

Trip report Azerbaijan 12-15 March 2020

Bird records during bird guide training field trip

Tomas Axén Haraldsson



Cover photo: the group scanning for birds at the epic Besh Barmag rock.

Background

Azerbaijan is an incredibly rich birdwatching destination and has received growing attention over the last few years. This is mainly thanks to the Besh Barmag project which has had many foreign visitors, been involved in local capacity building and also an active presence in social media.

The Azerbaijan Tourism Board (STB) has since 2019 decided to focus on birdwatching tourism as one of the sectors with high potential in the country. An assessment report is currently being finalized and will tell about the development prospects of the birdwatching tourism in Azerbaijan. As one component needed to make the country even more attractive for foreign birdwatching visitors it was decided to hold a training session for future local birdwatching guides.

Bird guide training

What do foreign birdwatchers expect of services when they come to Azerbaijan? Which bird species would they hope to see? How do you lead a birdwatching group in the field and what can you expect from them? These and many other questions were answered during our trip. Leading the training was Tomas Axén Haraldsson who has been a guide on birding tours for Swedish nature tour operator AviFauna for more than 10 years and done regular tours to Azerbaijan. He could explain to the guide "trainees" what it is like and what they need to prepare before they host a group.

The 12 participants were recruited by ATB and needed to motivate their place and show commitment and interest. The group was of a mixed level of knowledge and experience. Some had been on the Bird Camps at Besh Barmag, had a strong interest in birds since several years and even been co-leading foreign birdwatchers visiting Azerbaijan. So these were the "seniors" in our group whereas others had some background in tourism, or general interest in nature, but were new to birdwatching.

The participants were given different tasks during the days, they had to prepare some cases and we also held a little quiz as a test on their new knowledge. We practiced talking in microphone and also in front of a group. Due to the mounting Covid-19 situation we had to cut short the program and get the trainer back to Sweden before flights and borders closed down.



The bird guide "trainees" with Tomas, Vusala and Elchin Sultanov, chairman of the Azerbaijan Ornithological Society (AOS)

Logistics

All bookings and planning was done by Vusala Sarkhanova at ATB supported by Tomas and part of the arrangement. We traveled in a Mercedes Sprinter bus which was suitable for 15 persons and could manage even poorer roads. That was thanks to both bus and a superb driver! With the new highway running south from Baku the driving time to the southernmost region around Masalli has decreased from at least 4 hours to say 2.5 hours. That makes some attractive birding grounds (like the sites for Shikra and Caspian/Hyrcan Tit) even more available!

Kur Hotel in Salyan was simple and quite worn but an ok choice for a night or two for a birdwatching group. Restaurant within walking distance. Contrastingly the Lenkoran Springs Wellness Resort is a newly opened ***** deluxe resort which is a bit over the top for a birdwatching group but of course a very pleasant experience, and you might want to pamper yourself after some hard birding and long days. Staybridge Suites in Baku was a great experience, really nice rooms and one of the best breakfast buffets in town.

Itinerary

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| (11 March | bird guide trainer on evening flights from Sweden through Istanbul to Baku, arriving 06am on 12 March) |
| 12 March | day visit to Besh Barmag (bottle neck area and mountain). Overnight in Baku. |
| 13 March | morning drive southwards, stop at Gobustan and Shirvan fishponds en route. Lunch in Salyan, afternoon in Shirvan National |

Park. Late afternoon drive to Lenkoran. Overnight at Lenkoran Springs Wellness Resort.

14 March visit at Kizil Agach, lunch in Lenkoran. Afternoon birding at Machmud Chala wetlands. Overnight in Salyan at Kur Hotel.

15 March morning drive back to Baku, visit at Absheron National Park. Lunch en route to the airport, hasty departure of bird guide trainer.

(16 March certification ceremony for participants)



Shirvan fishponds.

