

Some of my IWRB reminiscences of the Middle East and Pakistan

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As a farmer of flowering bulbs with my brother and father we in winter had not much work. So in those months I tried to practice the four foreign languages that I had learnt. As birdwatcher and ringer it happened that I spent two winters at the Tour du Valat ringing station in France. After training, Dr Luc Hofmann asked me whether I would like to travel for him on behalf of the International Waterfowl Research Bureau (now Wetlands International). My first mission was to train two students in Greece to teach them how to count waterfowl and carry out bird ringing. However the colonels took over the regime and the king was thrown out of Greece. The army was mobilized and we did not manage to get our students out of military duty. It was in January 1968 that for the first time I visited Turkey. This after two months of bird ringing in Greece. We made a brief visit to Manyas Golu where we met Richard Porter and others, early members of the Ornithological Society of Turkey (Plate 1). My second visit was in 1969 with Hayo Hoekstra. This after his discovery of thousands of Red-breasted Geese in Romania which I had to confirm. We did some exploration in southwestern Turkey and made contact with the forest department authorities in Ankara for further exploration. Many ornithologists had visited Turkey before (Kumerloeve, Lehman *etc*) but nobody had estimated the numbers of ducks, geese and waders wintering there. So it was terra incognita in this respect.

In Ankara I found a telegram from Luc Hofmann with a request to travel on to Baghdad to join an expedition with Jacques Vielliard to Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and



Plate 1. Manyas Golu. 1968. (L-R) Ian Willis, Alan Kitson and Richard Porter.

Pakistan. So I took the train to Baghdad (Ankara–Baghdad Express) and accompanied Jacques. [Richard Porter adds, “I remember driving Fred to the station in Ankara in my Land Rover at midnight on 23 January after we had been to see Dr Zhivago at the cinema. It was particularly memorable as they got the second and third spools muddled up so we saw the ending half way through... Later he sent me a postcard to say that when he arrived at Baghdad he was ‘greeted’ by the sight of several hanged men on public display outside the station. I think I still have the postcard”...“Fred was a really good bloke, enduring uncomfortable and dangerous experiences, privations and hardships, and now making light of them in retrospect.] This was a unique opportunity to experience the Middle East and a little beyond. During this trip we collected many Little Stints and Dunlins in order to study their diet in Asia. We also collected specimens of birds for the Museum in Paris. The skins were conserved in formalin and the meat was consumed according to French standards. So I tasted many species of birds like sandgrouse, partridges, Ruddy Shelducks, curlews, pigeons and even Great Bustard and marmot. We collected the first specimen of *Podoces pleskei* for the collection in Paris as well as eggs of the Smyrna Bunting which were not described so far. On return Dr Hofmann asked me to do more work in the coming winters and to concentrate more on waterfowl especially in Turkey. He did not give me a salary and I worked as a volunteer. In summer I usually made up a programme for an expedition with an estimation of the cost of food, petrol, lodgings *etc.* In Basel or France I collected cash in many different currencies (Guilders, Deutsche Marks, Dollars) as politics can suddenly change the value or prohibit a certain currency in the different countries we passed through. In 1970 Lieuwe Dijkse and me made the first complete survey of the important wetlands and estimated the population of waterfowl in the order of 1 million birds in Turkey. The next five autumns and winters I spent in Turkey and became a member of the Ornithological Society of Turkey (Plates 2, 3).



Plate 2. Searching for geese from a vantage point, central Turkey, 1970.



Plate 3. Sultansazligi with Ercyes behind, Turkey, 1986.

The January 1971 survey in Turkey also included lakes Van and Erdek in eastern Turkey. We decided to travel on to Ramsar in Iran where the first meeting of the Ramsar convention was held and to report on our experiences to Dr Hofmann. Here we met Christopher Savage who was the representative for Pakistan. He told us that in that country waterfowl surveys had never been made apart from his surveys on some small lakes in the Salt range where White-headed ducks wintered in hundreds. We discussed this with Dr Hofmann and the next day we were off for further east! From Ramsar to Pakistan is a few thousand kilometers only. The Dutch saying: "A flying crow finds always something to eat" was very true here. Between 1971 and 1976 I surveyed this country six times (Plate 4). In the nineties I again visited Pakistan in four winters and concentrated especially on the lakes in Sind and the Rann of Kutch.

