

Azerbaijan, 24th October – 10th November 2016

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I spent two and a half weeks in Azerbaijan as a volunteer surveyor on the [Besh Barmag Bird Migration Count](#). Based on this brief spell I came to the conclusion that I need to return: the country is friendly, fascinating and has some serious untapped mammalwatching potential. With only limited time away from my counting duties, a little tactical planning allowed me to see some excellent species and plot a future trip...

Persian Gazelles, Shirvan NP

Logistics

From London, flights with the excellent Turkish Airlines into Baku's modern Heydar Aliyev airport (via Istanbul) were a very reasonable £330; there are also direct flights from several European cities with Azerbaijan Airlines. The ground arrangements were largely taken care of by the count coordinators and the local support team, but some birders from the UK who visited independently hired a 4WD (Mitsubishi Pajero) for around £200 for two weeks. They encountered no problems driving around, although another group got pulled over at one of the many police checkpoints and fined for some possibly fictional infringement! I think in general a self-driven trip should be fine, but spotlighting along public roads would undoubtedly attract some attention and the language barrier may create issues. As such, it may be worth thinking about using a local ground agent.

For my full day off, our cook and all-round excellent human Miryusuf contacted his brother, who is the proprietor of [Travel in Baku](#). Ali is a very smart guy who set up this company when he realised taxi drivers were unwilling to arrange day trips to multiple locations, preferring short fares; we arranged to visit the Gobustan area and then to Shirvan NP. Ali picked us up early morning in a very comfortable 4WD, drove us wherever we wanted while providing excellent company and insightful commentary on the country, and dropped us back at the accommodation 400km and 14 hours later, for 240 Manat (about EUR120). He'd never visited the national park before, but was keen to learn about the wildlife and now has a good idea on where to look. For anyone on a short trip to Baku and looking to make day trips, my recommendation would be to enlist his services (I should probably charge him commission!).

Prior to my trip, there were only two reports on mammalwatching. [Michael Polanski's](#) trip gave me the idea of how easy it is to visit Shirvan; while [Vladimir Dinets's](#) typically exhaustive overview was an enormous source of inspiration. For those interested in birds, autumn migration is nothing short of spectacular (see e.g. [Trektellen](#) and [eBird](#)); and considering how late in the autumn I visited, there was an abundance of reptiles (especially snakes) and amphibians.

Timing

My dates were limited by the dates of the migration count (from the end of August until the end of November), and further constrained by when I could take time off from counting birds for a living to go and count birds for free. Overnight temperatures had started to drop which undoubtedly reduced small mammal activity – despite the generally warm conditions, some species are hibernating by mid-October. Conversely the mostly pleasant daytime temperature encouraged some species to emerge for views in good light. I have never been anywhere with such a high density of rodent burrows: a visit at hotter times of year would surely get some serious nocturnal rodent action, but temperatures in the summer are frequently over 40c, which could limit daytime options.

Autumn is a good time to encounter Wolves as they move down from the hills, but I think I'll try to visit in late April-May. This should combine good small mammal activity with decent chances of Caspian Seal and East Caucasian Tur.

A note on jirds

I feel that it's worth emphasising the difficulties of identifying this group without in-hand examination, a subject that has already been highlighted for other rodents (eg). Even with the benefit of a good field guide, I initially came to the wrong conclusion about the identity of jirds on this trip. 'Mammals of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East' by Aulagnier et al gives the following features for Vinogradov's Jird: medium-sized, dull dorsal fur, orange-tawny at tail base, hairy ears, tail roughly body length with a good brush at the end, greyish-looking claws. That seems to fit the below animals reasonably well, especially allied with colonial, diurnal behaviour, foraging on vegetation, and within the range map shown in the guide.



This animal was photographed a little inland, on a semi-desert plain between a wadi and mountains. It appeared more slender, brighter coloured, naked-eared, with just one individual emerging from a simple burrow system in the evening. I tentatively thought it might be a Tristram's Jird, or perhaps Libyan (although the brush on the tail looked weak).



