

Smuggling and terrorism!

(Turkey 7.–25. 5. 2022)

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We have spent 18 days in Turkey, mostly around Adana/Niğde/Gaziantep, with a brief excursion to Van lake. Originally the trip was motivated by birding (and we ended up seeing 199 bird species, as well as 17 species of herps), but as it often happens now, we ended up mostly mammalwatching – the birding background however motivated some parts of the itinerary, especially the long drive to Van for Mongolian Finches, where we wouldn't likely have gone just for basically one mammal species. Turkey is an easy country to go to, rent a car in and sleep outside – however we had to change a camping spot twice because of a police (jandarma) request due to their concerns for our safety, once in Hatay province and once in Van province (where we have been told that the risk is „smuggling and terrorism“, a really believable concept in the middle of pastoral nowhere). Outside of these somewhat „hot“ areas we only had one another problem – when we parked on a small road near the Acomys site and jandarma called the rental company to get us to move the car as „parking in a deserted area at night is not safe“ or something similarly asinine. English knowledge is not very common in rural areas or among the jandarma, but almost everyone understands the concept of communication through Google Translate, which really makes things easier.

The rental car was a Fiat Aegea, which is a sensible sedan, even though on the back roads and tracks between fields one could use a bit more clearance, as this car had a particularly low-hanging piece of metal on the underside. The car has been changed at the last minute, for unknown reasons, and the rental company – Cizgi at Adana Airport – has some online reviews mentioning a bit of unreliable delivery of specific cars. On the other hand there were no problems with them at all, they even went out of their way to reach us through several channels when the jandarma called them regarding the “bad parking” and the rental wasn't expensive, so I'd recommend using them. Driving is a bit chaotic in Turkey but after Kenya it was a pleasant and relaxing experience ... We drove over 5000 kms (about 1500 of that just because of the Van excursion) – when reserving through rentalcars.com, the mileage was unlimited (unlike when I tried directly through the Cizgi website). Some highways in Turkey are paid for with a contactless system called HGS – I am not sure how it works exactly, but we had a HGS sticker in the car and upon returning the car, I have been simply charged all the toll, which, despite us having covered hundreds and hundreds kilometers on paid highways, amounted to some small change.

Turkey is not a well-known mammalwatching destination, there are only a handful of reports but the mammalwatching.com Turkey page (MWT) has a nice list of „possible“ species from a Turkish researcher, which is a great resource to get some mammal appetite. To be frank, a vast majority of the possible species – and indeed of species we saw – are rodents, but it's a really varied, almost spectacular selection of rodents, so we enjoyed looking for them a lot. But if you are looking only for the „bigger“ things, look elsewhere. Also, some patience is advisable – while we had some great mammal sightings along the way, we have also had some truly incredible stretches of night driving or hiking (both always using a thermal scope) with absolutely no animals in sight, sometimes for hours.

The MWT list is pretty good, but I have followed it up with more research and find a few things I would add, change or question:

- it inexplicably misses William's Jerboa (while including the two other much more obscure species), which is one of the easiest things to see
- it's a bit vague on Caracal range – IUCN really has it only around Antalya; Benjamin Schweinhart's report has a rumor in it of the area around Halfeti (north of Birecik) being good for it, so maybe there is more to this? But your hopes on Caracal outside the range should be moderated.
- it misses Palestine Mole-rat, which occurs, according to a paper, around Adana and in Hatay

- if you are interested in voles, you probably need to read up more on them as taxonomy is a bit disputed, distributions complicated and identification next to impossible
- *Apodemus witherbyi* is listed as *fulvipectus*, under a rather uncommon common name “Yellow-breasted Field-mouse”, which is a bit confusing when comparing to most sources
- A few species are only mentioned in other reports. Notably, the recently split Taurus Ground Squirrel was even not far from where we were, but we simply had to skip something...; then there are the Fallow Deer that can be argued to be more authentic than the introduced European population (if you are into that sort of things) – for more on both consult the latest report by Daan Drukker.
- and if you really run out of things to look for, there is always Jackass Shrew!

