

Azerbaijan, 17th–22nd October 2022



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This short trip report covers a visit to Azerbaijan in October 2022, concentrating mainly on the Besh Barmag Area (90km North of Baku) and the Lankaran–Larik areas (240km south of Baku). In addition, Absheron National Park (30 mins from the airport) and Shirvan National Park (right by the main Lankaran to Baku highway about 1¼ hr south of Baku) were also visited. We were provoked to go by a flying visit in October 2018 (see trip report [here](#)) which gave a tempting taster of what Azerbaijan had to offer.

This was a short trip, determined by availability of holidays and, as such only a day and half were devoted to the Besh Barmag area. The much more pleasant, fertile lowlands of the southwest Caspian around Lankaran, in particular at the south edge Kizil Agach bay, provided a welcome contrast and equally as many birds, and also allowed for a 1½ day visit to the Talysh mountains, for which Lerik is a great base, lying just 50km inland (west) of Lankaran. Overall, it was a great trip with terrific birding, sometimes in stunning landscapes, albeit with a lot of weather.

Logistics

Getting there Easy from Abu Dhabi as WizzAir fly daily. Other than a vaccination certificate, there were no Covid restrictions and Visas were easily available (cost 30 USD per person) on arrival at the airport; it is also possible to apply in advance online. Getting through the airport took an hour or so. Rates for Manat were much better at the airport on arrival in Baku than they were in Abu Dhabi; cashpoints were pretty widespread but we only used one or two as cards were widely accepted.

Getting around Also easy, as self-drive is now widely available in Azerbaijan. A few international companies have desks at arrivals; we used the local company VIP Cars (email support@vipcars.com) which worked out well – they met us within five minutes of arriving and there was no messing around once we met up on return. A UK driving license (or, I think, any in the Latin alphabet) was fine. Deposit was paid in cash (200 Manat) and returned, minus a small cleaning fee, on return. Baku has a lot of heavy traffic, but, once out of there, the driving is mostly easy enough although, given local proclivities, close attention needs to be paid to other drivers and what they do or don't attempt. The highway south from Baku is very fast and wide open but the road north deteriorates for the last 40km or so on the approach to Gilazi and beyond (i.e. just south of Besh Barmag) – it was down to both lanes on one carriageway for quite a lot, with a lot of heavy lorries, dust and potholes. Other than that, road quality was fine and, although we saw

a lot of traffic police, none of them bothered us. Navigating was easy using maps.me; we didn't bother with a local sim and pretty much everywhere we stayed had wifi. Note that away from Baku very few people spoke more than the most basic English, or less than that.

Accommodation

- **Besh Barmag area** – not easy to find. We tried **Alik's Guest House**, which is up the hill in Khivu and on the north edge of the city centre Heydar Park (c45km from the bottleneck watchpoint) and which was on www.booking.com as of October 2022 but, seemingly, not at the time of writing. It was basic but ok. Note that Khivu, at least on a cold, misty Sunday evening in October was totally devoid of shops or restaurants, so bring supplies. Whilst fairly well kitted out, there was little in the way of utensils, despite a decent cooker, fridge, kettle etc. The owner is based in Baku and the guest house is not marked, nor on maps.me – in fact even the immediate neighbours didn't know it existed – but once we arrived a call got us sorted in about 10 mins, including the loan of some utensils. This would be a good place to visit Altighaj National Park, which we intended to, but on the afternoon we had set aside for that there was very dense mist that was clearly in for the day, so we descended to the Caspian instead, having seen pretty much none of the local area. Another Besh Barmag option is the guest house in Zarat, used by the bottleneck count team, and less than 10 mins from the counting spot. We stayed our second night here, having only found this place and got it arranged a week before. There is a large communal kitchen; facilities are good and we got a very warm welcome and a lot of help from the small count team, which added a lot to the experience. The guesthouse is not bookable or even findable online (but is correctly pinned on maps.me); email info@birdingazerbaijan.com to book.
- **Lankaran** – **Khan Lankaran Hotel**. Great place, on the edge of town with a very nice local restaurant right alongside and more character than all the hotels in the UAE combined (not saying much... but this is a special place). Highly recommended.
- **Larik** – **Buta Hotel**. Don't be put off by the rather stale-smelling tea house underneath; the three rooms at the top of the building are really great and comfortable. As at Khivu, restaurants were not too obvious but there were small shops selling food on the same street and a small home bakery doing great bread just behind the building the next morning (follow your nose from the hotel steps). Note that the location of this hotel on Maps.me is a good 200m out; the establishment has a sign on the roof, but it is not all that obvious from the road. The correct location is, as far as I can work out, at about [38.774605, 48.415865](#); note that www.booking.com seem to have it incorrect as well. We had to ask passing policeman who quickly showed us.
- **Baku** – **Riviera Hotel**, about 1.5km walk from the old centre along the waterfront. Handy place if coming from the south as you avoid the heavy traffic and rather narrow and potentially very confusing streets of the city centre. Good views over bay, including a low island holding hundreds of gulls of three species. Most of Baku's sights are walkable from here, and there is parking; the airport was a 25min drive away (at least early on a Saturday morning).