Halfway through the trip, I was able to get some more information and according to specimens, the only species that occurs in this part of Azerbaijan is Libyan Jird! Certainly the Besh Barmag animals look unlike illustrations of Libyan, which are stated in Aulagnier et al as having dark claws. The behaviours also do not seem right, although this is known to be a very variable species. After the trip a helpful iNaturalist user provided me with a copy of some literature regarding Vinogradov's Jird – the Besh animals are clearly not that species, which looks large. Moreover, it has a very limited range, and I now realise the maps in the field guide are highly inaccurate for this genus at least. None of this is meant to sound as a harsh criticism, as it's still one of the best mammal field guides around (and one I've used the most!), merely that caution should be exercised.

Besh Barmag area

Naturally, the vast majority of my time was spent in this rural area roughly 85km north of Baku. The migration watchpoint is located at [41.004597, 49.220418](#), where a natural 'bottleneck' is formed by the eastern end of the Caucasus Mountains meeting the coast of the Caspian Sea. In the immediate vicinity are variably cultivated steppe areas, sparsely vegetated dune-type habitat, swampy areas, scrub and beach, which support a reasonable variety of mammals. The entire area is riddled with rodent burrows - even the counting spot was in the middle of a jird colony! To reach the watchpoint,

leave the main highway (M1/E119) just after Beshbarmag services - ignore the main turning to Siyezan, and turn onto the dirt road immediately after passing under the bridge at [40.981397, 49.229943](#); from here tracks lead to the low escarpment above the coast. Anywhere these habitats can be accessed in this region are liable to hold the same species we saw.

Besh Barmag is actually the name of the mountain that forms the end of the hills; I visited on one afternoon, but like most locations it would probably repay a visit after dark or a more thorough search under rocks or in the many boulder fissures. The mountain is a popular tourist attraction times, but is only reached by a gravel track off the road into Siyezan at [40.982771, 49.213330](#); the car park is at [0.955535, 49.232200](#), though without a 4WD it may be necessary to park by the stalls at the bottom of the steps.

Our accommodation was in the small village of [Zarat](#). I made a few nocturnal excursions in the coastal scrub, adjacent unoccupied gardens, and arable fields to the northwest.

Nathusius's Pipistrelle *Pipistrellus nathusii* – Up to two seen and sound-recorded around Zarat on 24-28th October. Towards the southern end of the mapped range, possibly a migrant here.

Golden Jackal *Canis aureus* – Common; seen or heard most days from the viewpoint or in the dunes; often heard and seen a couple of times around Zarat

'Steppe' Wolf *Canis lupus campestris* – A fantastic sighting of three early one morning from the viewpoint as they moved across the plain. Wolves were seen four or five times during the three month count period, while locals in the village below the mountain told me a group had passed through the streets one evening!



Wolves, Besh Barmag watchpoint & the view north from Besh Barmag mountain

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes* – Seen on several days in the area, not as common as Jackals.

Jungle Cat *Felis chaus* – One nice look at an individual in the scrub. Seen fairly frequently through the season by others

Brown (?) Hare *Lepus europaeus* – Flushed by day once (and a couple of times by others) in the dunes. While Aulangier et al (and other sources) map Brown Hare for here – and of course hare taxonomy is a nightmare – the animal observed by me seemed smaller, slimmer and paler with huge ears compared to the animals I see frequently in the UK. Thus, it was more similar to Tolai Hare (mapped as occurring at the north end of the Caspian Sea). Another observer, unprompted by me,

also commented on these features and noted that it was similar to Tolais he's seen in Mongolia. Perhaps just regional variation, or perhaps the ranges aren't fully resolved...

Williams's Jerboa *Allactaga williamsi* – A brilliant view of one while spotlighting on foot in fields near the watchpoint after dark, and seen bounding along the track once pre-dawn and once post-dusk. Prior to October, sightings are far more regular (often several per evening). One photographed by day by a birder had presumably been disturbed from its burrow by something.

Grey Hamster *Cricetulus migratorius* – Seen on two nights (the same animal) a field-edge bank just N of Zarat. An excellent little rodent.

Social Vole *Microtus socialis* – the slope east/southeast of the top car park at Besh Barmag mountain was full of small rodent holes. Several voles that emerged to grave late afternoon are presumed to be this species based on appearance and behaviour.

Lybian Jird *Meriones libycus* – See above. Seen almost every day around the watchpoint and a few times in the dunes/ scrub, with countless burrow entrances across the area. Some videos of these endlessly entertaining chaps [here](#).