In general, if you need any more information on Turkish mammals, the only way is to just look up original research papers. That's sometimes hard, but also rewarding – I have for example found one with exact coordinates of successful trappings on the Spiny Mouse (with 1-meter precision) etc. Benjamin Schweinhart's report was also quite useful to get general areas for some species.

iNaturalist observations: https://www.inaturalist.org/observations?d1=2022-05-06&d2=2022-05-26&place_id=7183&taxon_id=40151&user_id=opisska

We have undoubtedly observed 17 species with some more sightings of uncertain ID. All but four were lifers, those four being **Red Fox** (seen quite often, at various sites, once even in the dark desert form), **European Hare** (common in agricultural land, except for Van province), **Wild Boar** (seen when descending from the Dormouse site in Bolkar and at the Spiny Mouse site in Narlıkuyu, but must be common when the local „wildlife crossing“ road sign is a picture of it instead of a deer) and the obligatory item of „a bat“ (we haven't found any roosting bats and can't ID flying bats; we do have some ultrasound recordings to be studied later, if it ever comes to that).



From the new species, the most common were **Southern White-breasted Hedgehog** – seen, (invariably at night) at Samandağ, Kızılkalesi, Sultan marshes and slopes of Nemrut – and **Asia Minor Souslik** – seen right at the Snowcock site above Demirkazık, at several sites around Sultan Marshes and in Van province right at the Mole-vole site. They have quite large

colonies, are active during the day and as they are often standing up in the typical Souslik manner, they are easy to find even from the road.

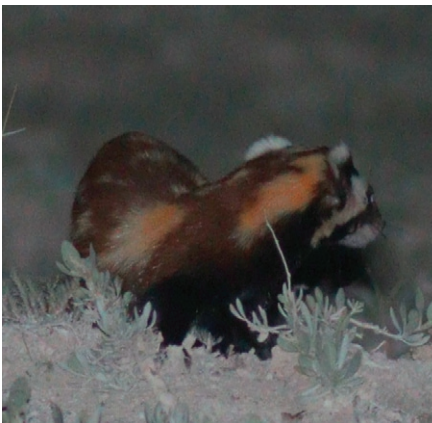


Another very common sight were **Apodemus** mice – which however pose a serious ID challenge in this area of Turkey where in most places all of *witherbyi*, *mystacinus* and the good old *flavicollis* are possible and those are just very hard to ID. An exception is the Spiny Mouse area around Narlıkuyu, which has been, understandably, the target of a lot of rodent research and nobody has ever found anything else there but the Spiny Mice themselves and **Apodemus mystacinus** – and as one of the rodents seen there even looks quite convincingly for *mystacinus* (large ears and very big body overall), we count it. One sighting from Sultan Marshes was very likely *witherbyi* based on habitat, but not enough for us to count.



I was expecting **William's Jerboa** to be relatively easy, but a long slow drive on back roads from Demirkazık to Sultan Marshes through what seemed to be reasonable habitat in many places, brought nothing but two Hares. Then as we started exploring the marshes the next day, we realized that this should be even better and decided to stay there the whole day, scouting the area for best places for nighttime observation – ultimately we chose a stretch of small road going south from Sindelhoyuk which caught our attention as it went through some really unspoiled semi-

desert habitat with sandy cover and sparse vegetation. There the Jerboa indeed turned out to be easy, not just with the IR, but also simply running across the road in headlights. We later saw two more, one in the Van province (38.4556, 43.9668) and one near Muş (38.8946, 41.6705). They are pretty large but incredibly fast, they seem to teleport across the landscape and aren't easy to observe for any extended amount of time, not to mention to photograph.



The Sindelhoyuk road had far more in store than just the Jerboa though – a **Tristram's Jird** and a **Marbled Polecat**. The Polecat was seen briefly while driving north and then again on the way back, when it gave us long views from close distance as it simply sat down next to the road. The Jird was found in IR a bit further from the road; later we have seen more Jirds running



along the side of a road near Halfeti (37.2727, 37.8806).

The Sultan Marshes area was also one of the places where we tried to see

Nehring's mole-rat. Those are quite common around Turkey – and as a large part of the area has no actual moles, the identification of their mounds is straightforward and you will quickly learn to spot them everywhere. What is far less so is actually seeing the animals – if you open a hole, the animal is not guaranteed to come check it out and even if it does, you may see nothing more than soil being pushed out. Here, as we picked a meadow close to some houses, our activity didn't go unnoticed and we got some friendly visits from locals, who explained to us their tricks for catching the mole-rats (for food?) from pumping water to the burrows to opening more holes and getting the rat run between them, all of which we considered too invasive. At the end of the day, we managed to get a glimpse of a snout that was clearly too large to be anything else (and thus we consider it countable), but I missed my chance to get a photo by a split second.



