



# Azerbaijan 2022

(February 25 – March 9)



## 's-Gravenpolder, May 21<sup>st</sup> 2022

A short report of what was mainly a birding trip. The trip report about the birding side of things will be written by Diedert Koppenol and will be posted on cloudbirders.com later this year. I will not write anything specific about the birds we saw. The number of mammals we saw was not very high, but I was very pleasantly surprised about the quality! I would like to thank my companions on this trip: Alwin van Lubeck, André-Willem Faber, Diedert Koppenol, Eric-Jan Alblas, Jaap Hennevanger and Lonnie Bregman for their pleasant company and keen eyes. Also especially thanks to Diedert for organizing and putting together this trip.

### Preamble

The purpose of our visit to Azerbaijan was not specifically to see certain mammals, but instead to see a very specific bird: Siberian Crane. Siberian Cranes are critically endangered with an eastern population and a western population. The western population has for some years consisted out of just a single bird which has been named Omid, which (I'm told) means Hope in Farsi. The past years Omid has been faithfully returning to the same Iranian field to spend the winter and in early spring he migrates back to the Wolga Delta in Russia where nobody has ever been able to find him. For birders that are serious about keeping a Western Palearctic list this is obviously a really good bird to get. What the exact borders of the WP are remains a topic for discussion, but the majority of WP-birders does not consider Iran to be part of it which makes Omid actually a very difficult bird to get on your list because you need to catch up with him while he migrates or find him in the Wolga Delta which I have been told is pretty much impossible (especially these days). In 2020 a couple of dedicated WP-birders set out for Azerbaijan in the hopes of seeing him on his way to Russia and actually managed to hit the jackpot. The story is already legendary and can be read [here](#). So after their success other WP-birders were itching to follow in their footsteps, but Covid prevented a return in 2021. This year things were much improved. The Russian invasion of Ukraine made things a bit more anxious, happening just a few days before we were set to fly, however in the end we did not experience any difficulty because of it. For a large part of the trip we were accompanied by about 30 other birders wanting to see Omid which makes this most likely the largest number of birders being in Azerbaijan at the same time in recorded history. I will not spoil how our quest for Omid went, but focus on the mammals instead. I refer to Diederts trip report for everything about the birds and much of the practical information. When the trip report is ready I will post the link in a comment.

### Preparation

I self-organise the far majority of my trips since I often travel alone or with not many others, so that usually means a fair bit of preparation. In this case I had the luxury of being with fellow birders and there was not much need for me to prepare a lot for the birding part. I took it upon myself to find out about the mammal part. I read the trip reports on mammalwatching.com (all three of them) and also posted a question on the mammal watching forum to which Vladimir Dinets was kind enough to respond. Still, there is not much information out there for mammal watching in Azerbaijan and probably plenty to still discover. I also uploaded all the sightings of observation.org.



For books I brought “Mammals of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East” by Aulagnier, Haffner, Mitchell-Jones, Moutou and Zima. Others brought the well-known Collins bird guide as well, while I had the app version of this book on my phone.

### Schedule

|                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
| <b>February 25</b> | Departure from Amsterdam and arrival in Baku late at night.  |
| <b>February 26</b> | Departure from Baku, made our way to the south-east while birding along the way. Visited Shirvan National Park for the first time as well as some other places nearby. In the evening we arrived in a town called Masalli which would be our home base for the next days |
| <b>February 27</b> | Spend the majority of the day near the village of Lerik which is near Hirkan National Park   |
| <b>February 28</b> | Spend the day birding along the Caspian Sea coast and also visited Gyzylagach Nature Reserve   |
| <b>March 1</b>     | Birded in a forest near Hirkan National Park, made our way back towards Masali while birding along the Caspian sea coast   |
| <b>March 2</b>     | Spend the day in Shirvan National Park   |
| <b>March 3</b>     | Went birding in various places, also visited Gobustan National Park for some birds (this park is famous for the prehistoric illustrations on the rocks). In the afternoon we went to Shirvan National Park and we spotlighted the evening there till 23.00               |
| <b>March 4</b>     | Birded along the Caspian Sea coast   |
| <b>March 5</b>     | Departed from Masalli early in the morning, birded some areas, but mainly drove all the way up to the Caucasus where we arrived late in the evening in a village called Laza   |
| <b>March 6</b>     | Birded near Laza (mainly on foot), it was very foggy which made it impossible to scan the mountains for good stuff   |
| <b>March 7</b>     | A very clear day, we birded the whole morning in Laza and in the afternoon made our way back to a hotel in the centre of Baku  |
| <b>March 8</b>     | Started birding in the morning near Gobustan NP, but spend the afternoon in Shirvan National Park  |
| <b>March 9</b>     | Departed from Azerbaijan very early in the morning   |

