

Our Mission:

*To interpret and conserve the earth's
biological diversity through research, education,
and citizen science focused on birds.*

LIVING BIRD

W I N T E R 2 0 0 6 V O L U M E 2 5 N U M B E R 1

GREETINGS FROM SAPSUCKER WOODS

As I write, it is early December and the woods outside my window lay dusted with snow like a holiday card by Currier and Ives. A minute ago, I looked up and caught a glimpse of an adult Cooper's Hawk dashing swiftly through the trees. It swooped up, landed on a branch, then briefly shook its tail and blasted away to continue its search for prey.

Down south in Arkansas, a different kind of search is underway. Our Ivory-billed Woodpecker team is already there in force, fanning out across the swamps and bottomland forests to find out more about this elusive species—where the birds roost; if and where they are nesting. It's an unbelievably grueling process to scour more than half a million acres of woodlands for a species whose numbers are undoubtedly extremely small.

I went to Arkansas for a few days in early November and got to meet the new fulltime searchers. Many of them were young; all were idealistic and passionate about the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. Their excitement was palpable as they went through the training process and got ready to hit the swamp. They will all stay there for a full six months. I admire their dedication.

The fulltime searchers are being joined by volunteers in groups of 14, each of whom has agreed to spend a minimum of two weeks searching the swamps. These volunteers, who number about 100, were chosen from hundreds of people who contacted us, eager to help with the search.

I'll be going to Arkansas myself late next week, just as soon as I finish the preliminary work on this issue of *Living Bird*. I look forward to it with eager anticipation.

Best wishes to all of you in the year ahead.

Tim Gallagher
Editor-in-Chief

Cover: A Dark-eyed Junco sits out a brief winter snow squall. Nature photographer Cliff Beittel took this intimate portrait in his backyard in York, Pennsylvania.

Right: The nation of Turkey is spectacular, with ancient ruins, stunning seacoasts, lofty mountains, and expansive steppes. It also contains a wide variety of birds, such as this Krueper's Nuthatch, a Turkish specialty. See article on page 14. Photograph by Cagan Hakki Sekercioglu.

Back cover: A juvenile Bald Eagle sits on the snow at Homer Spit, on the south coast of Alaska. Dozens of these birds gather there in winter to feed on fish. Photograph by Cliff Beittel.

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A BIRDER'S GUIDE

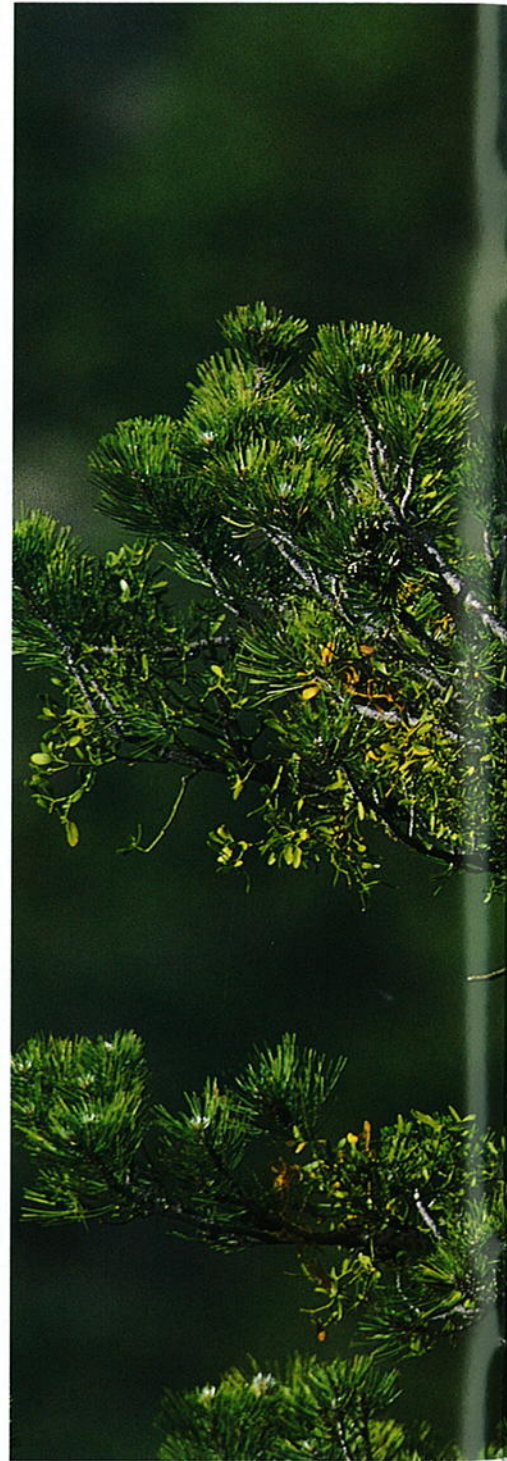
BY CAGAN HAKKI SEKERCIOGLU

A cornucopia of avian riches at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa

