

Shikra *Accipiter badius* breeding in Armenia

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The Shikra *Accipiter badius* is a widespread *Accipiter* with a predominantly Asian and African distribution. Throughout its range the species is represented by several races, with the northernmost and migratory *A. b. cenchroides* found from extreme southeastern Transcaucasus and northern Iran east to Kazakhstan and northwest India (Dementiev & Gladkov 1951, Cramp 1980, del Hoyo *et al* 1994).

In the Transcaucasus, the Shikra is known in Azerbaijan from old records at Vel village, near Lankaran city (southeast Azerbaijan), where three birds including one near a nest on 3 June were collected (year not specified, Dementiev & Gladkov 1951). In Little Kizil Agach bay, c15–20 km north of Lankaran city, one bird was collected on 13 May 1953, while a nest with eggs of probably this species was found in 1964 in Avrora village, c10 km SSW from Lankaran city (Patrikeev 2004). More recently, in May 2007, Alan Lewis observed and photographed (VA has copies) a breeding pair in ‘the main part’ of Azerbaijan (per Chris Batty *in litt* 2010). Subsequently, breeding was reported for 2008 from southeast Azerbaijan (Heiss & Gauger 2009). Our observations in the Transcaucasus extend the known breeding range of *A. b. cenchroides* west to Armenia.

OBSERVATIONS

In spring/summer 2009 we conducted pilot surveys of Levant Sparrowhawk *Accipiter brevipes* nests in several parts of Armenia, including parks in Yerevan city. The surveys included locating and monitoring active nests.



Plate 1. Male Shikra *Accipiter badius*, Yerevan, Armenia, 30 June 2009. © Vasil Ananian



Plate 2. Female Shikra *Accipiter badius*, Yerevan, Armenia, 18 July 2009. © Vasil Ananian

First pair

On 29 June 2009 VA and GJ were out in a Yerevan city park. After one and a half hours of walking the trails, they heard unfamiliar calls at about 09.30 h coming from a densely wooded patch 40–50 m away and moved to the area of the calls. The calls were heard again and shortly after, at 09.40, VA spotted an *Accipiter* perched c15–20 m away on a branch c5 meters above the ground. The bird was sitting in bright sun facing the observers and showed overall pale coloration with pale grey head/visible parts of mantle and shoulders, very pale underparts with uniform background and barely noticeable horizontal vermiculation and, most strikingly, bright orange-red irises strongly contrasting with its black bib—a combination not encountered in Levant Sparrowhawk. The bird was observed for less than a minute and immediately after it flew L Janoian and KA were contacted by phone and informed about the observation of a probable male Shikra. VA and GJ soon found a second bird of apparently female-type plumage and emitting similar calls. After the arrival of the co-observers with



Plate 3. Female Shikra *Accipiter badius* on nest, Yerevan, Armenia, 30 June 2009. © Vasil Ananian



Plate 4. Female Shikra *Accipiter badius* at the second nest, Yerevan, Armenia, 22 July 2009. © Siranush Tumanyan



Plate 5. Site in a Yerevan park containing the first Shikra *Accipiter badius* pair's nest, Armenia, 10 July 2009. © Vasil Ananian

telescopes, the birds were still present at the site exhibiting territorial behaviour and were well seen through optics at various distances (15 and more m) and perched and in flight. The birds were photographed (and on subsequent visits) and positively identified as male and female Shikras (Plates 1 & 2). Next morning the site was revisited and both birds were found displaying strong territorial behaviour suggesting breeding. A nest-like heap of twigs was spotted in a poplar tree, which proved to be the Shikras' nest containing downy young (Plate 3).

Second pair

On 20 July 2009, ST and another field worker visited another city park of Yerevan to check an active Levant Sparrowhawk nest and to look for an additional nest of the species which seemed possible in the park. At c10.15 h an accipiter was spotted perched on a branch of a poplar c8 m away and c7 m above the ground. The bird was quickly identified as a female Shikra. Shortly after it flew, it was relocated perched on a nest in a poplar (Plate 4). At c11.50 h characteristic Shikra calls of a second bird were heard, at which time the female had left the nest and immediately came back with prey and presumably started to feed nestlings, which were not visible from the ground. Two days later a female and male were observed at the nest.



Plate 6. Juvenile Shikra *Accipiter badius*, Yerevan, Armenia, 18 July 2009. © Vasil Ananian

ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Both nest sites were visited opportunistically thereafter. The parks where the nests were found are between 1000–1300 m asl and share similar characteristics in having wooded areas with light understory, interspersed with grassy clearings and patches with exposed ground and rock. Most trees, up to 25–30 m high, and shrubs of the parks were planted poplar *Populus*, ash *Fraxinus*, maple *Acer*, elm *Ulmus*, false acacia *Robinia*, honeysuckle *Lonicera*, privet *Ligustrum* and elder *Sambucus*.

The two nests were on 25–30 m high poplars at the edge of planted areas (Plate 5). Both were situated at the main trunk c12 and 19 m above the ground, and exteriorly were similar to the nest of Hooded Crows *Corvus corone*.

Feeding behaviour was observed on several occasions at both nests. Males with prey called females and passed prey to them on trees 10–30 m from the nests. The females were seen both consuming prey themselves and feeding prey to their young. At each nest, one of the parents was always present near the nest. When females were consuming delivered food the males replaced them on the nest. Prey items included small passerines and a vole *Microtus* sp. No prey remains or pellets were found under the nests.

The adults seemed relatively indifferent to the presence of people at the nest sites though a bit more wary than Levant Sparrowhawks in similar circumstances. Hooded Crows, Magpies *Pica pica* and, in one instance, Woodpigeons *Columba palumbus* appearing in the vicinity of the nesting tree were actively attacked and chased by the Shikras. The attacks were always accompanied with loud vocalizations. In contrast, a Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo* perched c40–50 m from one of the nests was ignored by the female Shikra.

The birds were highly vocal at their nests, more so than Levant Sparrowhawks. The usual contact call was a loud, high-pitched, clear 'ki kie' that faded on the second syllable. Similar calls were emitted by male and female when they chased other birds from the breeding territory and during prey-passing. The calls were easily distinguished from those of Levant Sparrowhawks (see Cramp 1980).

Adult birds appeared to be moulting both body and flight feathers. At the first nest, on 29 June, male and female had the outer pair of rectrices grown to two fifths of their length. On 18 July in the female these feathers had reached four fifths of the full length. The female was also missing several inner primaries. On 22 July at the second nest the male exhibited no moult in the rectrices whereas the female was missing its outermost rectrices. A number of flight and body feathers of adults were collected under the first nest on 18 July.

We did not monitor chick development. The first nest contained downy young on 29 June, the day it was found. On 18 July, the three chicks in this nest were ready to fledge (Plate 6). They fledged between 19–22 July. At the second nest, on 17 August, three chicks were fed by the female in the nest; on 20 August two of them were seen at about 20 m from the nest soaring with the female, whereas one was still in the nest.

To our knowledge our observations represent the first documented records of Shikras in Armenia. A sighting of a first-year male Shikra on 23 September 1995 in southern Armenia is mentioned in Adamian & Klem (1999). However, we were unable to locate full documentation for that observation.

We believe that the appearance of Shikras in Armenia is a recent event that reflects the species' expansion further west into the Caucasus. As well as Yerevan, large areas of the Arax valley may contain suitable habitat for the establishment of this species.

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