

# On the status and distribution of Thrush Nightingale *Luscinia luscinia* and Common Nightingale *L. megarhynchos* in Armenia

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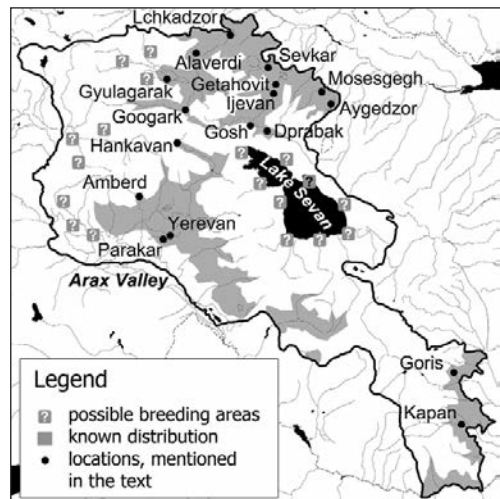
## INTRODUCTION

In the key references on the avifauna of the Western Palearctic and former Soviet Union, the breeding distributions of Common *Luscinia megarhynchos* and Thrush Nightingales *L. luscinia* in the Transcaucasus (Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan) are presented inconsistently, especially for the latter species. These sources disagree on the status of Thrush Nightingale in the area, thus Vaurie (1959), Cramp (1988) and Snow & Perrins (1998) considered it breeding in the Transcaucasus, while Dementiev & Gladkov (1954), Sibley & Monroe (1990) and Stepanyan (2003) do not. Its distribution in del Hoyo *et al* (2005) is mapped according to the latter view, but they note the species' presence in Armenia during the breeding season. Several other publications consider that the southern limit of Thrush Nightingale's Caucasian breeding range is in the northern foothills of the Greater Caucasus mountains (Russian Federation), while the Transcaucasus is inhabited solely by Common Nightingale (Gladkov *et al* 1964, Flint *et al* 1967, Ivanov & Stegmann 1978, Vtorov & Drozdov 1980).

Thrush Nightingale in Azerbaijan was classified as 'accidental' by Patrikeev (2004). The author accepted that the species had possibly nested in the past and referred to old summer records by GI Radde from the Karayasi forest in the Kura–Aras (Arax) lowlands, but Patrikeev found only Common Nightingale there in the late 1980s. Other earlier observers mentioned only the latter species for Azerbaijan in the breeding season. In Nagorno Karabagh, Common Nightingale was found by KA Satunin on 24 May 1912 near Magavuz village (Terter dis-



**Plate 1.** Common Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos* performing full territorial song, Vorotan river gorge, c15 km SSW of Goris town, Syunik province, Armenia, 12 May 2005. © Vasil Ananian



**Figure 1.** Distribution of Common Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos* in Armenia and locations mentioned in the text. © Vasil Ananian

**Table 1.** Specimens of Thrush Nightingale *Luscinia luscinia* from Armenia held at the Institute of Zoology of Armenia, Yerevan<sup>1</sup>

Date	Sex	Location	Specimen Collector(s)	Lyaister & Sosnin (1942)
27 April 1937	♂	Yerevan	Sosnin	not mentioned
27 April 1937	♀	Yerevan	Sosnin	not mentioned
03 May 1929	♂	Yerevan	Sosnin & Vorobiev	
08 May 1948	♂	Yerevan	Manukyan & Dahl	
09 May 1928	♀	Yerevan	Sosnin & Stegmann	
10 May 1925	♂	Parakar	Sosnin & Vorobiev	
10 May 1925	♂	Parakar	Sosnin & Vorobiev	
10 May 1925	?	Parakar	Sosnin & Vorobiev	
12 August 1930	♂	Googark <sup>2</sup>	Sosnin	noted as "1939"
12 August 1939	♂	Googark <sup>2</sup>	Sosnin	
13 August 1938	♀	Getahovit <sup>2</sup>	Sosnin	noted as "sex?"
17 August 1930	♂	Hankavan <sup>2</sup>	Sosnin	noted as "July"
21 August 1937	♂	Alaverdi	Sosnin	noted as "July", "♀"
29 August 1938	? <sup>3</sup>	Dprabak <sup>2</sup>	Sosnin	
29 August 1939	♂	Gyulagarak	Sosnin	noted as "♀"
03 September 1938	?	Gosh <sup>2</sup>	Sosnin	noted as "♂"
05 September 1937	♂	Lchkadzor	Sosnin	not mentioned

<sup>1</sup>The first four columns are reproduced from the species' datasheet in *Birds of Armenia (BOA) Project* archives, American University of Armenia, Yerevan.

<sup>2</sup> Place name from specimen label updated.

<sup>3</sup>Possibly male, see text.

trict) and 'many singing' was reported by EV Erikson in 1906 near Vank village, Khojavend district (Lyaister & Sosnin 1942). Both nightingale species are listed as breeding in Georgia (GCCW 2003). Only Common Nightingale is known to breed in Turkey and Iran (Roselaar 1995, Scott & Adhami 2006, Kirwan *et al* 2008).