Turkey has tremendous biological wealth that is often underappreciated. Three of the world's 37 plant zones mingle with various mountain ranges. Habitats range from Black Sea temperate rainforest, where brown bears and wolves roam and Caucasian Grouse and Caspian Snowcocks thrive in the shadow of the Caucasus Mountains, to subdesert scrub, where endangered desert monitors, striped hyenas, and sand gazelles share the southeastern plains with See-see Partridges and Cream-colored Coursers. Lying at the confluence of northern European forests, Mediterranean chaparral, and central Asian steppes, Turkey boasts more than 3,000 species of endemic plants, the highest among medium-sized temperate countries. Until the early 20th century, lions, cheetahs, leopards, and tigers were all found within the current borders of Turkey. The latter two may still survive, and there are



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HANNE AND JENS ERIKSEN/VIREO

DE TO TURKEY



The Inozu Valley, at left, is just an hour's drive west of Ankara, the capital city of Turkey. Lanner Falcons breed in this picturesque valley. Above, Imperial Eagles nesting in the Beynam Forest south of Ankara.



Nevertheless, for American birders visiting Istanbul, exploring the Belgrade Forest can be fruitful for sighting Great Spotted and Green woodpeckers, Marsh and Blue tits, Red-breasted and Spotted flycatchers, Blackcaps, Hawfinches, Short-toed Treecreepers, and other woodland birds. Scanning the Bosphorus, which divides Istanbul between Europe and Asia, is also productive for Great Cormorants, Yellow-legged and Black-headed gulls, sea-skimming flocks of Levantine (“Yelkovan”) Shearwaters, and maybe even a Cory’s Shearwater. During the raptor migration in September and October, the Kucuk and Buyuk Camlica

also important populations of brown bear, wolf, striped hyena, Eurasian lynx, caracal (desert lynx), and other large mammals.

Most important for the visiting birder, 465 avian species have been recorded in Turkey, and the number is growing despite the low number of resident bird watchers. When I started birding 15 years ago, there were only about 20 Turkish bird watchers—this in a country with a population of more than 60 million people. Although this number has since risen more than 10-fold, it is still a remarkably small group. Even so, ornithological discoveries are regularly being made. Promoted by groups such as Doga Dernegi; birding web sites such as <kustr.org> and <turkishbirding.com>; the birding newsgroup Toygar; and the eBird-inspired <kusbank.org>, interest in birding is increasing markedly, creating a new generation of bird watchers in Turkey.

Most non-birding visitors to Turkey concentrate on Istanbul and the southwestern coast, but the best birding locations and specialties are in the center and east. The country contains roughly nine major birding habitats: alpine areas, coastal wetlands, coniferous forests, deciduous forests, Mediterranean chaparral, steppe grasslands and fields, steppe lakes, subdesert scrub, and the neglected open sea. The best time to bird in Turkey is during migration: May and June are best for songbirds, with raptors stealing the show from September to October.

Most birders who visit Turkey come from Europe and are already familiar with the common deciduous-forest birds of their continent.

Hills are excellent spots for Black and White storks, Eurasian and Honey buzzards, Eurasian and Levant sparrowhawks, Lesser Spotted, Booted, Short-toed, and occasionally White-tailed eagles. Buyukcekmece Lake, west of Ataturk Airport, is the best (albeit deteriorating) wetland in the city, with records of more than 200 species, including Red-breasted Goose and Wallcreeper. A three-hour ferry ride across the sea of Marmara will take you to Mount Uludag, where Krueper’s Nuthatch, Fire-fronted Serin, Red Crossbill, and Eurasian Bullfinch are possible, and to Lake Uluabat and Lake Manyas, where you can look for Dalmatian Pelican, Pygmy Cormorant, Little Bittern, Eurasian Spoonbill, Ferruginous Pochard, and other wetland birds.

