

Birding With a Helmet On

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I jumped into the truck with binoculars and bird book in hand. I was going for a quick drive looking for birds. I knew the local hotspots spots as I had been in the area before. I had driven the road several times before back in 2009, during my first tour as a civilian contractor supporting the war effort. The road was actually the base perimeter of Bagram Air Field in Afghanistan. During my 2009 four month tour I had seen 47 species of birds including some of my favorites such as Long Tailed Shrike, Hoopoe, and several different raptors including the Short Toed Snake Eagle. I was able to get some very close photos and looks at one of these magnificent birds due to the fact that three local Afghan falconers had caught one two days before my visit with them. The base hired these locals to help prevent bird strikes by aircraft coming to and taking off from the base. I find it ironic that the ancient craft that these men practiced every day was preventing millions of dollars of modern aircraft from being damaged or destroyed. One of the falconers was going to take the eagle back to his compound as a pet but not to train it to hunt. One of the falconers told me that this species does not respond well to that type of training.

But now I was transiting through Bagram to a base near the Pakistan border for my next tour. After a quick eighteen hours on the ground and a short flight I arrived to my new home for the next four months, or so I thought. Immediately upon exiting the plane I felt a significant rise in the temperature but also more green trees and bushes than I had seen at Bagram Air Field. It was May so the hot season was in full force. My initial feeling was hot but lush. This feeling was proven true when after getting settled in I took a walk around - with binoculars and bird book in hand, of course. I was immediately rewarded by a flash of bright blue and red near a water channel that ran through the base. I thought 'roller' but as the blur of color settled down and landed on a fence post, I was staring through my binoculars at not one but a pair of White Throated Kingfishers. As I continued around the perimeter I noticed lush green irrigated fields and orchards butting up to the base fence. There is even a major creek or small river lined with reeds that runs just off the fence. This place was not the Afghanistan I had experienced in 2009. That was brown and dry with an occasional small irrigated field. On my quick walk I had seen ten species of birds of which five were lifers that included my favorite bird of this part of the trip, the Black Drongo. Over the course of the next few days, my early mornings and early evenings were spent walking the perimeter. I saw nineteen different species with nine of them being lifers. What a start to a four month trip! The area and climate were going to be great for my bird list. But all good things come to an end, and these ended abruptly when my orders were changed. At six o'clock in the morning of my fifth day on the ground I was told to get on the next plane out to Bagram Air Field so that I could get on another plane to get to my next location. I was at Bagram before noon. My layover in Bagram ended up being two days but it was time well spent as I found a pair of Snow Pigeons playing in the breeze and a Wire Tailed Swallow swooping back and forth over the base fence.

My new destination was to be on the other side of the country. I was to land at Camp Bastion/Camp Leatherneck and then catch the next thing out to my next new home. But sometimes intentions and schedules don't match up so I spent six days at Camp Leatherneck waiting for my next flight. Birding

was a bit sparse as there is not much life in that part of Afghanistan but I did find more birds in one day than a friend of mine had seen during three tours at Camp Leatherneck. It just goes to show if you look hard enough, you may get lucky.

After nearly a week of waiting, I finally made my way to my new location. Ironically, I took an Osprey to my destination. The Osprey is one of the newer airframes in the military. It is a plane that lands like a helicopter, or a helicopter that flies like a plane. Regardless, it was a first for me. To some people quiet desolate places are not good, but I immediately liked my new spot upon exiting the Osprey. Yes, it was hot and dry, as it was now June in south western Afghanistan, but because the base was so well laid out and open I never felt crowded. For me as a birder, the jewel of this place was the gray water pond where the base waste water was deposited was just off the perimeter. Any place that has a regular occurrence of water, especially in the desert, will attract wildlife, especially birds. Jackpot!! Four months here will be easy. Another bonus is that my tent is only a twenty minute walk away. My happy discovery makes my twelve plus hour workdays easier since I have a great opportunity to see birds that I have not seen before. I walk out to the pond three to four mornings and at least one evening a week just to see what may be out there. So far my favorite birds have been the three species of Sandgrouse (pin-tailed, crowned, and black-bellied). I have learned the difference in their calls and incoming flight patterns enough to know which one is coming in for a drink even before I use my binoculars. Other favorite visitors at Poo Pond (my local name for it is catching on even for the non-birders), have been three Gray Herons, a Slender Billed Gull, a pair of Common Redshanks, and several Citrine Wagtails. During my observations, I have been given some stark reminders of where I am. More than once, I have seen plumes of black smoke to the west that were evidence of supply trucks that had been attacked and were burning. One morning, I heard a large explosion several kilometers away that turned out to be an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) blowing up a civilian trucking company vehicle on one of the nearby highways. So the birding may be good, but my eyes are always on the next ridge.