Trip diary

12 March

An eager, curious and excited group of young bird guide "trainees" had gathered at the bus by the 28 May subway station, one of the famous meet-up places in Baku. Vusala from ATB was to lead the tour together with Tomas and there were smiles and happy handshakes as a long-planned program finally got underway. We were also joined this day by Elchin Sultanov from the Azerbaijan Ornithological Society.

The drive northwards out of Baku is through industrial areas, wastelands and the landscape flattens out to a dry coastal steppe and fields. Soon the foothills of the Greater Caucasus appears on your left and after a while also the magnificent pointed crag known as *Besh Barmag dag*, the sacred mountain of Besh Barmag. As the highway runs straight below the rock there are some road side stalls, shops, a mosque and other services for motorists. Here you turn off to the right by the bridge and take the dirt tracks towards the coast.

The Azerbaijani authorities have decided to build a new highway from the Iranian border in the south to the Russian border in the north. This road project cuts straight through the coastal area that has been the Besh Barmag bottle neck since its discovery in 2007 as one of the major bird migration routes in the entire Eurasia. As we drove down to the former observation spot on the ridge there was heavy fog, as it can be along the coast. We discussed what to do if you arrive with a birding group and you can't see any birds... We walked along the dunes and down to the camping spot where we held the Bird Camps a couple of years ago. *Marsh Harriers* migrated north as did a flock of *Little Bustards* and some *larks*. We found resting *Song Thrush*, *Brambling* and *Robin*; the spring is still early. Near the observation spot we checked out the new possible place that will be a new counting spot if planning and collaboration with the road construction company goes well. We found a male *Stonechat*, singing *Corn Buntings* and flocks of *Skylark* and *Calandra Lark*.

After a nice lunch at a restaurant in Siyazan, the town just north of Besh Barmag, we drove up the bumpy track all the way to the mountain itself. The road is quite bad but we had a very skilled driver. Very exciting when we flushed a ghost-white male *Pallid Harrier* sitting just along the road! Up at the sacred mountain the weather had cleared and we enjoyed some of the local species in this habitat, like *Rock Sparrows*, *Black Redstart*, *Rock Nuthatch* and a fine male *Blue Rock Thrush*. On the way back we also saw one *Great Grey Shrike* and *Long-legged Buzzard*. I think our guide students had plenty to talk about and learn from during the drive back to Baku in the late afternoon.



Blue Rock Thrush at Besh Barmag mountain, photo by Elvin Mammadsoy.

Checklist and some photos of our observed bird species at Besh Barmag here:

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S67453065>

13 March

In the morning we drove out of Baku southwards. On the bus we discussed how to plan a day in the field with a group, what stops to make along the way and what to keep in mind. Do you stop for birds seen from the bus window or keep driving? How many hours between breakfast and lunch and what about toilet facilities in the field?

One of the main "selling points" for attracting birdwatchers to Azerbaijan is the rich variety in habitats and bird species. South of Baku it gets drier and around Gobustan it is basically undulating semi-desert with hills and rocks. We took the turnoff point for the historical site at Gobustan and made a brief stop just after the entrance to the site, along the small road. Territorial *Isabelline Wheatears* and also a pair of *Finsch's Wheatear* were next to the road and 1000+ of *Calandra Larks* headed north, dense flocks low over the barren ground. A few *Marsh Harriers* were on the move northwards and Abdin discovered an eagle over the distant hills, a fine *Steppe Eagle* it turned out.

We continued southwards and just before the Shirvan Nationalpark there is a canal and a system of fish ponds on the opposite (western) side of the road. Here we drove out on the

dirt track and parked by a small hut with some fishermen. The shallow ponds are visible in the barren landscape and a few minutes walk inland. As good practice for our bird guide students we could study some small birds up close as both *Water Pipits*, *Little Ringed Plovers*, *Temmincks Stints*, *Redshanks* and *White Wagtails* were feeding on the mudflats. *Little Egret* and *Pygmy Cormorants* were fishing in the canal and in the distance we saw *Great White Egrets* and *Grey Herons* resting on the ground between the ponds. Shouts of joy as a flock of huge *Dalmatian Pelicans* soared up over the plains.