Other stuff In contrast to our 2018 trip, some proper weather was gear needed - we saw a lot of cloud, often quite low and thick. Heavy rain on our second day hit most of the country; this and moderate tail winds (the predominant direction) somewhat slowed down migration at the bottleneck or, at least, made it difficult to keep track of what was going; many but by no means all flocks were either high or distant, passing on a rather broad front. Otherwise, we had a lot of hazy high cloud and fairly mild temperatures but a storm was brewing on our last evening in Baku, with a really cold northerly wind and overnight rain

continuing the next day. A scope is essential for pretty much everywhere along the Caspian, but optional around Lerik. Due to the cloudy conditions and wind I used neither my camera nor sound recording gear as much as usual. All data recorded is on eBird; a summary trip report, with species and checklists separately sortable, is available at [this link](#). A small number of recordings made are deposited [here](#). See the Besh Barmag data in its entirety at [this link](#); searchable by day, year and summarized etc.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the all the counters and the Birding Azerbaijan team at Besh Barmag for a lot of help there and ad-hoc advice for other sites. In particular, Elvin (the 2022 count coordinator) was great and Max and Michel also provided a lot of fascinating information. Thanks also to Kai who responded promptly to emails.

Birding sites

1. Absheron National Park

The Caspian Sea's very own Spurn peninsula; looking very tempting from a map and easily reached by following lots of signs, in 30-40mins from the airport. Unlike most of the Caspian littoral in the vicinity of Baku and to the north, the landscape has not been trashed here and this is a remote, barren area of sparse bushy scrub and grass amidst low sand dunes, forming a perfect leading line for species migrating south in autumn. Although cover is limited, there are extensive mudflats on the west side and a low island and lagoon on the east. Entry cost was 5 Manat (total). It was a great area for a few hours of exploring, including a long walk to the tip. **Caspian Gulls** were everywhere, with a few **Pallas's** soon appearing, as did **Sandwich Tern**, whilst the **Dunlin** flocks produced quite a few **Sanderling** and **Grey Plover** (neither too scarce on the Caspian apparently) but also two **Red Knot** (which definitely are). Active migration included a flyby male **Pallid Harrier** and a scattering of passerines in the dunes; mainly **Chiffchaffs** but also **Northern Wheatear**; in addition there were singles of **Common Quail** and **Short-eared Owl**. A **Rufous Turtle Dove** was flushed; there is apparently only one well-documented report of this species in Azerbaijan (although, without photos, this one is not too well documented either...). Other notables included a **Eurasian Spoonbill**, **Peregrine**, **White-tailed Eagle** and masses of **Red-veined Darters**.



2. Besh Barmag bottleneck

This superlative watchpoint on a dune ridge overlooking the Caspian shores and a little to the north of the actual Besh Barmag montane spur, where the Greater Caucasus almost reach the Caspian Shore had been moved slightly relative to its position during our 2018 visit; as of autumn 2022, the eBird pin is at [41.004795, 49.219040](#). There is now a thrown together but moderately comfortable watchpoint with some welcome shelter and chairs. A new highway is being put in that will ultimately link Baku with the Russian border; this was tarred but otherwise far from complete in October 2022; it is not right alongside the watchpoint but passes rather close and watches in the future may no longer be the same peaceful experience if traffic jams of large trucks start to build up, or even if they don't. Two mornings were spent observing the migration; the first was cloudy and overcast but dry (tops of hills to west mostly obscure) and there was plenty of passage (compared to most watchpoints but not overwhelming by local standards). The next day saw lower cloud and much moderate rain in a cold, raw northerly wind and this slowed things down significantly; there was still plenty to see but viewing was a lot less pleasant. Under such conditions Besh Barmag is not easy birding, with a lot of distant scope work and careful listening by ear required. However, the company and atmosphere amongst the count team was great.