With September fast approaching I am looking forward to a few things. The migration will be well on its way by then, so there is no telling what different birds I will see adding to the sixty on the trip list with thirty five of them being lifers. But the main thing that I am looking forward to is getting back to my family in North Carolina and being with them.

As my time to go back to the States and my family gets nearer, I often reflect on the unique opportunity I have had. Unfortunately, due to the war and local conditions, not many people have ever had the opportunity to spend time birding in Afghanistan. It is a shame that more people do not get a chance to travel to Afghanistan because it has such diverse environments and 499 bird species partly due to the fact it is a major thoroughfare for migration. I feel fortunate to have been able to have spent collectively over eight months in country with chances to observe and document several species, many for the first time for me. The work that is being done over here is important and lots of sacrifices have been made and I am proud to be part of it. I am just fortunate to be able to find some enjoyment and distraction in the form of birding. When I leave this place I will be packing my binoculars and bird book for the trip but I will also be carried back some interesting war stories and bird memories to share.

Afghanistan Bird List

21 May – 11 Sept 2011

Bagram AF: 21 May 2011

- Common Myna
- Magpie
- House Sparrow

Jalalabad AF: 22 May 2011

- Common Myna
- Rufous Tailed Robin
- House Sparrow
- White Eared Bulbul
- Pied Bushchat
- Laughing Dove
- Common Babbler
- Eurasian Tree Sparrow
- Black Drongo
- White Throated Kingfisher

Jalalabad AF: 23 May 2011

- Common Myna
- Laughing Dove
- House Sparrow
- Pied Bushchat
- Bay Backed Shrike
- Common Babbler
- Eurasian Tree Sparrow
- White Eared Bulbul
- Barn Swallow

Jalalabad AF: 24 May 2011

- Common Myna
- Laughing Dove
- House Sparrow
- Pied Wheatear
- Pied Bushchat
- Black Drongo
- Common Babbler
- Graceful Prinia
- Eurasian Tree Sparrow
- Variable Wheatear
- White Eared Bulbul

Jalalabad AF: 25 May 2011

- Common Myna
- Laughing Dove
- Variable Wheatear
- Pied Bushchat
- House Sparrow
- Eurasian Tree Sparrow
- Common Babbler

Bagram AF: 28 May 2011

- Common Myna
- Barn Swallow
- European Skylark
- Maypie
- Wire Tailed Swallow
- Rock Dove
- Eurasian Tree Sparrow
- House Sparrow

Bagram AF: 29 May 2011

- Common Myna
- House Sparrow
- Magpie
- Snow Pigeon
- Eurasian Tree Sparrow

Camp Leatherneck AF: 31 May 2011

- Crested Lark

Camp Leatherneck AF: 1 Jun 2011

- Eurasian Tree Sparrow - Rock Dove - Laughing Dove

Camp Leatherneck AF: 2 Jun 2011

- Eurasian Tree Sparrow - House Sparrow - Laughing Dove
- Crested Lark - Rock Dove

Camp Leatherneck AF: 3 Jun 2011

- Clamorous Reed Warbler - Laughing Dove

Camp Leatherneck AF: 7 Jun 2011

- Pied Bushchat - Laughing Dove - Eurasian Tree Sparrow
- Crested Lark - Rock Dove - Clamorous Reed Warbler

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 11 Jun 2011

- Black Winged Stilt - Crested Lark - White Tailed Lapwing
- Crowned Sandgrouse

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 12 Jun 2011

- Black Winged Stilt - Crested Lark - White Tailed Lapwing
- Crowned Sandgrouse - Rock Dove - Barn Swallow
- Pintailed Sandgrouse - Crowned Sandgrouse - Yellow Wagtail
- Eurasian Spoonbill - Wood Sandpiper - Green Shank