For lunch we tried a local restaurant in Salyan that scrambled up and served us the regular type of food; salads, lentil soup and mixed grill plate. Its fine for a few days but will be tiring on a longer trip, so guides are advised to instruct the restaurants to please vary their meals. The afternoon was spent in Shirvan National Park, a fine experience (pleasant staff, clear information boards, nice tracks over the steppe down to the lake) and always good birds around. We could enjoy a *Hoopoe* just in front of us and plenty of *Corn Buntings*. We heard the calls of *Black Francolines* but seeing them was more difficult...

Driving the bumpy road through the plains produced some of the local *Goitered Gazelles* and more *Calandra Larks* and *Corn Buntings*. As we approached the "flamingo lake" we spotted a pair of *Ruddy Shelducks* flying and also two *Little Bustards*, disappointingly the only ones seen as we might have just missed the masses seen here last week! We walked out to the hide in the reeds and could enjoy some wetland birds, but most of them stayed at the far end of the water surface. *Bearded Reedlings* were not as shy and also a *Moustached Warbler* was singing next too the hide.

Abdin pointed out the spot where "Omid", the last surviving Siberian Crane of the western population stood less than two weeks ago (read the incredible story here https://www.dutchbirding.nl/wpbirding/1593/omid_-_last_of_a_legacy?fbclid=IwAR0A_X9z5HxGXEtYNW5zRuTFRdPrzY7v-JB450fr4LrWoAmDOhDgzU-bAgw)

With the spotting scopes we could see *Little Grebes*, *Pygmy Cormorants*, more wetland birds and also a *Kingfisher* speeding past our hide.

With the sun sinking towards the horizon we decided to skip the lookout tower by the lake and leave Shirvan. The new highway is truly a bliss for the drive southwards, replacing the bumpy and congested older road through the countryside. Now we found ourselves in Lenkärän in about 1.5 hours compared to double that time before. The green spring landscape and the vast Mughan plains was a pretty sight from the bus window. Some *White Storks* were seen feeding on the fields. We spent the night at the brand new and fancy Lenkärän Springs Resort with quite possibly the finest rooms I have seen in Azerbaijan. Singing *Robins*, *Wrens* and *Chaffinches* from the balcony overlooking the foothills of the Talysh Mountains.

Checklist of some of our observed bird species at Gobustan and Shirvan fishponds here:

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S67455428>

and

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S67457525>

14 March

After breakfast and checkout we headed for the coast and the short drive to Kizil Agach lagoons. This is a huge area and we only nibbled at the southern edges of it, driving out on the dyke connecting the mainland with the low sandy island inhabited by fishing villages. A good first stop is right at the base of the dyke, as the wetland sceneries open up on your left. Here we stayed for quite a while to look at all the *Little Egrets*, *Grey Herons*, *Pygmy Cormorants*, *Coots*, *Shovelers*, *Great Crested Grebes* and other wetland birds. Over the water surface flew hundreds of *Black-headed Gulls* and some *Whiskered Terns*. We saw one adult *White-tailed Eagle* sitting out in the reeds. Big excitement when a *Peregrine* flew over, both among birds and bird guide trainees!



Yellow Wagtail *feldeggii* at Kizil Agach and Hoopoe in Shirvan NP. Photos Abdin Abbasov.

We continued driving out along the beach and stopped as flocks of gulls and waders appeared on the sands and mudflats. Our group had heard explained how finding specific and rare bird species will make happy birdwatching clients and luckily this was demonstrated now; among the *Caspian* and *Black-headed Gulls* resting along the waters edge was a summer-plumaged *Great Black-headed* (or *Pallas*) *Gull*! Quite distant but very educative how finding a target species can be done. Heading northwards we stopped just by the creek in the village of Baliqcilar and walked out towards the flat beach. Flocks of *Ringed Plovers*, *Dunlins*, *Ruff* and *Common Snipe* flew back and forth and territorial *Lapwings* put on a show. We could study striking *Yellow Wagtails* of the *feldeggii* subspecies as well as *Water Pipits* and *Meadow Pipits*. Among the *Black-headed* were also a few *Slender-billed Gulls*.

