

AZERBAIJAN TRIP REPORT

26th April to May 1st 2019

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In our target of trying to see all the Western Palearctic birds, we had been considering a trip to Azerbaijan, mainly after the mythical “Hyrcan Tit” was definitely split from the Sombre Tit. This small passerine can be only found in the hyrcan forest habitat (southern Caspian deciduous mountain forest), what means it can only be easily seen in northern hills of Iran or, presumably, in a very poorly visited area in the southern-eastern corner of Azerbaijan. We could get in touch with Kai Gauger (kai_gauger@yahoo.de) a German birder who has lived in the country for years and one of the few persons who has seen this species in Azerbaijan, after many trip to Hyrcan National Park. He was very kind and helped us a lot, not just in exact places to look for the bird, but in logistics, through Hajibaba Imanli (h.imanli@hotmail.com), who runs an agency in Baku. We rent a car through his company in Baku for 5 days, and we could comfortably drive by ourselves around Azerbaijan.

A part from that, and taking profit of our stopover in Turkey on our way to Bakú, we combined this short expedition with a 24 hour visit to Birecik (Kurdistan, south-eastern Turkey), to see a bird we have missed in our trip at the same area in 2001, the Iraq Babbler, which have recently colonized this region coming from Euphrates basin in Syria and Iraq.



For both Azerbaijan and Turkey, visa is compulsory, but can be obtained through its official websites, for around 40€ and 20€. We had no problems at all in the passport controls. We also had no problems with driving license for renting and driving cars neither in Turkey nor in Azerbaijan.

DAY-BY-DAY SCHEDULE:

April the 26th. We left Girona by car to Barcelona airport, and get a direct flight to Istanbul, where we took a domestic flight (1.5 hours) to Gaziantep, where we arrived at 23.30h pm. We had previously booked a car with Avis Company, and we drove less than one hour to Euphrates gravel pits north of Birecik. We slept on the floor, next to the car in this marsh area, for a few hours. During the night, not just because of a noisy (but nice!) male Little Bittern calling from the reeds, but due to a incredibly busy river machinery (caterpillars, bulldozers, etc.), we hardly slept for a couple of hours.



April the 27th. Just before dawn, Black Francolin and many other birds start calling. We could easily find Iraq Babblers in the area, most of them perched on reeds or poplars, plus interesting birds for us like Bald Ibis, Pygmy Cormorants, Syrian Woodpecker, Dead Sea Sparrows, Red Pochard, Heron colonies on Euphrates riparian forest, Armenian Gull, Pied Kingfisher, etc.



Birding in the area was very interesting, with plenty of nice species on the marshes, ponds and the river itself. Not far from the lowlands, where the hills start appearing, we could also see Long-legged Buzzards, red-rumped Swallows, Prinia, Menetrie's Warbler, etc.





After a few hours on Birecik marshes and hills, we drove one hour towards North-east Gaziantep, to look for Red-rumped Wheatear in Isikli, a bird missed in 2001, although some of us had seen it in its African winter grounds. The area is worth to visit, and we could enjoy species like Eastern Orphean Warbler, Finch's Wheatear, White-throated Robin, Eastern Black-eared Wheatear, both Cretzschmar's and Cinereous Buntings, Black-headed Bunting and both Eastern and Western Rock Nuthatches and also Red-rumped Wheatear itself.





At around 15:30 pm, we got back to the airport, where we returned the car and took a flight to Istanbul. After a 3 hour stopover, we took a Turkish Airlines flight to Baku, our final destination. We reach Azerbaijan late at night, at 1:40 am. A person from Hajibaba company was waiting for us, as accorded before, with a nice rental car; not a 4x4, but big and conformable enough to drive around the country for the following days for ourselves. As we did the day before, we drove for a little more than one hour (crossing Baku with GPS and *Maps.me* app at night was not difficult), until we reach an arid area (Gobustan Rock Art Cultural Landscape) where we could bird next morning. We slept again on the floor, with our sleeping bags, as it was pretty cold during the night.

April the 28th. Again we had a short sleep (2 hours) and we got up very early. However, this time was not because of any machinery around, but for goats and cattle grazing just about our “next-to-the-car camp”. Shepherds around couldn’t believe what we were doing in that small pot-holed road, sleeping on the ground.



Early morning birds produced plenty of Isabelline Wheatears singing and displaying all over the area, plus several Lesser Short-toad Larks, Black-bellied Sandgrouses flying by, Tawny Pipits, Linnets, and other typical dry and open area birds.



After packing everything in the car, we left the area heading south, as the target was to reach Hyrcan Mountains in the evening, after visiting several marshes and lakes on the way to Lenkoran and Lerik.