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 14 Jun 2011

- Black Winged Stilt - Wood Sandpiper

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 15 Jun 2011

- Black Winged Stilt - Crested Lark - White Wagtail
- Barn Swallow - Rock Dove - Yellow Wagtail

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 18 Jun 2011

- Little Ringed Plover - Crested Lark - White Wagtail
- Crowned Sandgrouse - Citrine Wagtail - Little Stint
- Greater Sandplover - Painted Sandgrouse - Pintailed Sandgrouse
- Barn Swallow - House Sparrow

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 19 Jun 2011

- Black Winged Stilt - Crested Lark - White Wagtail
- Greater Sandplover - Pintailed Sandgrouse - Green Shank
- White Tailed Lapwing - Black Bellied Sandgrouse

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 21 Jun 2011

- Crested Lark - White Wagtail - Greater Hoopoe Lark
- Little Ringed Plover - Greater Sandplover - Green Sandpiper
- Citrine Wagtail - Pintailed Sandgrouse - Crowned Sandgrouse

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 22 Jun 2011

- White Wagtail - Crested Lark - White Tailed Lapwing
- Crowned Sandgrouse - Green Sandpiper - Bar Tailed Lark
- Pintailed Sandgrouse

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 23 Jun 2011

- Green Sandpiper - Crested Lark - White Wagtail
- Bartailed Lark - Crowned Sandgrouse - White Tailed Lapwing
- Pintailed Sandgrouse

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 25 Jun 2011

- Crested Lark - Laughing Dove - Green Sandpiper
- Crowned Sandgrouse - White Wagtail - Black Bellied Sandgrouse
- Barn Swallow - Black Winged Stilt

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 26 Jun 2011

- Citrine Wagtail - Crested Lark - Green Sandpiper
- Crowned Sandgrouse - Barn Swallow - Laughing Dove

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 28 Jun 2011

- Citrine Wagtail - Crested Lark - Green Sandpiper
- Crowned Sandgrouse - White Wagtail - Painted Sandgrouse
- Greater Sandplover - Kentish Plover - Little Ringed Plover

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 2 Jul 2011

- Citrine Wagtail - Crested Lark - Common Swift
- Crowned Sandgrouse - Barn Swallow - Pintailed Sandgrouse
- Wood Sandpiper - Bartailed Lark - Slender Billed Gull

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 3 Jul 2011

- Bartailed Lark
- Crested Lark
- Green Sandpiper
- Crowned Sandgrouse
- Black Winged Stilt
- Pintailed Sandgrouse
- Laughing Dove

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 5 Jul 2011

- Crested Lark
- Green Sandpiper
- White Wagtail

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 8 Jul 2011

- Crested Lark
- Green Sandpiper
- Eurasian Collared Dove
- Crowned Sandgrouse
- Greater Sandplover
- Little Ringed Plover
- Laughing Dove
- White Wagtail
- Barn Swallow
- Citrine Wagtail

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 10 Jul 2011

- Crested Lark
- Green Sandpiper
- Pintailed Sandgrouse
- Little Stint
- White Tailed Lapwing
- Black Bellied Sandgrouse

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 11 Jul 2011

- Crested Lark
- Wood Sandpiper
- Laughing Dove
- Citrine Wagtail
- Greater Sandplover
- Crowned Sandgrouse
- Green Sandpiper

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 16 Jul 2011

- Crested Lark
- White Wagtail
- Pintailed Sandgrouse
- Kentish Plover
- Wood Sandpiper
- Little Stint
- Eurasian Collared Dove
- Crowned Sandgrouse

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 17 Jul 2011

- Crested Lark
- Wood Sandpiper
- Laughing Dove
- Little Stint
- White Tailed Lapwing

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 23 Jul 2011

- Caspian Gull
- Common Redshank
- Crowned Sandgrouse
- Little Stint
- White Tailed Lapwing

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 24 Jul 2011

- Caspian Gull
- Black Winged Stilt
- Crested Lark
- Little Stint
- Gray Wagtail
- Hume's Short Toed Lark

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 29 Jul 2011

- Black Headed Bunting - Red Wattled Lapwing - Crowned Sandgrouse
- Little Stint - White Tailed Lapwing - Crested Lark
- Caspian Gull - Black Winged Stilt - Citrine Wagtail
- Little Ringed Plover - Wood Sandpiper - Gray Heron

