

Remembering Ali Kizilay

RICHARD PORTER

Friday 22 April 1966 I met a remarkable man. Someone etched in my memory ever since. Picture a large lake, some ten kilometres across, with fringing reed beds, a river flowing through and an inundated willow wood with over 2500 breeding pairs of mixed species of herons, cormorants and Spoonbills. Picture lake Manyas, Manyas Golu or Kus Golu (Bird lake), western Turkey's most famous wetland. Picture a short rugged man in his early 40s with a kindly face and twinkling eyes there to greet me and my three companions at the start of eight months of studying birds in Turkey. Picture Ali Kizilay (Plates 1–3), the warden of Turkey's first bird reserve—the Kuscenneti or, in English, Bird Paradise. Indeed perhaps the first bird reserve in the Middle East?

Ali was a local man from the lake-side village of Sigirci, who became the reserve warden in 1962, shortly after the Kuscenneti was formally established in 1958. His formal education took him through primary school, but thereafter he was largely self-taught and motivated. I would like to think that when Professor Curt Kosswig, who was instrumental in persuading the Turkish National Parks Department to create the Kuscenneti, that Ali, with his love of the local birds, was an obvious choice for warden. In those early days of wildlife travel a few visitors came to visit from Germany and Austria and Ali was keen to learn from them. This resulted in him speaking about birds in an ever-changing mix of Turkish and German: Klein Kus, Kucuk Vogel..... I remember on our first day Ali showed us a captive eagle with a damaged wing that he was tending. This was our first experience ever of a spotted eagle, so was it Lesser or Greater? Ali told us, with confidence, it was Greater Spotted and we were able to confirm later that he was right. He knew all the bird species on the reserve, the dates the migrants arrived and where to find them. You would



Plate 1. Ali Kizilay and his son Mehmet, Manyas Golu 1966. © RF Porter



Plate 2. Ali Kizilay, Manyas Golu, April 1967. © RF Porter



Plate 3. Ali Kizilay with his bee hives, Manyas Golu, May 1967. © RF Porter



Plate 4. Dalmatian Pelican *Pelecanus crispus* colony at the Kus Cenneti, Manyas Golu, Turkey, May 1970. © RF Porter

point to an illustration of Red-footed Falcon in 'Peterson' (the only field guide at the time) and he would respond: 'Mayis ayi cok dogan varmak' or for White Stork 'Eylul leylek

wandern.' No binoculars, no books to learn from, but nevertheless in his own way he was a walking guide to the birds of western Turkey.

The Kuscenneti became our base camp for much of that spring and summer and Ali and his teenage son, Mehmet, would make us thickly crusted yoghurts and cook pike fresh from the lake: 'Gros Balik Essen.' But he was employed to protect the Kuscenneti's breeding colony, and did so with total dedication and passion – they were *his* birds. Being close to a village and with the lake's rich fish stocks, poachers were a threat as their motorboats could cause panic when going close to or into the colony of inundated trees. One morning a stern look on Ali's weather-beaten face showed something serious had happened, to be confirmed when he went straight to a cupboard and took out a large hatchet and a double-barrelled 12 bore shot gun. He raced off in his boat and, we learned later (in a mixture of Turkish, Pidgeon English, German and sign language) that he had been after a poacher who had gone into the colony, but had failed to catch him.

The following day the poacher appeared again and from my diary: "*Ali ordered us into the Kus Cenneti boat and off we went after the intruder. We caught up with him just as he stopped his boat at the side of the canal. Ali approached him, heated words were exchanged, tempers became frayed and a fight started. Ali with a metal pole and the intruder with a three-pronged pitch-fork; the result was Ali's first finger being split open to the bone.*" Eventually the Forestry Police were called, and, we believe, the man was prosecuted. Not an easy thing for Ali when the poacher was from the same village, but he was a man of strong principles and employed to protect this internationally important colony.

It was also during the late 60s and early 70s that a reserve management plan was hatched with the aim of better protecting this national treasure and showing visitors the fantastic display of nesting birds. Ali helped Tansu Gurpinar of the National Parks Department develop that plan, with advice from the RSPB. Probably the first bird-reserve management plan in the Middle East? Tansu Gurpinar was the Turkish National Parks Department's conservation adviser and first secretary of the National Section of the Ornithological Society of Turkey. He was a key player in spear-heading Turkish conservation within the government. A major aspect was a tall, wooden observation tower enabling views right into the nests in the canopy of the inundated willows without causing disturbance—an early example of how to show people birds. Another was the building of nesting platforms....

On the southern edge of Manyas Golu there were other smaller colonies, including one of about ten pairs of Dalmatian Pelicans (Plate 4), nesting on the flattened branches of flooded willows. Unfortunately they were frequently disturbed, unintentionally, by fisherman mooring their boats to the nesting trees. This worried us – and Ali – and two years later when I visited him, he and Tansu had built artificial nests – large mattresses made of sticks – and placed them on top of willows, specially pollarded by Ali at the edge of the colony. A thriving colony of 26 Dalmatian Pelicans, in the protection of the Kuscenneti, was a testimony to his dedication and was captured in the BBC film, "*Where Two Worlds Meet*" in their 'World About Us' series.

Two frequent visitors to the Kuscenneti in those early years were Salih and Belkis Acar. Salih got much of his inspiration for his wonderful paintings from the waterbirds on Manyas Golu and Ali often took him out in his boat so he could capture the atmosphere of displaying egrets or whirls of soaring pelicans that feature so often in his art. It was during those visits by the Acars that the start of the Turkish voluntary conservation movement was born, leading to the creation of Dogal Hayati Koruma Dernegi (DHKD), now Dogal Dernegi (DD)—the BirdLife Partner in Turkey. I remember Ali listening excitedly to the discussions as he humbly served cay - his ready beam saying 'cok iyi....mujde.'

I visited lake Manyas, the Kuscenneti and, of course, Ali many times in the 60s, 70s and 80s. My last was in 1989, the year he retired as warden. By that time he was living in a tiny house with whitewashed walls in his village of Sirgirci. He had remarried and had a seven year old son, 'Kucuk Ali' as he was introduced. Ali Kizilay died in 2015, aged 91. Had I been told I really believe I would have gone to his funeral. I doubt if there was an obituary to him, but for OSME's 50th birthday I wanted to pay a tribute to an unsung Middle East conservation hero.

Tansu Gurpinar told me recently that the observation tower still stands, having been renewed six years ago, and the reserve continues to be popular with visitors. Dalmatian Pelicans still breed but their nests are now constructed from metal and look very artificial. The population of mixed heron species and Spoonbills is very low compared to the 60s and 70s, but cormorants are increasing.

Richard Porter, Kings Head Cottage, Cley next the Sea, Norfolk, NR25 7RX, UK
RFPorter@talktalk.net