The present paper reviews the Armenian literature, including key publications on the country's avifauna (Lyaister & Sosnin 1942, Dahl 1954, Adamian & Klem 1999), and summarizes recent observations 1999–2008.

## THRUSH NIGHTINGALE IN ARMENIA: THE LITERATURE

Lyaister & Sosnin (1942), Dahl & Sosnin (1947) and Dahl (1954) all list Thrush Nightingale as breeding in Armenia. In the latter work, the author stated that Thrush Nightingale breeds in the northern and northeastern wooded regions of the country and is a common passage migrant in the Arax valley. This conclusion was based on the 17 specimens available from Armenia (Table 1) and additional observations by GV Sosnin as reported in Lyaister & Sosnin (1942): "8 May 1933, strong passage, Yerevan", "13 August 1938, two observed with one collected, Getahovit village", "27 August–1 September 1938, creaking at dawn with one male very quietly emitting only incomplete units of song at sunset on 29 August, Dprabak village", "27 April–8 May 1940, several singing in thickets of dog rose, Kapan town, not reported here before 27 April". In addition, a single specimen was collected in 1948 (Table 1, Dahl 1948a, 1948b, 1953).

Adamian & Klem (1999), as in previous Armenian publications, stated Thrush Nightingale to be an uncommon breeding species in Armenia. All encounters with nightingale species listed in Adamian & Klem (1999), 1963–1994 inclusive, came from the same observer and comprise 11 records of Thrush Nightingale (68 individuals in total) and an

observation of a single Common Nightingale. One of these is an extraordinary claim, of 28 Thrush Nightingales along a 5 km transect in Yerevan on 16 June 1989. These pre-1995 reports appear doubtful in view of recent data. In Table 2, only the 1995 sightings presented in Adamian & Klem (1999), from a team of observers, are summarized.

## COMMON NIGHTINGALE IN ARMENIA: THE LITERATURE

This species was reported from Armenia for the first time by Lyaister & Sosnin (1942), who obtained six specimens: two late April specimens from the Arax valley and Yerevan, and two adult males and two juveniles shot 6–8 July 1938 near Mosesgegh village, NE Armenia. These comprise all specimens of this species held at the Institute of Zoology, Yerevan. The authors list observations by GV Sosnin of Common Nightingale from Mosesgegh village (“several singing in orchards on 6–9 July 1938, one collected”, “fledglings with incompletely grown rectrices on 7–9 July 1938”) and Aygedzor village in the same general area (“very common in orchards near a river, males actively singing on 23 June 1938”, “in a wooded gully on 2 July 1938”). Dahl (1954) concluded, apparently on the basis of this evidence alone, that the Common Nightingale is found on migration in the Arax valley, but breeds only in the wooded areas of northeastern Armenia.

The next reports of Common Nightingale available from Armenia are for 1995 (Table 2), with the exception of a single individual claimed in 1993 (Adamian & Klem 1999). These authors considered Common Nightingale to be a rare breeding species in Armenia and stated that it “breeds at higher elevations, occurring in lowlands during migration”. This conflicts with most of the locations listed under the 1995 breeding claims for the species (Adamian & Klem 1999, Table 2), as well as with recent data.

## RECENT OBSERVATIONS

Since 1999 there have been numerous and regular field visits throughout Armenia, particularly during the breeding season and completely covering the country’s range of biomes and elevations. Teams of observers on many of the late spring/mid-summer trips have involved skilled expatriate birders. Apart from personal experience, identification of nightingales was aided with the use of standard field guides and sound recordings (Roché 1990, Jonsson 1992, Harris *et al* 1996, Beaman & Madge 1998, Mullarney *et al* 1999, Roché & Chevereau 2002, Schulze 2004) and detailed comparisons of vocalizations of the two species in Cramp (1988) and Simkin (1990).

These surveys produced two observations of Thrush Nightingale: two individuals seen near Dilijan town on 6 May 2007 (Roy Beddard *et al*), and two together were seen and heard

**Table 2.** Summary of sightings of nightingales *Luscinia* spp in Armenia in 1995, based on Adamian & Klem (1999). Reports were not sorted by season in that publication.

Species	Spring	Summer	Autumn	Notes on breeding
Thrush Nightingale <i>L. luscinia</i>	9 Mar–8 May: 5 reports of 11 birds (1–5 birds/report).	21 Jun–23 Jul: 7 reports of 19 birds (1–2 birds/report, 8 seen 21 Jun).	2 Aug–25 Sep; 20–24 reports of 39–43 birds (1–7 birds/report)	9 Mar, incomplete songs (c15 km SE of Kapan); 27 Apr, song of a male (c12 km E of Ijevan); 21 Jun, at least 8 singing males (Yerevan).
Common Nightingale <i>L. megarhynchos</i>	18 May–21 May: 2 reports of 2 birds (1 bird/report).	12 Jun–20 Jul: 10–11 reports of 19–21 birds (1–4 birds/report).	8 Aug–15 Sep: 6 reports of 6 birds (1 bird/report).	21 May, 12–13 Jun, 26–27 Jun: singing males (Kapan, Amberd and Sevkar); 25 Jun, a bird carrying food (Ijevan); 14 Jul, a pair with 2 young (Kapan)

creaking, one of which was quietly emitting fragments of song, near Norashen village, Lake Sevan, on 12 May 2008 (VA pers obs).