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 31 Jul 2011

- Caspian Gull - Crested Lark - Crowned Sandgrouse
- Wood Sandpiper - White Tailed Lapwing

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 4 Aug 2011

- Glossy Ibis - Black Winged Stilt - Crested Lark
- Laughing Dove

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 5 Aug 2011

- Wood Sandpiper - Bartailed Lark - Crowned Sandgrouse
- Barn Swallow - White Tailed Lapwing - White Wagtail
- Laughing Dove - Crested Lark - Little Ringed Plover
- Hoopoe - Glossy Ibis

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 7 Aug 2011

- Caspian Gull - Little Stint - Glossy Ibis
- Crested Lark - Crowned Sandgrouse - Bar Tailed Lark
- Wood Sandpiper - White Tailed Lapwing - Pipit?

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 8 Aug 2011

- Caspian Gull - Little Stint - Glossy Ibis
- Crested Lark - Crowned Sandgrouse - Black Winged Stilt
- Crowned Sandgrouse - White Tailed Lapwing - Little Ringed Plover

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 10 Aug 2011

- Caspian Tern - Little Stint - Glossy Ibis
- Crested Lark - Crowned Sandgrouse - Spotted Red Shank
- Caspian Gull - Black Winged Stilt

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 11 Aug 2011

- Caspian Gull
- Brown Headed Gull
- Green Sandpiper
- Common Sandpiper
- Little Egret
- Crowned Sandgrouse
- Brown Necked Raven
- White Wagtail
- Caspian Tern
- Common Snipe
- Gray Heron
- Booted/Skye's Warbler?

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 12 Aug 2011

- Caspian Gull
- Crested Lark
- Little Egret
- Brown Headed Gull
- Glossy Ibis
- White Tailed Lapwing

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 13 Aug 2011

- Caspian Gull
- Crested Lark
- Curlew?
- Glossy Ibis

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 14 Aug 2011

- Caspian Gull
- Crested Lark
- Green Sandpiper
- Brown Headed Gull
- Glossy Ibis

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 15 Aug 2011

- Caspian Gull
- Crested Lark
- Green Sandpiper
- Jack Snipe
- Brown Headed Gull
- Little Ringed Plover
- Little Stint
- Gray Heron
- Spotted Sandgrouse
- Black Winged Stilt
- Glossy Ibis
- White Tailed Lapwing
- Black Bellied Sandgrouse
- Southern Gray Shrike

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 16 Aug 2011

- Caspian Gull
- Crested Lark
- Little Stint
- Brown Headed Gull
- Whiskered Tern
- Wood Sandpiper
- Gray Heron
- Glossy Ibis
- White Tailed Lapwing
- Black Bellied Sandgrouse

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 17 Aug 2011

- Caspian Gull
- Black Winged Stilt
- Gray Heron
- Eurasian Teal
- Brown Headed Gull
- Glossy Ibis
- Crowned Sandgrouse

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 18 Aug 2011

- Caspian Tern
- Black Winged Stilt
- Gray Heron
- Common Redshank
- White Tailed Lapwing
- Wood Sandpiper
- Ruff
- Eurasian Teal
- Brown Headed Gull
- Crested Lark
- Green Sandpiper
- Barn Swallow
- White Wagtail
- Glossy Ibis
- Crowned Sandgrouse
- Hoopoe
- Little Stint
- Eurasian Collared Dove
- Little Ringed Plover

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 19 Aug 2011

- Caspian Gull
- Black Winged Stilt
- Gray Heron
- White Tailed Lapwing
- Little Ringed Plover
- Kentish Plover
- Brown Headed Gull
- Ruff
- Booted Eagle
- Glossy Ibis
- Crowned Sandgrouse
- Little Stint
- Intermediate Egret

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 20 Aug 2011

- Caspian Gull
- Brown Headed Gull
- Crested Lark
- White Wagtail
- Laughing Dove
- Little Stint
- Kentish Plover
- Crowned Sandgrouse
- Booted Eagle
- Little Ringed Plover
- Marsh Sandpiper
- Shoveler
- Glossy Ibis
- Gray Heron
- Wood Sandpiper
- Common Sandpiper
- Yellow Wagtail

