Wichers, Tomas Haraldsson, Daniel Yttermalm

	S	N		S	N	S	N
goose sp.	47	-	Tufted Duck	216	-	Rook	626 401
Greylag Goose	28	-	Goldeneye *	8	-	Hooded Crow	18 -
Shelduck	450	-	Red-breasted Merganser *	13	-	Skylark	99 -
Ruddy Shelduck	30	-	Great Crested Grebe	23	1	Calandra Lark	2 -
Shoveler	260	-	Black-necked / Slavonian Grebe	1	-	Starling	160 -
Gadwall	245	-	Great White Egret	1	-	sparrow sp.	8 -
Wigeon	5023	-	Cormorant	93	4	White Wagtail	1 -
Mallard	4697	-	Sparrowhawk	1	-	Meadow Pipit	14 -
dabbling duck sp.	2909	-	Marsh Harrier *	36	1	Chaffinch	366 -
duck sp.	25	-	Hen Harrier *	6	-	Brambling	8 -
Pintail *	1151	-	Little Bustard	38	-	finch sp.	33 -
Teal	1002	-	Black-headed Gull	223	-	Linnet	3 -
Red-crested Pochard *	503	-	Great Black-headed Gull *	6	-	Goldfinch	2 -
Pochard	437	-	Caspian Gull	319	-	Siskin	1 -
Aythya sp.	61	-	Merlin *	1	-	Corn Bunting	2 -
Ferruginous Duck	1	-	Jackdaw	10	-	Reed Bunting	6 -

Present: Cinereous Vulture 2*, Imperial Eagle 3*, Sparrowhawk 1, White-tailed Eagle 1*, Long-legged Buzzard 1, Steppe Buzzard 1, **White-winged Lark 1**

Totals: 19620 individuals, 48 (+6) species, 9:55 hours

Comments: Really hard day for all the team because of the strong south-east wind and therefore lot of sand in our eyes and opticals... but what knowledges it brought about the Ducks migration here! Indeed, all day long, some nice groups of Common Shelduck (sometimes more than 40) followed one other and the story was the same for the Red-crested Pochard especially at the end of the day with this group of 75 birds! Concerning the nice views of the day, we can mention this flock of 29 Little Bustard just front of a large group of Wigeon above the beach and these 8 Goldeneyes also close to the shore with 2 beautiful males among them! So, yes, wonderful last official day count! Now, the extent begins until the 7 december!



"The rock" behind us – the Caspian Sea in front. Bottleneck explained! Early winter sceneries at Besh Barmag.

2 December

The wind had eased from yesterday so it was a pleasant morning and continuing spectacular seabird migration. Amazing flocks of Shelduck and Great Crested Grebe both reaching awesome daily totals! Today we could note more passerine migration and it was pure excitement to scan through the mixed lark flocks and pick out White-winged Larks in several of them! Several cool flocks of Pygmy Cormorants and also more Great Black-headed Gulls, sometimes mixed with Caspian Gulls but also as pure flocks. For us Swedes it felt like home when seeing migrating Black-throated Divers and even Goldeneyes.



Besh Barmag

Sunday 2 December 2018

Counting period: 07:34-17:19

Count type: all species

Weather: wind: 2-3 SE, temperature: 7-10 °C, clouds: 8/8, visibility: 10000 m, rain: 70%.

Observers: Kai Gauger, Gabi Caucal, Gunay Bahramzada, Leyla Muslim, Gerd Wichers, Tomas Haraldsson, Daniel Yttermalm, Huub Don

	S	N		S	N		S	N
Shelduck	2723	21	Black-necked / Slavonian Grebe	5	-	Rook	362	-
Gadwall	15	-	Grey Heron	1	-	Hooded Crow	30	-
Wigeon	73	-	Great White Egret	2	-	White-winged Lark	5	-
Mallard	417	-	Pygmy Cormorant	84	1	Skylark	1255	-
dabbling duck sp.	128	-	Cormorant	181	-	Calandra Lark	190	-
duck sp.	100	-	Sparrowhawk *	2	-	lark sp.	44	-
Pintail	6	-	Marsh Harrier *	18	-	Starling	1838	-
Teal	3	-	Hen Harrier *	3	-	Black Redstart	1	-
Red-crested Pochard *	46	-	White-tailed Eagle *	1	-	White Wagtail	1	-
Pochard	14	-	Little Bustard	1	-	Meadow Pipit	8	1
Aythya sp.	7	-	Lapwing	4	-	Water Pipit	1	2
Tufted Duck	4	-	Snipe	7	-	Chaffinch	73	332
Goldeneye *	20	-	Green Sandpiper	2	-	Brambling	16	-
Goosander *	1	-	Black-headed Gull	4947	-	finch sp.	18	-
Red-breasted Merganser *	15	-	Little Gull *	37	-	Greenfinch	1	-
Black-throated Diver	2	-	Great Black-headed Gull *	31	-	Linnet	1	-
Red-necked Grebe	2	-	Common Gull *	88	-	Goldfinch	11	-
Great Crested Grebe	1217	1	Caspian Gull	257	14	Corn Bunting	18	3
Black-necked Grebe	5	-	Merlin	-	1	Yellowhammer / Pine Bunting	1	-
grebe sp. *	4	-	Jackdaw	1	-	Reed Bunting	10	-

Present: Teal 2, Red-breasted Merganser 1*, Sparrowhawk 1*, Woodcock 1*, Great Black-headed Gull 2*, Blue Tit 3*, Great Tit 1*, Wren 4*, Blackbird 5*, Redwing 1*, Song Thrush 3*, Robin 12*, Red-breasted Flycatcher 1*, Linnet 15

Totals: 14734 individuals, 60 (+9) species, 9:45 hours

Comments: Wonderful day again for the project! Like yesterday, we learnt a lot about the migration here and what a amazing moment during the morning with these hundreds Black-headed Gulls, Shelducks (2 flocks of more than 500 individuals!!!) and tens of Great Crested Grebes migrating at this same time! Concerning the better composition of birds Besh Barmag style, we can retain this group of 5 Ducks with the same number of species (Tufted Duck, Mallard, Red-crested-Pochard, Gadwall and Goldeneye) and the really nice flock of Grebes comprising 1 Black-necked, 1 Red-necked and 5 Great Crested!

By lunch time we left the counters in charge, packed our stuff and headed back to Baku. This evening we had planned for a seminar to wrap up the autumn project and gain some support for future work here. A classroom-style seminar venue had been arranged, a slideshow prepared and invitations sent widely. We were happy to see some 30 interested showing up, including the head of the Swedish Embassy as well as Azerbaijani state television. The presentation went well and afterwards we gathered at a restaurant for Azerbaijani dishes and inspiring chats. Some of the team stayed in Baku, some went back to "Besh" and Tomas and Daniel turned in at their hotel room.



Part of the team and guests at the seminar in Baku 2 December. Good spirits!

3 December

Me and Daniel had a full day of meetings and arrangements in Baku which most were for the sake of safeguarding the Besh Barmag bottleneck. I visited the Swedish Embassy and talked bird conservation and diplomacy in a country under fast infrastructure development. Then I met up with Kai Gauger and together we visited Elman Yusifov at the Zoological Institution and after that I squeezed in meeting the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources together with our partner Nature Friends Azerbaijan. By the late afternoon we were quite exhausted of running around in Baku so we had a meal and relaxed on the room for a few hours before heading to the airport for night flights back to Sweden.