In contrast, Common Nightingale was found breeding in good numbers in all appropriate habitats over a large part of N, NE, C and S Armenia (Plate 1). This was from the lowest elevation in the country (c370 m) up to c2000 m asl, reaching highest densities in areas up to c1500 m asl. In the breeding season it is invariably observed and heard in the basins and valleys of the main Armenian rivers and their tributaries: Arax, Debed, Aghstev, Kasakh, Marmarik, Hrazdan, Azat, Vedi, Arpa, Vorotan, Goris, Voghji and Meghri (Figure 1). A similar abundance in the breeding season was observed in southwestern Azerbaijan, at various locations in Jabrayil, Fizuli, Qubadli and Zangilan districts (VA pers obs 1996–1998, 2007). Only Common Nightingale was found breeding in and around Yerevan (all city parks and Hrazdan river gorge within the city) and Kapan town (*contra* Adamian & Klem 1999), being very common at these locations.

## DISCUSSION

By the mid-1950s there appeared to be no reliable evidence to suggest that Thrush Nightingale had bred in Armenia. Thus, Dementiev & Gladkov (1954) correctly attributed all Armenian records to migrants, unlike Cramp (1988), who cited Lyaister & Sosnin (1942) amongst others and possibly was additionally misled by the erroneous dates in the latter publication with regard to specimens from Hankavan and Alaverdi (Table 1). Adamian & Klem (1999) are also unconvincing in claiming Thrush Nightingale as breeding in the country. They listed summer 1995 observations (Table 2), but none of these necessarily indicate breeding. These latter observations come from locations and areas currently known to be inhabited by Common Nightingale and require confirmation. Overall, all of the available Thrush Nightingale records from Armenia are better explained as due to migration and the migratory habits of this species. These include passage dates in the Caucasus area, song during migration at stopover sites, immature non-breeding individuals overwintering and first singing attempts of young birds in August (Dementiev & Gladkov 1954, Cramp 1988). The incorrect attribution of the species as a breeding bird of Armenia by local authors (Lyaister & Sosnin 1942, Dahl 1954, Adamian & Klem 1997, 1999) is concurrent with an underestimation of the distribution and abundance of Common Nightingale in the country. These views have, unfortunately, been accepted by several western publications and are reflected in incorrect mapping (Cramp 1988, Snow & Perrins 1998, Beaman & Madge 1998, Mullarney *et al* 1999). It, however, remains unclear how the Common Nightingale was overlooked and under recorded for years by the dedicated field ornithologist GV Sosnin, as the species' natural breeding habitats in the country seem hardly to have altered since the early 1920s.

Sight identification of nightingales is normally far from straightforward and requires ideal viewing conditions. The *africana* race of Common Nightingale, inhabiting the Transcaucasus, is not well represented in field guides. As was shown by Loskot (1981), in contrast to previous claims, *africana* in breeding plumage is the darkest of all races, less rufous above and has colder and browner upperparts, uppertail coverts and rectrices. It is thus more similar to Thrush Nightingale than *eg* nominate *megarhynchos*. The diffuse breast band in *africana* is pronounced and brownish-grey (Harris *et al* 1996, VA pers obs), rather than the sandy-buff of nominate *megarhynchos* (Mullarney *et al* 1999). In the breeding season most nightingales are identified by song, rather than sight. Some individuals of Common Nightingale may sound unusual in emitting a richer song with repetitive delivery and a slower, more measured overall pace, making it more suggestive of Thrush Nightingale (Cramp 1988, Simkin 1990, VA pers obs). Initially, during our earlier surveys

in 2000, such individuals caused the misidentification of several birds near Goris, southern Armenia (Busuttill 2000). This was influenced by the misjudgment of field characters of *africana* and erroneous published data regarding nightingale distribution in Armenia. Subsequent awareness of this confusion and the discovery of Common Nightingale, not Thrush Nightingale, breeding in Yerevan have led to the present revision of the status of the two species in the country.

In conclusion, Thrush Nightingale is not known to breed in Armenia and its status should be reclassified as an “uncommon spring and autumn passage migrant”. Breeding by the species in Armenia is presumably not impossible, but there is no adequate substantiating data. The Common Nightingale is, in fact, a common and widely distributed breeder in Armenia. The proposed distribution of the species in the country, based on proven records and recent observations 1999–2008, is sketched in Figure 1.

The Common Nightingale’s habitats in Armenia are not very different from those throughout its European and Mediterranean range (Cramp 1988). In woodlands, it inhabits edges of clearings with undergrowth and damp soil, more usually near some water and in similar conditions in the parks of Yerevan and other large towns, also in orchards with bushes sited on slopes and at the bottom of river valleys in and around human habitation. It also occupies gallery woodlands with thickets along rivers in valleys and lower steep slopes of deep rocky gorges overgrown with dense shrub, as well as shady gullies and orchards with rivulets and patches of dense bush cover in the arid areas of southern Armenia.

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