

A BIRDER'S GUIDE TO KARS AND İĞDIR PROVINCES, TURKEY

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Northeastern Turkey's Kars and İğdir provinces are up-and-coming birding destinations, as our Kars-İğdir Biodiversity Project has revealed since 2003 (see www.karsdoga.org). These provinces, with over 260 bird species recorded thus far and likely home to more than 300 of the 465 species recorded for Turkey, provide perfect, birdy stops on the long drive between the popular and better-known birding destinations of Kaçkar Mountains and Lake Van.

Red Kites, nearly impossible in the rest of Turkey, are sometimes observed on migration around Kars. Within an hour of the city of Kars, I have also seen Red-necked Grebe, White-headed Duck, Eagle Owl, Steppe Eagle, Pallid Harrier, Lesser Kestrel, Chukar, Broad-billed Sandpiper, Wryneck, Red-throated Pipit, Finsch's and Pied Wheatears, Rosy Starling, (Caucasian) Twite, and many more. Alpine Accentor, Ring Ouzel, Yellow-billed Chough, Red-tailed Wheatear, and Crimson-winged Finch are worth looking for in mountainous areas.

On the outskirts of the city, the campus of Kafkas University is one of the best birding areas in the region; new species are added to the list almost every day one birds there. April and May are best, and we have thus far recorded 120 species, including Red-necked Grebe, Lesser Spotted Eagle, Levant Sparrowhawk, Red-footed Falcon, Spotted Crake, Marsh and Curlew Sandpipers, Great Snipe, Red-necked Phalarope, Lesser Black-

backed and Armenian Gulls, Black Tern, Nightjar, Citrine Wagtail, Moustached Warbler, Caucasian Chiffchaff, Bluethroat, Pied Wheatear, and Rosy Starling.

Kuyucuk Lake is the best wetland in the Kars province. On a single day in 2004, we counted about 12% of the world population of Ruddy Shelduck there. Ferruginous and White-headed Ducks, Greater Flamingo, Great Bittern, Pygmy Cormorant, White-tailed Eagle, Black-winged Pratincole, Jack Snipe, Great Snipe, Marsh Sandpiper, Slender-billed Gull, Long-eared Owl, Desert Wheatear, and Rosy Starling are possible. This year, we initiated a banding program focused on waterbirds and raptors. Long-legged Buzzard, Pallid Harrier, Short-eared Owl, Little and Spotted Crakes, Red-necked Phalarope, Red-throated Pipit, and Citrine Wagtail were among the nearly 50 species we banded. Birders approaching from the north will find Ardahan Forest (Lesser Spotted Eagle, Common Crane) and Çıldır Lake (Dalmatian Pelican, Velvet Scoter) also worth checking.

Posof, on Ardahan province's border with Georgia, has breeding Corncrake and Caucasian Black Grouse, though both are hard to find. Aktaş Lake is divided by the Turkey-Georgia border; restrictions on human access make the lake an attractive location for breeding Dalmatian and Great White Pelicans, but it also means that you cannot bird there without permission from the military. Between Sarıkamış and Kağızman, you descend more than 1,000 meters from coniferous forest and alpine meadows to orchards, deciduous woods, and riparian vegetation along the Aras River. Keep an eye open here for Semi-collared Flycatcher, as well as for Brown Bear and Wolf. Throughout the region, including near Erzurum Airport, scan the fields for the slim possibility of migrating Great Bustards and Sociable Plovers.

Heading southeast towards Iğdır province and Mt. Ağrı, check Lake Çalı for Red-necked Grebe, White-headed Duck, Citrine Wagtail, Twite, and interesting migrants. During migration, Lesser Kestrels can be common near Digor. We have seen Griffon Vulture, Chukar, and White-throated Robin where the road goes down the escarpment into Halıkışla, but these cliffs are within the border military zone (Armenia is across the Arpaçay stream), so it is best not to stop.

Definitely worth a stop is the village of Yukari Çıyıklı on the Aras River. Fifty meters before the bridge over the Aras River, turn right and follow the road to its end. We have established eastern Anatolia's first bird-banding station here, Aras Bird Research and Education Center. In only six months, we banded about 9000 birds of 115 species and altogether observed nearly 190, including Black Stork, Red Kite, Little Crake, Great Snipe, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, and all four of Turkey's vulture species, including Bearded and Cinerous. Standouts among the species we have banded here include Booted Eagle; Levant Sparrowhawk; Pallid Harrier; Eurasian Thick-knee; Spotted Crake; Corncrake; Jack Snipe; Great Snipe; Syrian Woodpecker; Citrine Wagtail; Finch's Wheatear; Grasshopper, River, Savi's, Moustached, Icterine, Barred, Upcher's, Green, Blyth's Reed, and Paddyfield Warblers; Red-breasted and Semi-collared Flycatchers; Masked Shrike; and Rosy Starling. The mountain across the Aras River has Red-fronted Serin, Pied Wheatear, and Blue Rock Thrush.

From late May to late September, Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters are possible between the villages of Bulakbaşı and Aktaş at the foot of Mt. Ağrı, past Iğdır city. This area is also good for Pygmy Cormorant, Red-crested Pochard, Armenian Gull, waders, rallids,

and wheatears. Farther on, near Aralık, the arid scrub has Menetrie's and Desert Warblers, and Hypocolius have also been seen.

It is easily possible to spend a week visiting these varied sites. A convenient itinerary would take visiting birders to Kuyucuk Lake, Çalı Lake, and the Kafkas University campus on the first day, followed by a day spent at Çalı Lake, the Kars-Halıkları Road, and Aras Bird Center. The next day could be passed between Sarıkamış and Kağızman; the Iğdır-Aralık region can easily occupy another day. A fifth day could be devoted to birding between Çıldır Lake and the Ardahan Forest, while the final day and night could be profitably spent at Posof.

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