

# Spotted Nutcracker *Nucifraga caryocatactes*: a new species for Azerbaijan

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I observed a Spotted Nutcracker *Nucifraga caryocatactes* on 5 September 2011 during a bird migration study beside the Caspian sea in Azerbaijan. This is the first Azerbaijan record. The Spotted Nutcracker was watched in the narrow coastal plain between Besh Barmag mountain (40° 59' N, 49° 13' E, c80 km northwest of Baku), in the foothills of the Greater Caucasus, and the Caspian sea, an important bottleneck for migrating birds (Heiss & Gauger 2011). The region has few natural structures and is dominated by settlements, grazed steppes and oil production. There is a small strip of shrubby woodland that stretches along the coast.

At 11.50 h on 5 September, during a bird migration count of migrating passerines in the coastal plain, a medium-sized dark bird came from the north and flew c30 m above the ground towards the south. I used my binoculars to help identify the bird, which passed me c350 m away in poor light conditions due to complete cloud cover. At first sight, the bird reminded me of a Eurasian Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus* that was migrating through in fair numbers, but it was too dark and too heavily built to be this species.

Suddenly, the bird dropped down to land on the top of a Russian Olive tree *Elaeagnus angustifolia*. While landing the bird showed striking white tips on the tail feathers, which immediately brought Spotted Nutcracker to mind. This conjecture was confirmed by inspection through a spotting scope. The typical white spotting of the dark body and the large black bill were now visible and there was no further doubt about the identification. I



**Plate 1.** Distant view of the Spotted Nutcracker *Nucifraga caryocatactes* (centre of yellow circle) on top of a Russian Olive tree, Caspian sea coast near Besh Barmag, Azerbaijan, 5 September 2011. Caspian sea in the background. © Michael Heiss



**Plate 2.** Spotted Nutcracker *Nucifraga caryocatactes* in flight, Caspian sea coast near Besh Barmag, Azerbaijan, 5 September 2011. © Michael Heiss

asked Meike Schlienzy to keep an eye on the bird while I tried to get within photographing distance (Plate 1).

When I first approached the Spotted Nutcracker, it was quite shy and flew to the next tree where it hid in the dense foliage of the treetop. After a few minutes it re-emerged and I obtained a good view of it perched on top of a small dead shrub. By now it was unexpectedly tame and I took several photographs from distances down to c6 m (Plates 2 & 3). At 12.30 h I broke off the observation and left the bird in the shrubs. I phoned Dr Hartmut Müller, who came at 13.45 h, but the bird was not relocated.

The breeding area of this species ranges throughout Eurasia from the European Alps in the west to Japan in the east. The distribution correlates with the occurrence of the main food plants eg hazel and conifer species. Within the Western Palearctic two subspecies occur. *Nucifraga c. macrorhynchos* breeds in the taiga of Siberia and regular irruptions into Europe have been recorded, whereas the nominate subspecies is mainly resident (Cramp & Simmons 1980, Glutz von Blotzheim & Bauer 1993).

On account of the slender bill I identified the bird as *macrorhynchos*. *N. c. caryocatactes* has a thicker bill, especially at the base. Another character that helps differentiate the two subspecies is the extent of the white tips of the tail feathers. This is larger in *macrorhynchos* than *caryocatactes* (Glutz von Blotzheim & Bauer 1993). This feature is clearly visible in Plates 2 and 3 though the amount of white is clearly commensurate with both subspecies, albeit less than in a typical *macrorhynchos*. Both subspecies show variation in this feature (Glutz von Blotzheim & Bauer 1993), it is certainly within the range of *macrorhynchos*. Glutz von Blotzheim & Bauer (1993) stated that *macrorhynchos* is not as shy as *caryocatactes*. I was able to approach very close to the bird (Plate 3), though vagrants are often exhausted and therefore tame. Tame behaviour was also observed during a Spotted Nutcracker invasion in southern Russia (Belik *et al* 2009).



**Plate 3.** Spotted Nutcracker *Nucifraga caryocatactes* at close range, Caspian sea coast near Besh Barmag, Azerbaijan, 5 September 2011. © Michael Heiss

Spotted Nutcracker is not listed by Patrikeev (2004) for Azerbaijan and this observation must therefore be treated as the first record. The eruptive migratory character of *macrorhynchos* makes its occurrence in Azerbaijan far from implausible. The species is a known vagrant in Iran with two recent records: March 2005 (Sehhatisabet *et al* 2006, Khaleghizadeh *et al* 2011) and February 2006 (Khaleghizadeh *et al* 2011). All Iranian records previous to these were rejected by Roselaar & Aliabadian (2009). There are two records for Turkey: November 1966 and October 2006 (Kirwan *et al* 2008a, Kirwan *et al* 2008b) and for Syria a possible record from 2006 (Ottelin 2008). In 2009 Spotted Nutcrackers were also observed at several sites in Georgia (A Gavashelishvili pers comm).

North of Azerbaijan, Spotted Nutcrackers are common during some irruptions along the Ural valley as far south as the northern coast of the Caspian in Kazakhstan (Gavrilov & Gavrilov 2005, Wassink & Oreel 2007). In Russia, Spotted Nutcrackers occur in invasion years south to the Greater Caucasus (Madge & Burn 1994, Belik *et al* 2009). A well documented invasion in 2008/2009 led to several observations in southern Russia *eg* Volga delta (Reutskiy 2009), steppes of Kalmykia (Muzaev *et al* 2009), Stavropol region (Fedosov & Gordon 2009), North Ossetia (Komarov 2009), southeast Rostov-on-Don (Lipkovich 2009), Sochi and Krasnodar region (Belik *et al* 2009). A maximum of c100 individuals (in several small flocks) were observed in southern Kalmykia (Muzaev *et al* 2009). Other observations ranged from single birds to flocks of up to 15 individuals (Belik *et al* 2009). During such invasions it is likely that a few birds will move further and it is therefore not a huge surprise to find this boreal bird species in Azerbaijan east of the Greater Caucasus.

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