### Impression of the country

Sadly my overall impression of Azerbaijan was not very positive. It is the first country I have ever been to where I vowed never to return. For me this was due to a combination of things. The police is very corrupt and is omnipresent. I have never seen it as bad as this. Along the highway every few kilometers there would be a police car posted and sometimes two. We were stopped a few times (actually not the car I was in) and they would usually ask for 200 Manat for some made up reason (the amount was each time the same interestingly). However when we called our local guide or were with them they would usually back off pretty quickly. An effective response is telling them they can charge their ticket through the car rental company. Furthermore the traffic around Baku is very chaotic and you have to drive very carefully with people constantly cutting you off or stopping on weird places (like just in the middle of the lane). I have also seen people drive in the wrong direction on the emergency lane with the highway going in to the opposite direction... Also in many places the staff works very slow and inefficient, be it picking up your rental car, getting a sim card or getting a Covid test. Also very few people speak anything other than Azerbaijani or Russian. That's nobody's fault, but it does make the country less suitable for independent travellers that don't speak these languages.

The quality of the food can be pretty good, but can also be appalling. We had some good evenings at the restaurant, but also a particularly bad one when they served up a roasted goose again the next evening after no-one had eaten from it the previous evening... I might be unfairly projecting my experience in Masalli on the whole country though since we stayed there for a week. Last but not least there is littering pretty much everywhere. The floating objects in the Caspian Sea can cause a little excitement because they can resemble a seal.

So is it all negative? There are definitely some positive sides too and I think my experience might be biased because we spent so much time in the South-East. I really liked the Caucasus, it is very beautiful there and if there was much littering there, the snow covered it up. From a naturalists perspective it is also definitely an interesting country to explore. Persian Leopard is probably the mammal speaks the most to the imagination and Azerbaijan has a couple, however no-one ever sees them. Marbled Polecat might be a specific target for some for which Shirvan National Park might actually be a very good place for (see in the species list for more information). There are some other more localised mammals on a world scale to get although they can often be found as well in Georgia, Turkey or Iran. Still in order to get to the good places I would really recommend getting in touch with a local guide, they will most likely much better arranging access to things than you.

### **Comments on certain places**

I have included only the ones that (to me) are interesting from a mammal watchers perspective.

#### **Shirvan National Park**

For me this was definitely the most interesting area I visited. This is a large park that is mostly a large plain with a few lakes. The largest lake is called Flamingo Lake and has a watchtower. There is a lot of reed here. This was also the spot to scan for Omid. We saw Jungle Cat near the lake, as well as Golden Jackal and Marbled Polecat (a little farther away). In this park Goitered Gazelle is guaranteed, they are the most tame near the entrance. Farther into the park they often ran away quickly. We also heard wolves but did not see them. There are unpaved roads running through the park. As it had been dry for weeks we did not have any problems driving them, however by the tracks I could see that it can be more problematic when it gets wet. The park opens at 8.00 and needs to be exited at 18.30 (if I remember correctly, it might be different in other times of the year). The entrance is 2 Manat per person and you need to write all your names down. Visiting the park earlier than 8.00 or doing night drives needs some arrangement. We had one night with one of the rangers sitting in the front seat the whole time. He was very pleased with what we saw. I don't think he did many (or any) night drives before our group came. He didn't like shining around with the torch so I recommend bringing a heat scope. He was fine with lighting up the animal once we had found something interesting. When it comes to small rodents there are many Williams's Jerboas around. There should also be plenty of Libyan Jird but we did not see any, perhaps they were hibernating? I don't know much about Jirds, but it seems a common mammal in Azerbaijan and we did not see a single one. Furthermore Long-eared Hedgehog should be possible. Kuhl's Pipistrelle was reported in large numbers around the watchtower in 2008, so you might get lucky later in the year.