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 21 Aug 2011

- Caspian Gull
- Gray Heron
- White Wagtail
- Little Stint
- Booted Eagle
- Kentish Plover
- White Tailed Lapwing
- Crested Lark
- Common Sandpiper
- Glossy Ibis
- Bar Tailed Lark
- Shoveler
- Black Crowned Night Heron

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 22 Aug 2011

- Caspian Gull
- Gray Heron
- House Sparrow
- Kentish Plover
- Crested Lark
- Egret (Black feet)
- Black Winged Stilt
- White Tailed Lapwing

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 23 Aug 2011

- Caspian Gull
- Hoopoe
- Kentish Plover
- Gray Heron
- Rufous Tailed Shrike
- Little Stint

- Crested Lark - White Wagtail - Crowned Sandgrouse
- House Sparrow

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 24 Aug 2011

- Caspian Gull - Kentish Plover - Crested Lark
- Little Egret - Gray Heron - Wood Sandpiper
- White Wagtail

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 28 Aug 2011

- Gray Heron - Crested Lark - Crowned Sandgrouse
- House Sparrow - Caspian Gull - Wood Sandpiper
- Little Stint - Yellow Wagtail

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 31 Aug 2011

- Caspian Gull - Kentish Plover - Red Necked Phalarope
- Crested Lark - Gray Heron - Marsh Sandpiper
- Crowned Sandgrouse

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 1 Sep 2011

- Caspian Gull - Little Stint - White Tailed Lapwing
- Crested Lark - House Sparrow - Little Ringed Plover
- White Wagtail - Yellow Wagtail - Black Winged Stilt
- Pied Bushchat - Gray Heron - Blue Cheeked Bee Eater

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 3 Sep 2011

- Caspian Gull - Little Stint - White Tailed Lapwing
- Laughing Dove - House Sparrow - Hen Harrier
- Gray Heron - Yellow Wagtail - White Wagtail
- Barn Swallow - Paddy Field Pipit?

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 4 Sep 2011

- Caspian Gull - Whiskered Tern - Black Bellied Sandgrouse
- House Sparrow - Crowned Sandgrouse - Laughing Dove
- Crested Lark - Wood Sandpiper - Black Tailed Godwit
- Peregrine - Marsh Harrier - White Tailed Lapwing
- Black Headed Gull - Ruff - Gray Heron
- Yellow Wagtail - Little Ringed Plover - Glossy Ibis
- Spanish Sparrow - Black Winged Stilt

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 6 Sep 2011

- Caspian Gull
- Crested Lark
- Yellow Wagtail
- Ruff
- Green Sandpiper
- Little Stint
- House Sparrow
- Crowned Sandgrouse
- Rock Dove
- White Tailed Lapwing
- White Wagtail
- Eurasian Teal
- Wood Sandpiper

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 7 Sep 2011

- Caspian Gull
- House Sparrow
- Gray Heron
- Little Egret
- Little Stint
- Little Ringed Plover
- Eurasian Teal
- Crested Lark
- Yellow Wagtail
- Bar Tailed Lark

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 8 Sep 2011

- Caspian Gull
- House Sparrow
- Black Winged Stilt
- Pallid Harrier
- Barn Swallow
- Little Stint
- Little Ringed Plover
- Gray Heron
- Peregrine
- Crowned Sandgrouse
- Crested Lark
- Yellow Wagtail
- White Tailed Lapwing
- Hoopoe

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 9 Sep 2011

- Caspian Gull
- Yellow Wagtail
- Eurasian Teal
- Ruff
- Little Egret
- Crested Lark
- Gray Heron
- Common Red Shank
- Pied Stonechat
- Common Sandpiper
- House Sparrow
- Hoopoe
- Common Kingfisher
- Red Necked Phalarope
- White Wagtail

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 10 Sep 2011

- Caspian Gull
- House Sparrow
- Black Winged Stilt
- White Wagtail
- Red Necked Phalarope
- Crested Lark
- Yellow Wagtail
- Gray Heron
- Marsh Harrier
- Eurasian Teal
- Ruff
- Hoopoe
- Kentish Plover

Delaram II, Nimroz Province, AF: 11 Sep 2011

- Caspian Gull
- Black Winged Stilt
- Barn Swallow
- White Wagtail
- House Sparrow
- Gray Heron
- Eurasian Spoonbill
- Ruff
- Yellow Wagtail
- Hoopoe
- Peregrine
- Shoveler
- Rufous Tailed Shrike