Southeastern Turkey is hot and dry, and Birecik, home to a free-flying colony of Walldrap (“Northern Bald Ibis”), is great for subdesert birds. Bordering the great Arabian deserts, this area is part of ancient Mesopotamia, “the area between the two rivers” of the Tigris and Euphrates. Both originate in Turkey, and when birding along the Euphrates, you can see Pygmy Cormorants, Little Swifts, and Pied Kingfishers, as well as uncommon specialties such as See-see Partridge and Pale Rockfinch in the dry *wadis* and Cream-colored Courser and Desert Lark higher up.

In the afternoon, seek shelter from the heat in the orchards, where Ménériés’s, Upcher’s, and Olivaceous warblers and Dead Sea, Spanish, and Yellow-throated petronia can be seen. As evening approaches, riparian areas may provide



The open and mountainous terrain of Anatolia, interspersed with forests, provides a perfect habitat for Short-toed Eagles (left).



sightings of Black-bellied and, rarely, Pin-tailed sandgrouse coming to drink. Owling can also be productive. Besides Long-eared, European Scops, Little, and Barn owls, Eagle and Pallid Scops owls are possible, the last-mentioned most reliably found in a tea garden.

Little Swifts and Rock and Persian nuthatches frequent the crags of nearby Halfeti, over which patrol Bonelli's and Short-toed eagles. The boulder-strewn cliffs of Durnalik and Isikli, west of Birecik, may reveal Eastern Orphean Warblers, uncommon Cinerous and more widespread Black-headed and Cretzschmar's buntings and rare Red-tailed Wheatears.

Heading west, you cross the northern ter-

minus of the Great Rift Valley, which starts in East Africa and ends in Turkey at Amik Lake. Before it was drained, the lake hosted the northernmost African Darter population. An African influence is also seen in other wildlife such as common chameleon, black-backed jackal, and Egyptian mongoose, none of which is uncommon in southern Turkey. Near subtropical Akyatan lies the Cukurova Delta of the Seyhan and Ceyhan rivers, with four globally important bird areas. This is where I saw my first White-throated Kingfisher and White-spectacled Bulbul. The delta is known for its rich birdlife, including hundreds of Greater Flamingo, Black Francolin, Collared Pratincole,

The otherworldly landscape of Cappadocia was created by the repeated explosions of Mount Erciyes (Aergius) seen in the background. In addition to the "fairy chimneys," various good birding spots lie nearby.



Snowy and Spur-winged plovers, Slender-billed Gull, Graceful Prinia, and Spanish Sparrow. In winter, this is the best place in Turkey for Great Black-headed Gull, which I observed in January 2002, in addition to Short-eared Owl, Red-throated Pipit, and a rare Black-legged Kittiwake. During migration, rarities such as Broad-billed Sandpiper, Eurasian Dotterel, and Greater Sand Plover are possible.

Two hours west on the toll highway, near Tasucu, lies the Goksu Delta. This is the crown jewel of Turkish birding sites. Among the more than 335 species are highly sought-after birds such as Pygmy Cormorant, Black Francolin, Marbled Teal, Ferruginous Pochard, Purple Swamphen, Audouin's Gull, and, if you're lucky, Eleonora's Falcon.

The coast between Akyatan and Goksu is important for nesting green and loggerhead turtles. Tasucu graveyard has Masked Shrikes and, especially during spring, check the chaparral and nearby Uzuncaburc for Barred, Bonelli's, Garden, Icterine, Olivaceous, Ruppell's, Sardinian, Olive-tree, and other warblers. Also be alert for rarities, such as the Terek Sandpiper and Red-breasted Goose; I saw 39 of the geese

there during the harsh winter of 2002, when it even snowed in Adana, a rare event. Anamur is good for seawatching, and Cory's Shearwater, Gannet, and even Parasitic Jaeger have been seen.