Although the main road was in perfect conditions (a nice brand new highway all the way from Baku to almost Iran border), once we took secondary roads, things were substantially different. However, driving carefully helped us a lot not having any problem, even in small roads and paths.



Shirvan National Park was the first protected area we visited (and one of the most important ones in the country). At the small entrance, we tried to communicate with a ranger, and we succeed, as an English speaking ranger came in a while and for 16 *manats* (less that 8 Euros), we could enter the park for ourselves, they invited us to tea and coffee and he explained us about the park for almost one hour.

At the main entrance bushes we could see Spanish Sparrows, as well as migrating passerines like Redstart, Wood Warbler, several Red-breasted Flycatchers, etc.



Once inside the park, we could find about one dozen gazelles, almost the only place in Europe where this interesting species can be seen (*Gazella subgutturosa*).



We could also see hundreds of Lesser Kestrels (from here onwards to the south they became really abundant), both European and Blue-cheeked Bee-eater sharing places to breed and feed and also Calandra Lark displaying over the fields.

In the lakes and ponds we found the first big flocks of waders and aquatic birds, like Whimbrel, Mute Swan, Avocet, Ruddy Shelduck, Caspian Gull, Ruff, many Garganeys and other ducks (Teal, Mallard, etc.), and thousands of White-winged Terns everywhere.



In one of the first's stops, once we left the park and close to Salyan, over a agricultural land with scattered ponds, we could also see Collared Pratincole and 2 distant Black-winged Pratincole, which was one of our target birds but we couldn't see it well enough again during the trip.



At the same area, with small muddy ponds we could see several White-tailed Lapwings. They turned to be pretty common in the country, and we saw more than 30 birds during the trip. We also saw many migrating and breeding Yellow Wagtails from different and interesting subspecies (*lutea*, *feldegg*, etc.).

As we got headed south, and got closer to the Caspian Sea, we could add new species such as Slender-billed Gull, Palla's Gull, Terek Sandpiper, Greater Sand Plover and we even found an interesting tern and wader colony, where lots of Collared Pratincole, Terns, Grebes, Little Gulls, Lapwings, and many other plovers nested.





As we did for the whole trip, we just had very quick lunch-stops at road restaurants, which turned out to be extremely cheap and, even the food was very basic, we ate very well (the food was based on goat, sheep, tomatoes, salads and a delicious handmade bread). Our main problem was the difficulty of communication to local people, as we don't speak Azeri or Russian and they can't speak any Latin language or English.



From Shirvan, we headed south again, following a comfortable new highway to Quizilagaq and Baliqçılar, where we reached the Caspian Sea. Its shores are surprisingly smooth, sandy and plenty of shells everywhere. Its water is not salty at all (or it didn't taste like). In the area we made a quick stop at some nice marshes, with impressive Crested Grebe colonies, over flown by thousands of Tern, Herons and Gulls.



The next target was Tabassum, on the slopes of the Hyrcan mountain area where we would spend the next two days looking for our main aim, Hyrcan Tit. The hotel was and we could finally have a very nice dinner, shower and some proper sleep in a bed after two wild nights and three hardcore birding days.



April the 29th.

As we had agreed the night before with the hotel owner (in spite of some difficulties due again to language) a Lada Niva driver came at 5 am to pick us up and drove us to Lerik.



However, he understood we were just heading “the mountains” and not the tiny town where we would start walking from, Mastail. That was the place Kai told us we would have more chances to find the Hyrcan Tit. We struggled to make the driver understand we wanted to go to Mastail from Lerik, but we finally did.