During our short stay, the main species moving were hundreds of **larks (Calandra and Sky)**, **Eurasian Starling** and **Rooks** and, mostly far out over the Caspian (given the lack of onshore elements in the wind), hundreds of **dabbling ducks** and **Great Cormorants** in long, stringy lines. Small passerines were rather intermittent but for **White Wagtails**, however variety was quite good and included **Hawfinch**, **Common Rosefinch** and **Red-throated Pipit**. Less frequent sights included a group of 33 **Eurasian Spoonbill**, nearly 100 **Ruddy Shelducks** and, right at the end of the second morning, a high-flying **Great Bittern**. On the second day the rain grounded passerines in the dunes, with bedraggled but very tame **Chiffchaffs**, **Common Redstarts** and **Northern Wheatear** close at hand.

Raptors were sparse (a good passage of Steppe Eagles had been noted the day before we arrived and, again, once the rain cleared in the afternoon the second day) save for **falcons** (four species, the only **kestrel** being a male **Lesser**), **Long-legged Buzzard** and a drizzling of **Hen** and **Pallid Harriers** passing close by. Plenty of **Caspian Gulls** and the odd **Pallas's Gull** and **White-tailed Eagle** were also hanging around the area.

3. Cape Gilazi

This is another lonely, barren watchpoint on a low point that juts out into the Caspian, not far to the south of Besh Barmag. As in 2018, we had a nice time, seeing a lot more shorebirds than at Besh Barmag whilst, projecting rather further out, the migrating ducks and cormorants are much closer and were passing in quite good numbers. **Little Gulls** and **Sandwich Terns** were very numerous and feeding flocks drew in four **Arctic Skuas**, one memorably moving past high over the beach alongside a **Marsh Harrier**. Passerine migration was obvious too, even in



the late afternoon, with **Skylark** flocks racing past all the time, and large flocks of **Corn Buntings** on the roadside wires. Cape Gilazi would presumably be a good place for morning migration watches, neatly intercepting the large numbers of birds that track along the coast or just offshore. Single **Great Grey Shrike** (as 2018) and **Siberian Stonechat** were the other main finds.

4. Little Kizil Agach bay and adjacent Caspian Shores

This rather mouth-watering area was visited on two mornings, both times at dawn from the hotel in Lankaran, c12km south. This is a vast and, perhaps, mostly inaccessible area but the southern causeway starting at about [38.884560, 48.807800](#) provides a good place to start to sample it from. Frequent scans from here on either side provided plenty of waterbirds, and, one morning, I proceeded onto the shores of the Caspian proper, reaching about as far as [38.897823, 48.901676](#). Waterfowl and shorebirds were abundant, as were small migrants in the shoreside scrub and, with a near-continuous stream of **larks, sparrows**, the odd **Hobby, Merlin** and **Red-throated Pipit** amongst other visible migrants high overhead, this was an exciting place to birdwatch. Highlights over two mornings included up to 100 **Pygmy Cormorants** (70 in one flock), **Great Spotted** and **White-tailed Eagles** seen in quick succession, **Water Rails** heard calling and **Spotted Crake** seen very closely on the second morning. There were quite a lot of waders, led by 85 **Wood Sandpipers** (one flock of 75!) but also 30 **Pied Avocet** and **Eurasian Oystercatcher**, masses of **Marsh Harriers** leaving roost before sunrise, great close-ups of both **Cetti's Warblers** (common on voice) and two **Moustached Warblers**, blatantly in the scope for ages on the second morning.



5. Lerik area

This area is doubtless of much greater interest from spring to summer when the combination of breeding species assemblage and, doubtlessly, lots of migrants, must make a for a heady mix. Birding is a lot quieter in October but we had a nice 1½ autumn days here with some interesting species, although we failed to find Caspian Tit, despite a four hour search on the hill above Mastail.

There are lots of rolling hills of green fields, ploughed farmland and woodland patches in the immediate environs of Lerik and on the road to the start of Lerik Canyon; these yielded just a few species but included **Long-legged Buzzard**.