Inland from Goksu and Cukurova, lie the Aladaglars, part of the Taurus range and excellent for montane species. Birder-oriented Safak Pension in Demirkazık makes an ideal base. Red-billed and Yellow-billed choughs are common in the spectacular Cimbar Canyon, Chukar is likely, and Wallcreepers nest. If you are less than eager to hike up the treacherous canyon at 3:00 A.M. to search for Caspian Snowcock, Hasan Safak can arrange a tractor ride for you, which is an unequalled birding adventure. Although a trailer can be bumpy, you will be better off than sitting between the two rear wheels, as my brother and I did two years ago. Leaving at 4:00 A.M., you ascend from 1,500 to 2,500 meters to look for Caspian Snowcock, as well as Wallcreeper, Alpine and Radde's accentors, Fire-fronted Serin, Crimson-winged Finch, and raptors such as Golden Eagle, Eurasian Griffon, and perhaps even Lammergeier.



plenty to see for a non-birding companion. Nearby are the ruins of Catalhoyuk, the world's oldest known human community, dating back to 7,500 B.C.

At 1,900 square kilometers, Tuz (Salt) Lake of Central Anatolia is one of the largest in the world, but it is rapidly deteriorating because of draining and pollution. Kulu Lake, an hour south of Ankara, is of global importance for its populations of Greater Flamingos, White-headed Ducks, Greater Sand Plovers, and many water-

The Red-tailed Wheatear (left) is one of the top specialties of eastern Turkey, limited to a few mountains there. This bird was photographed near Durnalik, east of Adana, but it is most common on the historic Mount Nemrut of Kahta. Spur-winged Plovers (below) are common in the wetlands of central and western Anatolia and are easier to see than most of the 16 plover species found in Turkey.

To the west is the vast Anatolian Steppe, where breeding Greater Sand Plovers can be seen. During long drives through Anatolian fields, be sure to check utility poles and scan the skies for raptors. The migration can be impressive in the Sultan and Eregli marshes, where you can see hundreds of migrating waders and one of the largest Lesser Kestrel colonies of the Western Palearctic near Bogecik. The Seljuk city of Konya, home to whirling dervishes, caravanserais, and religious seminaries, has

birds. The surrounding steppe can be excellent for finding larks and raptors. In addition to studying larks, during migration be ready for rarities such as Demoiselle Crane, Great and Little bustards, Great and Jack snipes, Eurasian Dotterel, Broad-billed Sandpiper, Temminck's Stint, Terek Sandpiper, Citrine Wagtail, and Bluethroat. Unfortunately, like many Anatolian steppe lakes, Kulu is rapidly drying. The nearby lakes of Kozanli, Uyuz, and Mogan offer further possibilities for breeding and migrating



Mount Agri (Ararat) is a dormant volcano and at 5,165 meters, the highest mountain in Turkey. It is also the purported resting place of Noah's Ark. White Storks forage in the foreground, below.

wetland birds, such as Squacco Heron, Ruddy Shelduck, Ferruginous Pochard, White-winged, Black, and Whiskered terns, Bearded Reedling, and Eurasian Penduline-Tit.

North of Ankara, you enter conifer-dominated forest characteristic of the Black Sea Mountains, a good area for raptors. The relict forest of Beynam supports a pair of Imperial Eagles. Beypazari Canyon has breeding Egyptian Vulture, Lanner Falcon, and Black Kite as well as Black Stork, Blue and Rufous-tailed rock-thrushes, and Finsch's Wheatear. Various

raptors, including majestic White-tailed Eagles, nest around Sariyer Dam, and Beypazari municipal dump can be good for vultures.

Sogu su National Park, near Kizilcahamam, is famous for its hot springs. It is an excellent place to stay because you can shower in hot mineral water. The 12-kilometer dirt road encircling the park provides easy access for birding. It is an ideal location for owling, where you can find Barn, Little, Tawny, Scops, and Eagle owls. Most of the handful of records for Boreal (Tengmalm's) Owl in Turkey come from there, including an individual that I observed in September 2004. This is a great site for raptors—31 species of which have been recorded. It is the best place in Turkey to find Lammergeier, Northern Goshawk, Booted Eagle, and Cinereous Vulture. The area is also good for finches such as Hawfinch and bark specialists such as woodpeckers, treecreepers, and the Krueper's Nuthatch, which is limited mostly to Turkey.

