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A tale of two ringing sites. Part 2 - Aras River

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After leaving Kuyucuk, we drove back to the KuzeyDoga office for a brief stop before carrying on another 90 km down to the Aras River. The ringing site is between the river and a small village called Yukari Ciyikli where we stayed. Although it is 130 km by road, I measured the direct distance to Kuyucuk on the GPS and found it to be only 71 km. We were now also only about 5 km from the Armenian border.

This site is quite different to Kuyucuk; much lower for a start, at 980 m and with a lot of small trees and bushes. The river itself is surprisingly barren. It has bare gravel banks with very little vegetation and consequently no bird life. The mist nets were set up in a very marshy area about a couple of hundred metres from the river. The site was overlooked by a distant, pyramid-shaped mountain called Tek Elti or Tekealti. For the first few days, it would always be visible indicating good weather, but that would change.

The birds at Aras were also quite different, although there were a few species which we caught at both sites. I did get small numbers of what are normally considered fairly common and well-known European birds. These included (in the order we caught them) Robin *Erithacus rubecula* (9), Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella* (1), Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs* (5), Blackbird *Turdus merula* (1), Great Tit *Parus major* (12), Dunnock *Prunella modularis* (4), Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis* (2), Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes* (4), and Blue Tit *Parus caeruleus* (9).

Our accommodation was the other side of the village from the ringing site. It was a proper, fairly modern brick building with a couple of bedrooms, a kitchen, a shower and - sheer luxury - a toilet one could actually sit on. Unfortunately, it lacked any form of housekeeping and could have benefitted tremendously from some cleaning and tidying. Nevertheless, it was heaven after Kuyucuk.

The ringing station was an aluminium painted caravan which looked to me like it was homemade. Its tow hook rested on an old drum, but otherwise it was not stabilised, not even levelled. Consequently, every time I put my pencil down it would immediately roll off the table unless I took precautions to prevent it from doing so. Also, the whole van shook violently whenever anybody entered it, or moved in it. As the days progressed, Umut became more and more bored and often used to sit at another table, habitually shaking one leg. This would cause enough vibration in the caravan that it became impossible to read the weighing scale or the vernier! I just needed to look at him and gently raise a finger until he got the message.

As there had been nobody at the site for the previous couple of days, all of the nets were furled and so we had to get up early on the Thursday morning to unfurl them. The first few birds caught were the familiar Chiffchaffs, but there were a significant number of the drabber Mountain Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus lorenzii* (37) which completely lacked any yellow. Wing morphology was used to confirm identification, but the differences were marginal at best.

The catch of the first day was a Savi's Warbler *Locustella luscinioides* (2) which is similar to the River Warbler *Locustella fluviatilis* occasionally found in southern Africa. One feature of this genus which quickly leads to the correct identification is that the outer rectrices are shorter than the longest undertail coverts.

After day one, it was apparent that bird activity in this area had diminished significantly since the previous ringers had been there. I averaged 50 birds a day at Kuyucuk, but Aras would only give me 30 per day, and so boredom quickly set in - especially with the students. Even Rakesh had few birds to watch at this site; he rarely recorded much more than the birds we caught in the nets. Aysu never got bored as long as her mobile phones were working - yes, she had two! She would spend hours talking to her mother or a friend. We could always tell which it was as she spoke softly to her friend, but she was very animated, often even angry while burning her poor mother's ear.

As with most countries, Turkey has its fair share of ethnic minorities. If you check your atlas, you will see that Turkey borders Armenia to the north-east, and beyond Armenia to the east is another former Soviet Socialist Republic called Azerbaijan. Communities of people (called Azeris) from this country are quite common in eastern Turkey and the village of Yukari Ciyrikli is one example. One particular Azeri family provides lunch and supper for the volunteers and students at the ringing station which means that Yakup only had to prepare his usual breakfast. At about noon, he would walk the 1.5 km or so to the village and collect a simple lunch which we would eat in the caravan. In the evening, we would clear the nets for the final time after dark, and then walk to the family's house for a proper sit-down supper.