5A - Mastail area

About six hours were devoted to this area, accessed by driving out Lerik on the Mastail road. The total distance was c5km but after c2.5km the road became rather steep and the graded track became decidedly muddy so we parked at about [38.783971, 48.398510](#) and walked the rest. Walking to the village was fine but getting the final c1km from the village up hill to the scrubby woodland on the ridge behind (at about [38.791063, 48.375491](#)) was tricky; it was ankle-deep mud for a lot of the way on the track, although on the descent we simply navigated through some fields which were in a much better condition, although this necessitated jumping the odd fence and then, finally, walking through a friendly local's garden. Up on the ridge, with the mud below us, it became pretty pleasant, with blue skies and a bit of a headwind causing the migrant finches to fly low to get through the shallow pass. Despite a very through mash about all along the ridge and down the other side on a pleasant (i.e. mud-free) track into some decent woodland no Caspian Tits were located but, with persistence, bird variety and numbers were rather good. Active migration, casually on view much of the time, was memorable, led by many hundreds, probably thousands, of **Chaffinches** streaming over (at the rate of up to 70 per five-minute slot), along with a scattering of other **finches**, **White Wagtails**, a **Woodlark**, 110 **Stock Doves** in three groups and even 55 (presumably rather late) **Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters**. Stuff grounded on the more open grassland ridges included **Water Pipits**, **Spanish Sparrow** and a nice **Great Grey Shrike**, soon followed by a skulking **Menetries's Warbler** in some brambles. A reasonable selection of common woodland birds were about, including single **Common Pheasant**, the obscure local subspecies of **Dunnock** and **Rock Bunting**.

5B - Zuvand area, including Lerik Canyon

Although the Mastail area is good and requires plenty of time, we were lucky to get back to the car with a bit of time to spare, following a lift from a friendly farmer who wouldn't take no for an answer. We then had time to drive back through Lerik and out the other side to Lerik Canyon and, eventually, right through the dry, arid Zuvand and hence not at all far from the Iranian border. This was a dramatic landscape and in spring would be worth at least two day's birding or more; as it was we only had a short look on a late autumn afternoon. It was pretty hard to line up maps.me with hotspot locations in eBird (trying the afternoon before, on arrival in Lerik, had not been successful and we had ended up in some very narrow farm tracks). However, one important clue that you are on the correct route is that it is fully tarred all the way and an easy drive. Once at Lerik Canyon, which starts at about [38.726691, 48.432656](#), you simply stay on the road. The canyon was spectacular but very quiet for birds on a few short stops (**Green Woodpecker** appeared and a few common species) and we soon ascended up and eventually out onto the Zuvand, a vast area of arid, rocky grassland and rolling hills, punctuated by small valleys contain open groves of tall poplar trees. Checking a couple of these yielded a few **Syrian Woodpeckers** and **Chiffchaffs**, with **Red-breasted Flycatcher** tracked down and some **Corn Buntings** flying to roost. So not loads in terms of birds, but a very memorable area to visit. If you are in Azerbaijan in spring, you'd be nuts not to give this place a go.

5C - Tebassum resort

Easily accessed and about half-way between Lankaran and Lerik, on a short track south of the main road at about [38.740732, 48.611649](#). From a small riverside restaurant, a vehicle track goes steeply uphill from the river and is easily followed on foot, through some lovely lush broadleaved Caucasian forest. A somewhat cloudy early afternoon walk was pretty autumnal and rather quite birdwise but interesting

local subspecies of **Coal** (*P a phaeonotus*) and **Long-tailed Tits** (*A c alpinus*) were easily seen, with a few flyover **Hawfinches** plus **Siskin** and **Green Woodpecker** (heard only) also in the mix.

6. Shirvan National Park

As in 2018, this proved a great place to visit, a vast semi-desert landscape with large lakes inland from the Caspian Sea. It is clearly signed from the main highway at with the visitor centre located at [39.751870, 49.143443](#); pay at the gate and then follow the graded (sometimes potholed) track towards 'Flamingo Lake'. At least without a lot of time, only a small portion of the park is accessible; we as last time we stuck to the (main) track down to the watchpoint on the rooftop of a small building and, a short distance from there, the boardwalk through the reeds to the well-made screen on the lakeside. No Little Bustards showed up this time, unlike 2018, but of 600 ducks, mainly **Eurasian Teal**, 10 were **Marbled Duck**, **Grey-headed Swamphen** and **Black Francolin** were seen and out of 15 species of wader, an outrageous 150 (plus) **Spotted Redshank** included a dense swarm of 100 following feeding egrets. In addition, **Dalmatian Pelican** dropped in and groups of migrant **Stock Doves** whipped by amidst a scattering of other migrants. Two **Lesser Kestrel** were found on the wires. **Goitered Gazelles** were, of course, impossible to miss and we had two sightings of **Wild Boar**.



7. Baku

To be honest Baku isn't the greatest of birding cities, by any stretch, but the birdiest place locally was probably the flat rocky island in the bay below the hotel (island at [40.352570, 49.841427](#)) – on a wild, windy late afternoon this had 100 **Mediterranean** and 70 **Caspian Gulls**

sheltering, all visible from the room with a scope.