#### **Hirkan National Park**

I thought to include this because I think it is a very interesting place, but we were not able to assess its true potential. It has quite a number of endemic plants and trees and the vegetation should be very interesting. However in winter it is less so and we were also not able to enter the fenced off part of the park (I am not sure if the area outside of the fence is officially the park, but Google Maps does not

make a clear distinction). With a local guide pre-arranging it it should probably be possible, but we were not able to enter even with our local guide on the phone. This might have been due to the time of the year. There did not seem to be a very 'official' entrance let alone a visitors centre. This is the home of the Persian Leopard, but it will be extremely hard to see it. You might be able to find some cool other mammals (I believe there is an endemic shrew there, as well as some other stuff, see Vladimir Dinets trip report for that) with the thermal, however entering at night will probably be even more of a challenge.

### **Gyzylagach National Park**

Enter here (38.960, 48.923). I think there was another entrance as well. This area has a lot of reed and water. Others saw several Jungle Cats here. Entrance here was again 2 Manat. It is not allowed to drive here, which makes it impossible to properly check out the park. It might be possible to get permission to drive, but it will be an exception. It is very well possible to drive, at least for the first few kilometres the road is paved, it might stay the same throughout the park.

### **Absheron National Park**

I have not visited this area, but this is what Vladimir Dinets recommended for Caspian Seal. Others saw some dried out skeletons of the seals here. The guides said May is a good time to look for the seals here because they migrate to the south then. Apparently Azerbaijan is not the best country to look for this species because in winter they stay much farther up north and in summer much farther south.

## **Trip list**

This was not a dedicated mammal trip, so the number is not high, but we had some nice ones.

### **1. Williams's Jerboa (*Allactaga williamsi*)**

Very common on our one night in Shirvan National Park. Small Five-toed Jerboa should probably also be possible here, but we did not see anything out of the ordinary.





## 2. Greater Horseshoe Bat (*Rhinolophus ferrumequinum*)

Two sleeping in a cave here (38.720, 48.425). I did not get good pictures, but someone else did so they could be ID'd.



### 3. Jungle Cat (*Felis chaus*)

I was very pleased to add a new cat to my world cat list. Cat number 17 (30 cats before I'm 30 is still a realistic goal :)). This is not a very difficult cat to see in the world, but it's always nice to see new things sooner than later. I found one individual close to the watchtower in Shirvan with the thermal. The cat disappeared before I could get a good look at it, but fortunately it returned after we waited for a few minutes. Then it stayed for about 5 minutes just sitting and looking. Great sighting! These are the coordinates (39.671, 49.182).



### 4. Golden Jackal (*Canis aureus*)



Saw my first one in Shirvan just on foot while it was about 50 meters away. I expected to see a lot more in Shirvan but didn't, we did hear them a lot at night. We had them often in other places though. We had a very tame individual near Hirkan NP and also saw them along the highway.



#### **5. Steppe wolf (*Canis lupus campestris*)**

Heard-only, I think it should not be that hard to see this species as it is reported by Mike Hoit in his report (also in Shirvan) and I have also read a birding trip report reporting seeing them in de Caucasus. Still they are wolves so no guarantees there. We only heard them at night in Shirvan.

#### **6. North Caucasian Fox (*Vulpes vulpes caucasica*)**

A beautiful subspecies. We saw it a couple of times in Shirvan, both during the day and at night. It shouldn't be that difficult to see one.





## 7. European Marbled Polecat (*Vormela peregusna*)

The star of the trip for me! Mike Hoit reports a sighting in his report as well, the location of which was not very far from ours. Furthermore other birders went 2 days before us to go spotlight in Shirvan and also saw a Marbled Polecat while it was chased out of its burrow by a fox. I understood this location was approximately a 100 meters away from Mike Hoits location, along the road. I think about here (39.696977, 49.202489). We saw one sitting next to a burrow around 16.15: in broad daylight! It was initially sitting more upright, but went down a bit when we stopped. Then it stayed out for about half a minute but went in a burrow just when our second car had caught up. Sadly they did not see it. We did not have any sightings at night. This is the location of our sighting (39.695, 49.184).





## 8. Eastern Tur (*Capra cylindricornis*)

We found a group of 14 individuals here (41.283, 48.112) near Laza, while scoping for Caucasian Snowcock. I think this area is only accessible with a permit (which we had), but you should probably be able to find them outside of that area. A spotting scope is recommended for finding them.







### **9. Goitered Gazelle (*Gazella subgutturosa*)**

An animal you will definitely see when you go to Shirvan. I have not seen them outside of the park. They often move in herds, I have seen up to 40 together.