The villagers lead a simple, rural lifestyle. They farm a few animals and grow various trees in small orchards. Fruit trees like apple or peach were common. Tall, thin Lombardy Poplar trees were also grown although nobody could tell me why. I guessed it was to provide timber in an area where there was very little of this particular resource.

The next day produced little of real interest apart from a female Syrian Woodpecker *Dendropicos syriacus* (1), so, after lunch, I decided to go back to the accommodation for a shower and to take some photos in the village on the way. Just as I got to the other side of the village, I heard a lady calling from the top of a steep, stony hill to my left. I looked up and saw her coming down the hill with two buckets hanging from a yoke. She was waving frantically with one hand and my immediate thought was that she had seen the camera dangling around my neck and wanted her picture taken. I quickly turned on the camera and pointed it in her direction, by which time she was almost at the bottom of the hill, skidding down on the loose stones at an impressive speed for an old lady. With only one picture taken, she ran up to me and showed me her swollen arm, all covered in what were presumably wasp stings! She jabbered away in Turkish and I could only imagine what she was saying. Seeing that I was obviously unable to help, she scuttled off into the village leaving me feeling rather guilty having completely misinterpreted her cries. I did, however, get a nice picture!

That Friday evening, after supper, Yakup took Rakesh and me to another house in the village where most of the villagers were partying. It was a traditional henna party, held the night before a wedding. We sat on chairs in the garden and listened to the music and watched people dance in a circle holding hands. It was another of those surreal moments which will stick in my mind forever, especially as the air had an all-pervasive aroma of cow dung. After about half an hour, the music stopped and one of the men took

a microphone and started to speak. He might have been speaking Martian for all it meant to me, but a shiver ran through me when he glanced in our direction and I picked up the word "tourist" from his speech. My worst fears were soon realised when Yakup confirmed with a big grin "they want you to dance"! Now dancing is not my favourite activity at the best of times, but we had been put in a position where we couldn't refuse. So Rakesh (who also had little in the way of dancing skills) and I put on a show which the crowd obviously found hugely entertaining, much to our great embarrassment.

On the Saturday, Yakup decided to show us a shortcut through an orchard, around the village to the ringing site. There was a small ditch to cross and we were advised to wear wellies. Rakesh didn't need to be up quite as early as the rest of us, so he usually stayed behind in the morning and made his own way later after showering. The three students, Yakup and I made our way through the orchard with no problem and soon came to the ditch. It was just too wide to jump and filled with thick, wet mud. Someone had thoughtfully placed an old lorry tyre right in the middle, the idea being that one would step on the tyre and then onto the far bank in one fluid movement.

Yakup showed the way, followed by me. Ulvi and Umut soon crossed leaving Aysu to bring up the rear. Now it must be said that Aysu is not really an outdoor girl, and to put it politely, is not really built for jumping muddy ditches. Nor had she heeded Yakup's advice to wear wellies. In a blind leap of faith, she launched herself across the ditch; her right foot landed on the tyre, but skidded off into the deep mud. Her forward momentum carried the rest of her body to the intended destination where she collapsed in a heap, minus her shoe which was now in the bottom of a leg-shaped hole in the mud. Ulvi gallantly held her hand while she leaned over and recovered the lost shoe which she subsequently carried to the ringing site and later washed and left to dry in the sun.

Having suffered one indignity, you would think Aysu would be wiser, wouldn't you? Well the next day, she again failed to wear wellies and caused yet more mirth with her clumsy antics. This time, she was slightly more cautious and didn't have quite the same momentum as on the previous day. Again, the right foot hit the tyre and slipped into the mud. Now caught off balance, the left foot only made it half way across the ditch, and she ended up straddling the tyre almost up to both knees in the mud, with a pained look of disgust on her face. Ulvi and Umut courageously took an arm each and pulled her to the safety of the grass bank - from where she now had to retrieve (and subsequently wash) two shoes from their muddy pits.