Another jird was seen several times at the same location in dunes/scrub between Zarat and the Caspian Sea at night (but not on my two diurnal visits) seemed to have a simple burrow system; without the above information I would have suspected a different species!

House Mouse (sp) *Mus musculus/domesticus* - one in Zarat.

On spring visits (April-early May), the count co-ordinators have seen Caspian Seal from this spot on several occasions, generally when ice is present offshore.

Candycane Mountains

This stunning area of mountainous badland-type scenery is a short way inland from Gilazi. The hillsides here are banded reddish-pink and white, being full of belemnite fossils and iron compounds and are worth a visit in their own right. Park near the [Mikayil Mushvig Home Museum](#) to explore the area.

Jird sp *Meriones* – one in the [valley](#) north of road (see above).

Williams's Jerboa *Allactaga williamsi* – One crossed the road in the flat area between here and southwest of Gilazi around [40.86371](#), [49.33531](#)



Candycan Mounrains & Altiaghaj NP

Khizi (Xızı) area

Further inland again, the vicinity of this small town would be worth exploring. A nighttime visit in the warmer months may be productive as, like everywhere else, fields just south of the road [east](#) of the town and either side of the road to the west had a high density of rodent burrows. Our driver pointed out hamsters in the field guide as something that occurs here, although how reliable this is I can't say. The road carried on to Altiaghaj NP; we had a short look along the fringes one afternoon. Apparently Eurasian Wild Cat, Eurasian Wild Pig and Caucasian Squirrel are present, along with presumably a wide variety of smaller mammals.

Golden Jackal *Canis aureus* – One seen closely by the roadside between the town and national park.

Gobustan

Easily found on google maps. Another site worth including for non-mammalwatching reasons - the petroglyphs and mud volcanoes are amazing. I didn't actually record any mammals here, but a more concerted effort of flipping rocks on the lower slopes might produce shrews or perhaps rodents (though be aware of Levantine Vipers, which are common here). I suspect that access for exploring was far easier when Vladimir Dinets visited – there is a manned security gate preventing access before 10am and after 5pm, and most of the high up rock fissures which look ideal for bats are roped off. Quite a few park staff were around, making sure visitors didn't sneak into off-limits areas – probably good for the conservation of the site, not so good for mammalwatchers!



Persian Gazelles & the flat expanse of Shirvan NP

Shirvan National Park

An excellent national park. The main gate is southeast of Alat-Astara-Iran highway [here](#). Note that you cannot simply turn off the main road into the park – if travelling from Baku, you need to exit the M3, cross over the highway, then turn left on a minor road parallel with it; at the first opportunity, turn left under the highway, and head back northeast until you reach the park HQ. Entry is very cheap (a few manat); a 4WD is advisable for the dirt tracks within.

The park staff speak no English, but Ali kindly asked them a few questions for me and I was able to ascertain the following:

- Wolves are most reliably seen along the tracks that run east and north-east to the Caspian Sea coast and mud volcanoes
- It is possible to stay overnight in the park either in the 'Lake House', or by camping next to it. This is by the marshland at [39.670791](#), [49.182287](#), with toilet and barbecue facilities.

Generally speaking, one should be ok to turn up and camp without giving notice, but unless you speak Azeri or Turkish I suspect there will be a language barrier! Perhaps more advisable is to get Ali or a similarly helpful local (and most Azeri people are indeed happy to help!).

From what we could gather, once staying in the park, you would be free to explore wherever you want day and night, as long as you stay on the tracks. I'm quite keen to give this exciting possibility a go on a return visit; apparently Small Five-toed Jerboa and Long-eared Hedgehog are common, and a number of other small mammals may be possible.

Marbled Polecat – brief but very close views of one hunting around a jird colony at 5.45pm south of the track towards the coast [here](#). The diurnal/crepuscular behaviour of the rodents at this season probably facilitated the sighting of this spectacular animal – certainly the highlight of the trip.

'Persian' Goitred Gazelle *Gazella [subgutturosa] subgutturosa* – abundant; we also saw a few outside the park from the highway.

Jird sp *Meriones* – a few seen darting across the tracks; again, apparently Libyan is the species here.



Gobustan