The itinerary described above will keep a keen birder busy for two solid weeks and can produce close to 250 species during migration. For the dedicated listers, eastern Turkey is a true birding frontier, with Caucasian specialties such as Caucasian Grouse and Mountain Chiffchaff competing for attention with Central Asian birds such as Demoiselle Crane, Paddyfield Warbler, Mongolian Finch, and Gray-hooded Bunting. With the exception of Sumela, Sivrikaya, Dogubeyazit, and Lake Van, eastern Turkey (which is larger than England) is rarely birded, and the possibilities for new discoveries are considerable. But remember that distances are large and accommodations are limited. You should also be aware that binoculars and spotting scopes should not be used near sensitive border areas such as Dogubeyazit. You should seriously consider traveling with a guide or interpreter or at least have a letter in Turkish explaining your purpose.

Even though northeastern Turkey borders Georgia, the Caucasus Mountains block cold weather, and the climate is mild. Black Sea clouds dump more than two meters of rain yearly on the 3,937-meter-high Kackar Mountains, which are



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covered with extensive Colchian rainforests. Trabzon provides convenient air access, and the breathtaking Sumela Monastery—carved into a sheer rock face—is only an hour away. On the trail to this splendid edifice, look for White-throated Dipper, Green Warbler, Black Woodpecker, and coniferous forest birds. Most birders come to the northeast with one bird in mind: the Caucasian Grouse (see page 23). The quaint village of Sivrikaya in the Kackar Mountains, three hours southeast of Trabzon, is the place to see it and around the village stream is good for Mountain Chifchaff. When the male grouse perform their display in May and June, you will need to leave at 3:00 A.M. to have a good chance of seeing them. You may be lucky enough to observe males dancing at their leks, with the splendid vistas of the snow-covered Kackars in the background. At the foot of the mountain behind Sivrikaya's summer village, persistent birders may also find Caspian Snowcock. Your chances for seeing both grouse and snowcock will be much greater with the help of the resident guide Mustafa Sari, and you will also be creating a financial incentive for bird conservation.

Heading inland to drier eastern Anatolia, scan the skies for raptors and, crossing the mountains around Ispir, keep your eyes open for *Ficedula* flycatchers, such as Semicollared. In central and eastern Turkey, always check starling flocks for the elegant Rosy Starlings and keep your eyes and ears open for the ferocious kangal dogs, which are extremely territorial. Most birders will be heading to Dogubeyazit, at the foot of mighty Mount Agri (Ararat), the highest peak in Turkey and the purported resting place of Noah's Ark. The place to bird is behind the imposing Ishak Pasha Palace, where it is possible to see Rock Nuthatch, Gray-hooded Bunting, Mongolian Finch, and other rock-loving passerines on the scree-covered cliffs. Driving south, east of Caldiran, we have seen Twite, White-winged Snowfinch, and Mongolian, Trumpeter, and Crimson-winged finches in the same hour on Mount Tendurek's fresh-looking lava flow—more reminiscent of Hawaii than Turkey. Halfway between Dogubeyazit and Van, Eagle Owls have bred in the gorge of Muradiye waterfall. Saker Falcon is also a local specialty, though never a sure thing.

Rosy Starlings (above) undergo periodic irruptions tied to insect emergences. Although the species is erratic in most of Turkey, it can be found fairly reliably in the east.



Lake Van (above) was formed when Mount Nemrut blew its top off during the Pleistocene and blocked the Van basin's only outlet. The endangered White-headed Duck (below) is the most threatened bird regularly seen in Turkey.

Between Georgia and Lake Van, Red Kites regularly pass during migration, as I observed last year near Kars, an up-and-coming birding destination. Within an hour of Kars, I have seen White-headed Duck, Eurasian Griffon, Pallid Harrier, Lesser Kestrel, Chukar, Armenian Gull, Wryneck, Citrine Wagtail, Red-throated Pipit, Blue Rock-Thrush, White-throated Robin, Finsch's Wheater, Rosy Starling, and (Caucasian) Twite. At the bird-banding station my colleagues and I set up near the city, we banded Caucasian Chiffchaff, Green Warbler,

and Levant Sparrowhawk and watched Ruddy Shelduck, Eagle Owl, and Steppe Eagle fly over the nets. Lesser Spotted Eagles nest in nearby Ardahan forest. Cinerous Vulture and Blue-cheeked Bee-eater were seen at the spectacular Ani ruins last year. White-winged (Velvet) Scoter, Lammergeier, Slender-billed Gull, Alpine Accentor, Ring Ouzel, Pied and Red-tailed wheatears, Yellow-billed Chough, and Crimson-winged Finch have also been observed recently in the province. Hypocolius has been seen in bordering Iğdir, where Desert and Ménétries's warblers are possible.

