

The rediscovery of breeding Shikras *Accipiter badius* in the Western Palearctic

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In spring/summer 2008 we spent several months doing fieldwork in Azerbaijan, where we mainly worked in the Talish mountains in the southernmost region of the country (Figure 1). In May, Dr Hartmut EJ Müller was visiting the nearby Länkärän lowlands, when he stopped at a roadside tea house a few kilometres south of the city of Masalli. He noticed an *Accipiter* alarm-calling with a double call and was sure that this was not a European Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*, which produces a series of single calls (Svenson *et al* 1999). His first thought was that it might have been a Levant Sparrowhawk *Accipiter brevipes*. He phoned us immediately and asked us to have a closer look. As we were high up in the mountains at this time we decided to visit the site the following day aware that there was a third species of sparrowhawk described from the southern lowlands of Azerbaijan.

On 19 May, we located the described spot and after a few minutes we recognized a pair of sparrowhawks flying high above us and disappearing in the direction of an afforestation a few kilometres away. We were not sure about identity, but noticed very light colouration of the smaller, male, bird. We walked further along the trees beside the road and found a small nest, the size of a crow's, in the crown of an oak. At first no bird could be seen in the nest but suddenly a female *Accipiter* flew off, left the trees and was now visible in flight at close range. After a few minutes a male occurred and both were now observed under excellent conditions and digital photos were taken (Plate 1). We were immediately able to identify them as Shikras *Accipiter badius* and confirm the first breeding record of this species in Azerbaijan and the Western Palearctic for many decades.

The breeding site was north of Cumbatshi directly by the main Baku–Astara road, between the city of Masalli and the town of Liman to the south. South of Masalli, this road is regularly bordered with afforestations of *Quercus castaneifolia*. These plantations consist of trees with a height of 15–20 m and were planted widely in the region in Soviet times.



Figure 1. Map of southernmost Azerbaijan showing Shikra *Accipiter badius* breeding evidence locations: 1, breeding pair near Cumbatshi; 2, breeding pair in Moscow forest near Avrorä; 3, territory found south of Länkärän; 4–7, territories found near Masalli; 8, breeding pair at the Länkärän river.



Plate 1. Male Shikra *Accipiter badius* (note the yellow eye which probably indicates a 2nd-year bird), Cumbatshi, Azerbaijan, 19 May 2008. © Kai Gauger



Plate 2. Shikra *Accipiter badius* nest in an oak afforestation near Cumbatshi, Azerbaijan, 20 June 2008. © Kai Gauger



Plate 3. A clearing in the Moscow forest, where fledged young Shikras *Accipiter badius* were seen, Avrora, Azerbaijan, 6 June 2008. © Michael Heiss

They act as windbreaks and are nowadays used for fuel-wood logging as well. Apart from the Moscow forest (see below), small remnants of floodplain forest and some old wooded cemeteries, these are the only forest-like structures in the southern lowland of Azerbaijan.

This Länkärän lowland is a 10–30 km wide north–south strip between the Talish mountains and the Caspian shore. It was formerly densely covered with broad-leaved forest and in recent times is intensively used for the rural economy with grain, potatoes, vegetables and fruits being cropped. The nest was regularly observed (Plate 2), but the last time a bird was seen on the nest was 20 June 2008. A reason for the abandonment of the nest might have been intense cultivation nearby, where an overgrown field was being prepared for production and some trees had been felled.

The next observation was on 28 May in the Moscow forest near Avrora village. This small wood is the only remaining piece of natural lowland forest in the region and part of the Hirkan national park (Plate 3). It consists of up to 35 m high *Populus*, *Acer* and *Alnus* trees. Here, a pair of Shikras defended their territory intensively against Hooded Crows *Corvus corone*, making typical alarm calls. This behaviour was also observed on 6 June at the same place, which indicated a nest somewhere at this site. A fledged juvenile bird was seen there by Christoph Völlm in mid July. Other alarm-calling and partly defending birds were observed at the following sites: one female in an oak plantation near the coast south of Länkärän city on 24 June, four territories with 5 individuals observed east of Masalli on 25 June and a pair with prey at the Länkärän river near Veladi village on 3 July (Plate 4).

According to Beaman & Madge (1998), Azerbaijan has the only area in the Western Palaearctic (*sensu* BWP) where the Shikra breeds. In fact, there are only one or perhaps two previous breeding records for the Western Palaearctic. The first record was in Azerbaijan in June 1933 when a nest was found near Länkärän (Cramp & Simmons 1980). On 19 May 1964 a nest with eggs of probably this species was found in Avrora (Patrikeev 2004). Gregory (2007) mentioned also a shot bird in May 1953 near Länkärän. Outside Azerbaijan, Shikras have only twice been seen in Europe (Gregory 2007). In Israel, one individual was ringed on 20 April 1987 (Shirihai 1996) and another individual was seen in November 2005. According to Gregory (2007), all the other 24 Western Palaearctic records have been from Kuwait.

NOTES ON FIELD IDENTIFICATION

The easiest way we found to detect and identify Shikras was their typical call. They are one of the noisiest birds of prey (Cramp & Simmons 1980). Their disyllabic ‘kee-vick kee-vick’ was loud enough to hear over long distances. Mostly, a bird was first seen after



Plate 4. A pair of Shikras *Accipiter badius* with prey in the riparian forest along the Länkärän river, Veladi, Azerbaijan, 3 July 2008. © Michael Heiss

searching for the caller in dense forest-like habitat. The call is distinct from that of *A.nisus* and *A.brevipes* and unmistakable.

In distant flight, this species was difficult to separate from these congeners and only securely at close range by their wing pattern and striking red/orange eyes.

DISCUSSION

Due to our limited data it is difficult to estimate the breeding population in Azerbaijan. Our observations were obtained during the course of other field work. An intense search for this species never took place. Therefore, we combined our knowledge of preferred habitats of the lowlands with recent satellite images.

We found and expect breeding Shikras to be only in the lowlands around Astara, Länkaran and Masalli with the city of Biläsuvar being the northern border. Further north the landscape becomes an increasingly treeless semi-desert. Further south, its distribution connects with its breeding range in northern Iran (del Hoyo *et al* 1994).

We expect the area occupied by Azerbaijan's breeding population of this species to be less than 2000 km². Shikras have a mean territory size of c1–2 km² per pair in West Africa (Cramp & Simmons 1980) and c1 pair per 100 km² in Asia (Ferguson-Lees & Christie 2001). The closest straight-line distance between two territories that we found was 1.9 km. Other distances below 10 km were 3.5, 4.5, 8.3 and, twice, 9 km. As the lowlands are not fully covered with optimal habitats, we expect there to be 50–150 breeding pairs of Shikra in southern Azerbaijan.

This number appears remarkably high given that only one or two breeding records are known from the past. We assume that Shikras have not expanded their breeding range, but have been overlooked. This reclusive species was, for us, only easy to recognize since we knew the typical loud call. Nevertheless, it was rather difficult to find their nests and separate them from those of crows. That 'strange *Accipiters*' occurred regularly in the past in Azerbaijan has been reported (*eg* Patrikeev 2004) but much confusion existed about their identity.

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