A local tv station wanted to meet us which we obliged to and had a brief walk inside the newly designated national park area. Its dominated by vast bushland so not many birds to be seen, but calling *Black Francolines* and hunting *Marsh Harriers* were studied. We returned to

Lenkärän for lunch and later on returned northwards on the highway. Near Bilasuvar we turned off and down on the older road and passed across the Machmud Chala wetlands which is a very nice stop and often rich in birds in migration and winter times. Despite being just on the roadside and noisy traffic is quite disturbing its a rewarding experience.



Greater Flamingoes and Shelducks at Machmud Chala wetlands. Photo Abdin Abbasov.

Beautiful low standing sun and lots of resting birds in the shallow waters next to the road, we could enjoy *Caspian* and *Gull-billed Terns*, a male *Hen Harrier* chasing *Lesser Short-toed Larks* and a *White-tailed Eagle* sitting on a pylon. Along the muddy edges was a swirl of *Dunlins*, *Little Stints*, *Ringed Plovers* and good numbers of *Kentish Plovers* too. Further out on the surface were thousands of dabbling ducks, mainly *Shovelers* and *Wigeons* but also *Teals* and some *Garganeys*. Tall and elegant *Greater Flamingoes* attracted much attention.



Resting Gull-billed and Caspian Terns with Black-headed Gulls at Machmud Chala. Photo by "digiscoping"
Tomas Axén Haraldsson

Reluctantly leaving this spot we drove the last bit northwards to Salyan and found lodging at Kur Hotel in the centre of the town. We had our dinner within walking distance of the hotel and wrapped up the day with some "classes" on bird guide skills in the hotel lounge... We got some sleep despite a wedding going on next door!

15 March

Due to the increasing lockdown among countries, borders and airlines as a result of the Corona pandemic we had to cut short the program. Tomas needed to be rushed back home to Sweden in order not to be trapped by lockdown measures. So instead of visiting Aggöl National Park we headed back to Baku and continued east out on the peninsula and the Absheron National Park. It was quite windy and difficult to get a good birdwatching experience but also useful to learn what can face you as a birding guide in adverse weather. The habitat are open dunes, bushes and low grassland and shallow coastal waters and lagoons. This area is quite rich in birds both in winter and during migration so despite the wind we could find several flocks of waders, ducks and gulls. From the cover of an old ruin we could scope *Eurasian Curlew*, *Grey Plover*, a flock of *Goldeneyes* and huge rafts of *Coot*. A female *Hen Harrier* flew by briefly and some of us spotted an immature *Great Black-headed Gull* cruising by in the strong wind. We headed on until the end of the road at the reserve

center and walked out to the beach to see some more duck flocks and waders. This is clearly a rewarding area and can be visited with short distance to Baku. We returned inland for lunch at a local place before dropping Tomas at the airport.



Birds and birdwatchers 😊 Water Pipit, two Little Ringed Plover and a Chaffinch and us trying to "digiscope" them... Photo Abdin Abbasov and Tomas Axén Haraldsson respectively.

On the March 16 there was arranged a brief ceremony to award our "trainees" a certificate of participation. Even though the attendance was cut down because of the mounting hygiene measures it was a fine ending to a brief but intense training full of new impressions and new-found friends. A first step on a potential bird guide career for some and a good boost for others already well underway.

Thanks all for your involvement, thanks ATB for arrangement and thanks UK Embassy in Baku for your support!

For further information and questions on this trip and guided birdwatching in Azerbaijan please contact yusala.sarkhanova@tourismboard.az or tomasharaldsson@hotmail.com