At 3,755 square kilometers, Lake Van is the biggest lake in Turkey. Its alkaline content is so high, many local people clean their clothes without soap in its waters. As a result of the recent rise in the lake level, the marshes along the southern shore of Lake Van have lost their former glory, but you may still find Siberian Stonechat, Marbled Teal, Ferruginous Pochard, White-headed Duck, Citrine Wagtail, and Paddyfield Warbler, among others. Amazingly, Plain Leaf-Warbler has recently been found breeding southeast of the lake. The extinct volcano of Mount



HANNE AND JENS ERIKSEN/VIREO

Nemrut, northwest of Lake Van, is good for Bimaculated Lark and montane species such as Alpine Accentor and Ring Ouzel, with out-of-place White-winged Scoters breeding in its crater lake.

West of Mount Nemrut lies the Murat Valley, a special place where traditional agriculture has preserved declining pastoral habitats and the species that depend on them. In addition to Common Cranes, the stretch of Murat river near Bulanik is the only known breeding location for Demoiselle Cranes in Turkey, although sighting them is not guaranteed. On June 17, 2005, Soner Bekir, myself, and the rest of our group saw five of them plus three Great Bustards in the same hour. Little Bustards also breed there but are difficult to find.

As you have realized by now, Turkey offers a great diversity of avian life, with many spec-

tacular species and a good mix of European, Mediterranean, Central Asian, and Middle Eastern specialties. It is one of the safest, most accessible countries to visit in its region, with a low crime rate and an excellent highway system. There you can experience breathtaking scenery, traditional Turkish hospitality, delicious cuisine, 10,000 years of history, and some of the best birding in the Western Palearctic. ■

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A FIRST ENCOUNTER

When I arrived in Sivrikaya in July 2001, I was greeted with great fanfare, hugs, and kisses. This was because I was the first Turk ever to visit the place to look for the Caucasian Grouse, although hundreds of foreign bird watchers had been coming since the 1980s. I learned this from the village chief, whose brother, Mustafa Sari, shows the grouse to bird watchers. The village does not have a hotel, so they kindly put me up in the village mosque, which is not unusual. It is an example of Turkish hospitality and religious tolerance that the residents of Sivrikaya have put up many foreign bird watchers in the mosque, even though they were not Muslims. The hospitable villagers also gave me refreshing ayran (yogurt and water) and the local specialty of sac kavurma, consisting of delicious chunks of beef cooked on a metal sheet.

Next morning, Mustafa Sari met me at the mosque at 3:00 A.M., and soon we were breathing heavily as we hiked up a steep slope to get 1,000 meters above the village, itself more than 1,500 meters above sea level. In May and June, birders may be lucky enough to observe male grouse displaying at their leks while enjoying splendid vistas of the snow-covered mountains. But because the mating season was over, I was doubtful of my chances. Common Rosefinches were everywhere, and we flushed a Common Quail on the way up. While scanning the skies for raptors, I was also tense in expectation of a

grouse bursting from the vegetation. They flush very close by, so it felt like walking in a minefield. Long before we flushed any grouse, Mustafa's keen eyes noticed two males about a kilometer away, on the other side of the deep valley. Even with my state-of-the-art binoculars, I could barely discern the two black dots from such a distance. We had to get closer. As we struggled to avoid falling while walking on the slope of slippery rhododendrons, my heart leapt as two explosions beneath my feet resolved into khaki-clad female grouse, which skimmed over the nearby ridge and dropped back into the rhododendrons. But I was not satisfied with this two-second look.

After an hour of struggling, we finally came to the area where we had seen the males. I thought I saw some vegetation move about five meters away, and Mustafa went to check it as I waited with my camera. Just as I was concluding it must have been a rodent, the jet-black cock exploded from the glistening vegetation. It was such a breathtaking experience that I forgot to take any photographs until the bird was only a speck in my viewfinder. But I still hoped to catch the other bird as Mustafa walked toward me. And there he was—once again scaring both of us. This time I was ready. I fired away, as my predictive auto-focus stayed on this elusive symbol of the Caucasus Mountains. The image of the blood-red eyebrow against the coal black plumage is still deeply engraved in my memory.

LIVING BIRD

Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology

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