In between the time of the surveys in November and January in Turkey we made trips to Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The expeditions were always made by road in a small Volkswagen beetle and several times we drove over 30 000 km in a winter. There were only bad road maps for tourists and no Google Earth apps to find lakes and the little roads to the lakes. So the first winters we lost much time in finding tracks leading to good locations from where to estimate the waterfowl on a lake or delta of a river. Numerous were the occasions that we had to ask local people to pull or push (often with a tractor or horses) our car out of the mud or snow. After the first two years we were able to survey the most important Turkish wetlands in about 4 to 5 weeks. At the Central plateau of Turkey the best method for counting the ten thousands of geese was to camp at their roosts. By day they dispersed over such extensive areas and were difficult to locate. Unforgettable were the sunrises with the chorus of thousands of White-fronted Geese, Ruddy Shelducks and Cranes. We had freezing hands, hardly able to hold binoculars, pencils and notebooks. Highlights of course were the sights of Red-breasted Geese, Great Bustards or a wolf. After the morning flight we searched for a small lokanta to warm up with tea, chorba and a



Plate 4. Crossing the Nara (Fred Koning sat behind and John Walmsley sat in front), Thar desert, Pakistan 1973.

bucket full of bread. We estimated that the Anatolian population of white fronts varied between 50 000 and 100 000 birds. Hunting pressure was high in many areas especially on the lakes in the Kizilirmak delta on the Black sea coast where Italians every winter came to hunt Greylag Geese and ducks. In those years I became a member of the Ornithological Society of Turkey as we made very many notes on the distribution of birds in winter.

One of the fascinating lakes in Turkey is lake Burdur. Here we discovered that it was the main wintering location of the White-headed duck in the Middle East. On 16 January 1973 we counted 8988 birds there. The lake also held over 11 900 Black-necked Grebes, often in flocks of several hundred diving at the same time.

People and especially authorities like the police or military were not familiar with foreigners equipped with binoculars and telescopes so we often hid our equipment. Although we had some official letter from IWRB we usually said that we were students or tourists interested in biology. Obtaining official work permits was too much of a bureaucratic exercise. Beautifully packed filter cigarettes (Benson & Hedges) and alcohol were good materials to bribe officials. However we saw many police stations and military posts from the inside, sometimes handcuffed and with an armed escort. Usually we were free after a few hours with the help of a person who was able to speak a foreign language. We had over a week in prison in Mashed in Iran.

In Iran waterfowl were surveyed by Derek Scott and colleagues at the Iran Game and Fish Department so, on our trips to Pakistan, we drove through the country without observing waterfowl. In Afghanistan winter conditions (snow) and permits limited travelling other than the main roads and we usually surveyed the lakes Chaman, Kargha, Sarobi and Duronta. We managed only once (1971) to visit the lakes in Seistan (Hamun-i-Puzak) from the Afghan side. In March 1970 conditions were favorable to reach Ab I Estada (2100 m). Here the highlight was 72 Siberian Cranes seen on the border of the lake. Sudden snowfall in Herat on 2 February 1971 resulted in a strong migration of Shore Larks in the

pass near the Mir Ali (1720 m). We counted 720 Shore Larks. The country certainly needs more attention from ornithologists but camping and leaving the main roads (as we did) is not advisable nowadays.

Before and after an expedition we always were invited by an Ottoman aristocratic family that had fled to Egypt after the revolution of 1915. In the sixties they returned to Turkey and lived in Istanbul. As keen hunters they thought it ridiculous to estimate the numbers of ducks in Turkey but were so kind to invite us for dinner and to hear about our experiences. Prince Abbas had a fantastic room with all his handmade shotguns. Here we discussed waterfowl and politics with a good glass of whisky. He had a diary in which he noted all the birds he had shot in his life: over 80 000 and he hoped to reach 100 000 a number only achieved by a German baron. However Prince Abbas failed. The dinner always had duck on the menu so I tasted many species.

We often visited landlords with their privately-owned lakes. This in a manner gives some protection for waterfowl. To 'spy' on those lakes we sometimes tried to get invited for hunting parties so that we could make estimations of the birds present. One of the best lakes was owned by the Bhutto family and sometimes held up to 30 000 ducks. Also unforgettable was the presence of over 2000 Night Herons here. Another landlord on the edge of the Thar desert possessed a lake holding up to 1000 Marbled ducks. He fell in love with my wife who accompanied me that trip. He had already a Pakistani and a Swiss wife but wanted to add a Dutch one. He asked whether we were married in church. This was not the case and he argued that our marriage was not official. So the next year he came to Holland to ask my father-in-law for the hand of his daughter! Marja, her father and me (of course) refused and our friendship with the landlord cooled down. Counting waterfowl in the Middle East is sometimes a little uncomfortable.

In the nineties I again visited Pakistan in three winters and concentrated especially on the lakes in Sind and the Rann of Kutch, an area difficult of access as it lies on the border with India. Here there is still much to explore as the area holds ten thousands of cranes, Lesser and Greater Flamingos, pelicans, shelducks and waders.

All the data collected were the basic material to convince local authorities for the need of conservation of wetlands as waterfowl were threatened everywhere by hunting and drainage of lakes and marshes. It is a good feeling that we contributed to the creation of an instrument like the Ramsar convention respected by many countries nowadays.

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