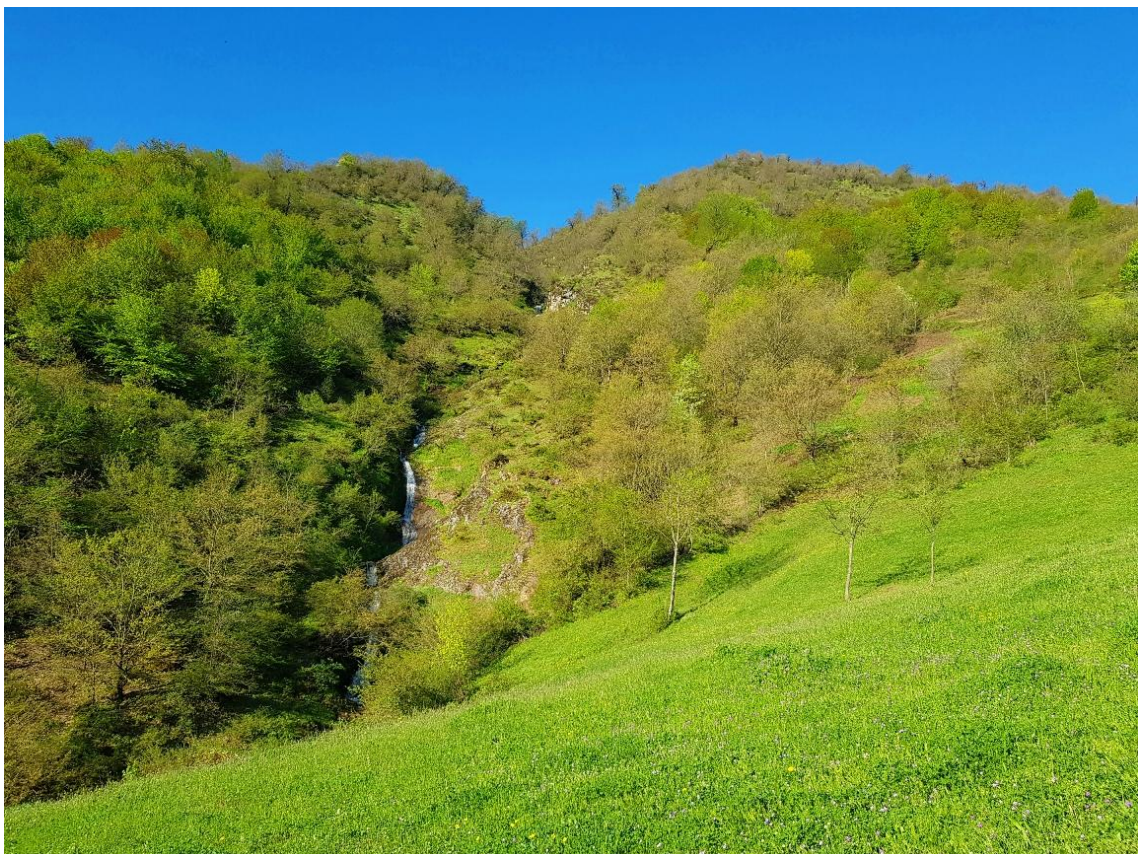
The road was not as terrible as we expected (the weather had been dry for several weeks) but we cannot imagine how tough must be driving in the area after some rainy days, even with a 4 wheel drive car. Once we reached the town, we agreed with the driver that we could meet at the same place at around 16h pm and we started walking up, following the steep slopes through cattle muddy paths.



It was not easy to find the right direction, although we had the exact GPS point where Kai had seen the Tits for the last time a couple of years before. We tried to ask to some local people we found around but what helped us the most was to use several satellite Google Map pictures we had download before reaching the area which could be used offline.



The landscape in Hyrcan Mountains is superb and plenty of deciduous trees, what made this late April time a perfect moment to enjoy the area. Its forests at plenty of cows, sheep and goat, but not overgrazed, and the hills and mountains look really natural and wild. Actually, wolves, bears and even leopards can still be found. Just a few people frequent the area, most of them shepherds but also some loggers (some of them still cutting tree by hand).



Forest birds we could see around were Semicollared Flycatcher, Black, Green and Great Spotted (another interesting subspecies) Woodpeckers, Green Warbler, Hawfinch, Goshawk, a nice subspecies of Eurasian Jay and even a Tawny Owl calling at 11 am.



Several species of orchids very fully blossoming at the end of April, and the nice sunny days helped to enjoy this forest at its best. However, in spite of a brief encounter with a Hyrcan Tit just arriving to the first pass at the edge of the forest, we couldn't find it for more than four hours walking around the forest.



We played to call for hours, as we were hiking on the slopes. We visited the three exact places we could find at Ebirds, and we spent more than one hour at Kai's place but we didn't succeed.



Once we decided to leave the forest we suddenly run into a nice and confident Hyrcan Tit. The light was perfect, and the bird was feeding at less than 15 meters from us. As we realized latter on, the place was actually very close to the bushes where we had seen the first pair (probably male and female) early morning. We could enjoy it for more than ten minutes, and even take pictures and videos of it.

You can see a video at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c4Z7r2emQVg>



We had definitely succeeded on our main target of the whole trip and it was time to come back to Mastail and, hopefully, find again our Lada Niva man. However, we still had to manage down the muddy cattle paths on our way back. What it should have been a nice gravel 4x4 road turned to be an uncomfortable spine-bush fenced and slippery cattle path.