By the third day, Aysu had at last taken Yakup's advice and worn wellies, and she received a rousing cheer from all of us as she got it right for the first time. It was however, my turn to cause the laughter. I suppose I was getting a bit over-confident and my foot slipped off the tyre on my way across. I was lucky that the boot didn't stick in the mud and I suffered little more than a few splashes of mud and a bruised ego. By this time I had determined (using my GPS) that this shortcut only saved about 200 metres, so after that day, I reverted to walking through the village - far easier.

Around lunch time on the Saturday, Yakup left for a short break. He went back to Kars for three nights as he had been working continuously for several weeks. The students, Rakesh and I would manage the station without him.

That first Sunday at Aras, Oct. 19, was a bad day for me. I had (at last) caught Aysu's cold and it was affecting my concentration. We caught our first European Stonechat *Saxicola torquatus* (2) and while trying to photograph it, I lost it from my

hand, but it had, at least, been measured and ringed. That same day I also lost a bird from the net and another from a bag before a ring was fitted, or any biometrics could be recorded. As if this wasn't bad enough, I also let a bird go (having recorded all the measurements) without putting the ring on, which in ringing circles is a real novice mistake. That evening, I climbed into bed early and tried to sleep, but before long, I smelled stale cigarette smoke wafting in from the next room. In an uncharacteristic outburst, I informed the students that they must not smoke in the house if they wanted to live any longer, and although they didn't understand much English, it didn't happen again.

Monday was rather uneventful, apart from losing another Chiffchaff from my hand. We did, however, see about 10 wild boar across the other side of the Aras River. Also, Ulvi tried fishing with some makeshift equipment, but he was unsuccessful.

The Tuesday was a little more interesting. We caught our only Scarlet Rosefinch *Capodacus erythrinus* (1) which had a growth on its right heel where it had probably been broken and had healed badly. We also had a small flock of Lesser Short-toed Larks *Calandrella rufescens* (6), most of which were caught in the high raptor nets. We never saw any subsequently. By this time, the students had discovered a 470 g packet of sunflower seeds amongst the stores. These were eaten rather like we might eat peanuts. With practice, one cracked the outer shell with ones teeth and extracted the tasty kernel with ones tongue. I never quite got the hang of it, but I did crack open a few and enjoyed the tiny reward. Umut was a real expert and he ate hundreds at a rate of about one every 3 seconds. With mounting impatience (partly due to my now fully developed cold) I found the noise of Umut's continuous seed cracking rather irritating. I don't know how many seeds one gets in 470 g, but it must have been several thousand.

That day was also memorable for a remarkable piece of good fortune. We caught and ringed a female Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix* (1). These are short, stocky little birds and like many game birds, are prone to "exploding" out of your hands if you don't hang on to them. I ringed it with the recommended "CS" ring, which I think is a 6 mm, and took all of the usual measurements. We then went outside to photograph it. As I held the legs firmly in my left hand, it suddenly took flight and left me holding air. It flew straight into a net only about 5 m away and we were able to recover it only to discover that the ring had gone! I had noticed it was a bit loose, but the force of its sudden departure had pulled the ring over its foot and it was lost in the long grass. Despite a subsequent search, we never did find the missing ring. I took the bird back to the caravan and put on a smaller "DS" which fitted much better. The "CS" is probably a better fit for a male.

That afternoon, we noticed that a storm was brewing to the west and we had our first few spots of rain. In the evening, despite a steady downpour, Aysu still spent more than an hour on the porch, in the dark, chatting on her mobile phone.

After a bad night due to my cold, we awoke to a miserable day. It rained again around lunch time and there were few birds. Lots of things were beginning to irritate me and for the first time, I was really looking forward to going home. Umut, who'd also acquired the cold, seemed to spend his days sniffing, sleeping, crunching sunflower seeds, or shaking his leg. Aysu either wandered off with one of her phones glued to her ear, or else sat around with her head in her hands looking thoroughly bored and fed up. Ulvi to his credit did try to show some interest. With the help of his Turkish/English dictionary, we made some slow, but interesting conversation. He also used to get the

Turkish bird book out every time we got a new bird and read up about it. I predict that Ulvi will do well at University, but I don't hold out much hope for the other two.