How many of you have ever seen a **Woolly Dormouse**? Frankly, I hadn't even heard of it until a few days before the trip when I started looking into what mammals we could see. I couldn't find any reports or information about its observation, but when researching sites for Brown Fish-Owl, I noticed that the Bolkar Mountains IBA (which has the owl) mentioned them in description. So I looked up their habitat, looked around and on satellite images, planned a 10-km-there-10-km-back hike with 800 meters of altitude difference and indeed found one

after about 1.5 hours with thermal scope after sunset. It only offered us a few seconds of views and never appeared again, no other individuals were found during a 5-hour hike that evening. The Dormouse was at roughly 37.2670, 34.6717 – at roughly 1850 meters, well within the commonly stated altitude range between 1500–2000 meters for the Dormouse, on which we focused. With a slightly higher clearance, this site could be practically driven to – with our car, we parked at 37.2454, 34.6925 and quite enjoyed the hike which had many birds and lizards. In my opinion, it would generally be preferably if hordes of mammalwatchers won't start driving there, considering the beauty of the area (but locals do commonly drive there on motorcycles).



Benjamin Schweinhart's report mentions **Persian Squirrels** "around Uzuncaburç", so we gave it a try. It's a massively cute area with lots of small rocks covered in bushes with tiny fields hidden between them, but the area directly north of the village, where we started, had very little actual grown trees. From one high rock, I looked around with the binoculars and identified an area with larger trees on the horizon, which I was able to match with a map and we drove there, as it was many kilometers away. There at 36.5735, 33.8910 is a cute field surrounded by trees on rocky terrains (seriously looking like art from some videogame), where we immediately saw some squirrels running on the ground and the trees.

In Demirkazık, our main target was Caspian Snowcock. The traditional way to see them is for people to stay in a hotel in the village and get someone to drive them to the site at 37.8505, 35.1216 before dawn with a jeep or even a tractor. This is only about 600 meters of altitude gain, so we simply hiked it up in the evening (hoping – in vain – for some mammals on the way), camped there and looked for the Snowcocks at first light. We eventually saw those at 9:30 (after we went to sleep and got up again), but we also saw a herd of **Bezoar Ibex** (Wild Goat) mostly resting under an overhang on the opposite slope of the gorge from that site using a spotting scope. For a brief moment, we could even watch two long-horned males fighting.



Our visit to Birecik was similarly motivated by birding, as that's one of the most fascinating sites in the Western Palearctic, but since we moped up all our targets in one day, we went for a mammal hunt in the evening. As we have heard reports of the locals being overly protective of the pistachio plantations, we have stayed in the car and on public roads – yet we easily found several **Long-eared Hedgehogs**, one even crossing a back road in the headlights.

Even though we covered a pretty large distance to get to the Van province (mainly because of the Mongolian Finch), there wasn't much of a change in the expected mammal species, with the main exception of the **Transcaucasian Mole-vole**. We speculated a lot about how difficult it will be to find some of their burrows. Then we noticed that we parked over

some when we stopped for the night to camp (38.3166, 43.6906) – so that part turned out to be pretty easy. The next day, after an hour of waiting next to a hole – which we have ... slightly improved – the animal emerged to roll back said improvements. Having learned our lesson from the Nehring's Mole-rat fiasco, we put one camera close to the hole and recorded video in case we wouldn't manage to snap some shots from the car with a longer lens, but in the end, both methods were equally successful and we could watch and record the animal very well. Later when driving around the region, we found numerous further obvious Mole-vole colonies - some fields or pastures are full of them, while a neighboring area may be completely empty, but overall, they are clearly numerous.



