



The Urban Birder in Istanbul

BBC's The One Show's David Lindo writes for Bird Watching



NEVER mix alcohol with birding – it just doesn't work. That was the first lesson I learnt at 5.30am on the first morning of my urban birding trip to Istanbul. I was struggling to understand why my guide Murat had two sets of eyes slowly drifting across his face. I must have looked like a confused chameleon trying to concentrate as he broke down the day's itinerary. The reason for my discombobulation? An unexpected binge the night before with photographer Dean Eades, who had accompanied me to shoot some urban wildlife. Istanbul was one of those mystical places that I thought I'd never get to, yet there I was, standing in the pre-dawn late September darkness feeling as sick as a dog and wanting to quietly die on the spot!

Murat was unaware of my dire predicament and thought that my subsequent regular naps were due to tiredness. The first place on his list was one of Istanbul's major migration hotspots at Küçük Çamlıca Hill, to observe the legendary raptor movement over the Bosphorus. This hill was effectively a lightly wooded municipal park that afforded a superb elevated view across the city. I was potentially about to witness one of the greatest migration wonders in the world and I couldn't even see straight! I needed to sober up pretty quickly if I were to enjoy this spectacle that was scheduled to kick off once the thermals started to rise later in the morning. So after barely managing to see three out of 15 or so migrant Red-breasted Flycatchers overhead, I decided it was time to slumber on a patch of ground frequented by a host of feral dogs and cats.

When I awoke, over an hour later, I felt a thousand times better and more importantly, functional and ready for some serious raptor watching. Moments after that, I was watching the first of a wave of large birds passing overhead in the clear blue sky with a bunch of other birders from across Europe. Steppe Buzzards, Short-toed Eagles, Black and White Storks were drifting over in waves across a broad front. One Turkish birder showed me some footage on his camera taken the week before, of several thousand Lesser Spotted Eagles in the air together – a phenomenal sight.

Küçük Çamlıca Hill is a must for birders visiting Istanbul, as the raptor migration here can be sensational. Over the years, though, the raptor counts over the Bosphorus have been steadily declining. In 1966 Richard Porter (author of *Birds of the Middle East*) and his friends counted more than 250,000 soaring birds

migrating over Istanbul from July to November. In that year he also found 20 pairs of nesting Black Kites in the city. Now there are none.

Later that afternoon we traveled north and stood on top of a nearby watchpoint called Toygar Hill, which overlooks a valley next to the sea. Standing on the brow of the hill we observed, often at closer quarters, well over a hundred low flying Lesser Spotted Eagles, hordes of Steppe Buzzards and Short-toed Eagles, whose number were sprinkled with a few Eurasian and Levant's Sparrowhawks, a Goshawk and a Booted Eagle. Almost all of Europe's Lesser Spotted Eagles pass through Istanbul every year, as does the entire eastern European population of White Stork. Mind-blowing stuff.

We ended our first day by the coast of the Black Sea at Riva Stream, where plentiful Yellow-legged Gulls and Shags frolicked along the coastline and flocks of Rock Buntings were in the seaside vegetation along with Sardinian Warblers and Stonechats.

Perhaps my favourite urban birding areas were the Büyükçekmece and Küçükçekmece Lakes, both smack in the middle of town. The former site is especially popular with gulls that can be watched fairly closely from the historical and funky looking Kanuni Sultan Suleyman Bridge. Whilst supping mint tea at the café situated at the water's edge we managed to scope five gull species including several Slender-billed Gulls plus Common and Whiskered Terns, Pygmy Cormorants, a Spoonbill and a roosting White Pelican – all in the middle of urbanity.

We also took a ferry across the Bosphorus Strait to the Golden Horn (the old city centre of Istanbul) to watch urban Alpine and Pallid Swifts swooping high over the heads of tourists, Laughing Doves and escaped Ring-necked and Alexandrine Parakeets. The ferry crossing yielded a tick for me in the shape of group of Yelkouan Shearwaters cutting above the waves through the flotilla of ships that litter the strait.

Istanbul is a captivating city, not least for its friendly people, interesting architecture and fascinating culture. It is also a very busy and crowded place, daunting unless you know where you're going or have a guide. I loved it. ■ Thanks to Murat Bozdogan www.naturetoursturkey.com and the Turkish Culture & Tourism Office www.gototurkey.co.uk ■ David flew with Turkish Airlines (www.thy.com) and stayed at The Marmara Camlica Residence (www.themarmarahotels.com)