That afternoon mainly out of curiosity, and perhaps also out of boredom, I decided to get a rough measure of the length of net we had out. I paced out each net and noted how many of each different length there were. Yakup had told me that there was about 500 m of net and my calculation confirmed this; I got a figure of 570 m. Later, I timed myself doing a complete net round and found it took a full 25 minutes to tread carefully through all the mud and that did not include extraction of any birds.

Over the weekend, Emrah had told us that the students would be leaving on Wednesday and he had threatened to bring more. I pleaded with him not to send any more students as there was very little to do and the ones we had were already bored out of their skulls. Fortunately he did listen so Yakup, Rakesh and I would be on our own for the last few days. When we arrived at the house for supper that Tuesday evening, Yakup was already there having returned too late to come to the caravan, or so he said. Rakesh and I also had a sneaking suspicion that he had a crush on the daughter of the family.

Wednesday dawned wet as we left the students to pack for their return journey. They had to make their own way back to Kars using public transport. Later in the morning, Yakup got a call on his mobile and then said he had to go back to the accommodation as the students had missed their bus!! He returned alone a couple of hours later and seemed happy that he'd solved the problem. The day remained dreary, dark and overcast all day with some rain. As if he thought it might cheer me up, Yakup gave me a letter which Mike Ford had written for me before he left. Mike was the other South African ringer who had spent six weeks at the same sites before my arrival. In his letter, he set out lots of useful tips which would help me during my stay. Now if I had received this letter on day 1 instead of day 18 of 22, it might have helped me a lot more.

By Friday the weather was still dreary with drizzle in the morning. We caught a couple of immature Red-backed Shrikes *Lanius collurio* (2) which had been harassing the birds in the nets for the previous few days. We also caught a tiny Goldcrest *Regulus regulus* (1), very pretty and one of Europe's smallest birds.

Emrah suggested that we close the site on Saturday, but the thought of two nights in Kars didn't inspire me. Instead, we elected to pack up on Sunday, but when it started to rain heavily on Saturday evening, we began to think we'd made the wrong decision.

Sunday, October 26 was the day we had to close the site. In the morning, it was still overcast and I was still full of cold. It started raining hard just after 9 so we couldn't yet put any nets away. This was lucky as it turned out, because Rakesh managed to flush a Little Crake *Porzana parva* (1) into a net. Just as I was thinking it would be nice to get just one more interesting species, Rakesh came back with a Red-breasted Flycatcher *Ficedula parva* (1). This wasn't so easy to identify in its drab brown winter plumage.

We decided to eat lunch before clearing away and Yakup went off to the village to get it for the last time. Rakesh and I started to worry when Yakup hadn't returned after a couple of hours, so we were pleased to see him when he did turn up. The clocks had gone back the previous night and lunch wasn't ready as he'd arrived an hour early!

Rakesh brought one more surprise before we started to take down the nets. It was a second Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis* (2) and unlike the first one, this one had not been ringed. It was a nice end to the trip. All of the nets and poles were packed into the

caravan which was towed back to the village behind a local farmer's tractor. There, presumably, it would stay until spring.

The journey home was fairly uneventful. After a night's sleep at the Kars office (which had several beds and a semi-functional shower), Onder, Emrah and Yakup took me for a traditional Turkish breakfast which included delicious honey - a speciality of the region. Before leaving for the airport, Rakesh and I did a brief tour of the town with Yakup in drizzly weather. I must confess I didn't take much of it in as I was already looking forward to some South African sunshine.



The ringing caravan



Ulvi trying to fish, watched by Umut



Me checking the nets



The author at work



Me with the Little Crake



Emrah, Yakup and Onder