During a night drive in the Van province, we stopped for a William's Jerboa and during this stop (38.4556, 43.9668), we noticed some more animals in the grassland, which turned out to be **Microtus voles**. This finding however took a long and tiring game of whack-a-vole: because the voles were really skittish to with regards to light (even red), my wife would watch the area

with IR in total darkness, tag a place where a vole emerged with a laser pointer, I would try to focus on the laser pointer spot and then blindly shoot with a flash. The colony was extensive and the animals would emerge chaotically at various directions and they would never stray far from the burrows. Eventually, we managed to get some photos, but the identification is tricky and so is the taxonomy – according to IUCN taxonomy, colonial voles in this area should be either *socialis* or maybe *arvalis*, if we are a bit generous on the range, but the local population of the latter is now often split as *obscurus* – then there is also *levis*, which I thought originally to not occur in colonies, but then I found some mentions as to the contrary ... On the way back from the east, we found another vole colony south of Malatya (38.2585, 38.6130 – bonus points for anyone who guesses correctly what we were looking for in such a random place originally), on the side of a small stream, in lush grass and streamside flowers, making it quite hard to see the animals. In the bank, there were many holes, some really big and then to the left there was another active area. The site was right next to a major road and the animals wouldn't go out much when there were cars – and even when they went out, they would just run for a few seconds from the hole, chew on something and run back. We sat there also in the afternoon and there was no activity, only at night. In this area, the IUCN range maps suggest either *socialis* again or *guentheri*. Overall, we count both colonies as *Microtus* sp. for the 17th “surely observed” species.



The 18th species, which we don't count though, is the **Sand Gazelle**. Benjamin Schweinhart's report mentions Goitered Gazelles around Kızılkuyu, SW of Şanlıurfa, with little details, so we went to check it out. We found a gazelle breeding center and, more importantly, Adil, a PhD student working there, who spoke English and gave us a lot of information. He explained that this is ssp. *marica* – which is now split by IUCN as Sand Gazelle. He also told us that the one male we saw outside the enclosure is a recent release and many other gazelles in the area are their releases – making it impossible to determine which gazelles are really wild – so „counting“ any gazelles in the area is dubious. These mammalwatcher problems however soon

started to feel petty when Adil described what really bothered him – the poachers who come to steal newborn gazelles, usually killing their mothers in the process. And while Adil and others try to fight them as much as possible, he conceded that against organized groups with machine guns scattered across a huge area, they feel pretty powerless. We continued to search the area for more gazelles, further from the breeding center but were stopped by some much less friendly people who told us that this is a „forbidden area“ and forced us to leave ...

For a 19th species, I have originally considered a Stone Marten, which I thought I saw crossing the road at night near Narlıkuyu. However after having seen the Marbled Polecat from a similar distance, I have concluded that the coloration of the latter is far less conspicuous in bad light than I have thought and that I cannot in good



conscience exclude the possibility of this having been another Marbled Polecat instead as I haven't seen the head/neck pattern enough. Up to three more species could be possibly obtained if the other Apodemuses and the two vole colonies were all different species, but this will likely remain unsolved.

We looked for a few more species without success:

When it comes to obscure mammals in Turkey, Asia Minor Spiny Mouse is hard to beat. Having been known for less than 60 years its species status is still heavily disputed. For some time it was known from only one site (exact location of which we couldn't however find anywhere), it has been recently found in a „larger“ area of about 100 sq. km. Since there is a paper with exact coordinates of the successful trapping sites, the species just waits for mammalwatchers to see it. We have spent 6 hours trying to do that – unfortunately we had to leave the most promising area near Narlikuyu because the jandarma didn't like our car parked „in a deserted area“, but we moved to further sites and eventually, when we were just about to give up, we thought we had found a good candidate while driving the Ayas-Karaahmetli road, but it turned out to be *Apodemus mystacinus*. In general the mice there are extremely hard to see, much more skittish than *Apodemus* in central Europe so we have found several heat signatures along the way that we could never follow.



The first morning, after camping at a random place SE of Adana, we walked around and found mole-rat mounds (36.8311, 35.6040) – in this area they had to be Palestine Mole-rats (which we didn't realize at that time), but all we got from them was some moving soil.



Around Birecik, we looked for Euphrates Jerboa, as it is expected there, a bit to the north, we followed the rumor of Caracals around Halfeti (despite this being out of IUCN range) and at several places all around, we tried to scout promising habitats for both Gray and Brandt's Hamsters, including some extensive search of an agricultural landscape north of Muş.