Our Lada Niva man was there. Actually, he had been there for the whole day, waiting for us. We then drove back to Lerik, where we had a deserved lunch (again was bread, sheep and salad) and he brought us to Tabassum hotel, where we still had some hours of light and we decided to drive ourselves up again to the hills. This time, thought, we went further up to another valley, very close to Iranian border.



The landscape here was stunning. 4000m high snowed peaks over showed behind the border hills, and the countryside was rocky, grassy and treeless, due to the altitude.



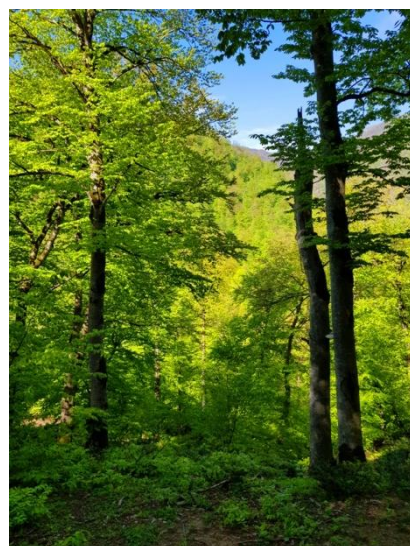
We saw new birds for the trip, like Grey-necked Bunting, Short-toed Lark, Little Owl, Corn Bunting, Pale Rockfinch, Golden Eagle, Siberian Stonechat and many other interesting mountain Caspian species.



We were getting closer to Iranian border, but we didn't realized we were just about crossing the "protection zone", a 5 kms wide area where no one can enter in spite of being still in Azerbaijan. It was then when a "civil citizen" forced us to follow him. We didn't pay much attention to what he was telling us, but after some minutes, on our way back from the border, a military control stopped us and we went "sent to jail".



After 30 minutes of talking (or trying to), showing the bird pictures we had taken with our lenses, and negotiating (how difficult to communicate by mimics is!) we were sent free and we finally manage to arrive to our lovely home, the Hotel Tabassum.



April the 30th.

On our last full day in Azerbaijan, we got up early again. However, after 4 sunny days, today it was raining. How lucky we had been the day before hiking on a sunny and dry weather!



We headed north, looking for wetlands on our way back to Baku. Our main target was finding again a closer Black-winged Pratincole, but also looking for Pied Wheatear, a new lifer for some of us. We succeed in the Wheatear, but not in the Pratincole. While looking for them, we could see a Hare.



We stopped in an interesting wetland area close to Hacıqabul and Mugan, plenty of fishponds. The ponds were crowded with waders, such as Ruff, Greenshank, Plovers, Marsh Sandpiper and even the first Flamingos we had seen during our trip. We also saw Little Tern, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Curlew Sandpiper, Turnstone and dozens of thousands of Terns everywhere. Not far from there, a nice reed bed provided a juvenile Bearded Reedling calling from the reed.



When the temperature increased, we drove up to a close range which looked interesting. On the way there, we added Red-footed Falcon, Ortolan Bunting, Lesser Shrike, Red-backed Shrike and Merlin. We had lunch while looking for raptors in the area. They provided Black, Egyptian and Griffon Vultures and also our last target of the trip, a solitary Pied Wheatear.





The hills were spectacular, and its geology was really amazing. Still on our way up at dusk, we kept stopping at every single marsh and pond. All of them had hundreds of waders, gulls and mainly an amazing number of White-winged Terns.



We made a quick stop next to main road to have dinner (a genuine kebab), before reaching a sandy and rocky mountain where some mud volcanoes were supposed to hide between some hills. We slept on the floor, next to our car.

May the 1st.

After getting up very early (sleeping again on the ground, under thousand of stars), we climb to a close range, where we found some nice hills, plenty of Isabelline Wheatears and two new birds for the trip, Stone Curlew and Rock Sparrows.



At the top of the hills we could enjoy one of the most impressive things we saw in the trip; the mud volcanos. Most of them were active. Some were muddy and semisolid, what made them slow, but others were more liquid, active, plenty of mud bubbles and suffered more frequently “explosions”.



We then drove all the way north, trying to look for more rocky outcrops, as the ones we wanted to visit were fenced due to the Historical Park facilities. Unfortunately we couldn't visit it until 11 am (6 hours after the sunrise!), so we headed to Baku.



What we saw next was just very poor habitats, deeply constructed areas and many lakes and marshes that, once we finally managed to get to, they turned to be just oil ponds, a desert habitat for birds and life. We drove to the north easternmost tip of Baku Cape, not far from the airport, to visit the coast, where all we saw was a few terns, waders and gulls. Oil mills were scattered everywhere. We finally flew from Baku to Istanbul and reach Barcelona at 23.30h pm. The total number of birds seen was 194 species.

