



Afring News online 38:4-12, 2009

A tale of two ringing sites. Part 1 - Kuyucuk Lake

Alan Brooks

ahbrooks@icon.co.za

When men join the army, one of the first things they are warned about is not to volunteer for anything. Well, unfortunately I was never in any army and so it was that I volunteered for some bird ringing in rural North East Turkey.

I had answered an e-mail sent originally to Dieter Oschadleus, head of SAFRING, and subsequently circulated to all southern African ringers. It was from Stanford University-based Turkish ornithologist, Dr Cagan (pronounced "Charn") Sekercioglu who was looking for volunteers for his two sites in the far north east of Turkey. I had also been looking at a possible voluntary position in Costa Rica, but the logistics were proving too difficult and costly. Subsequently, Cagan told me that he knew Daniel Martinez, the person recruiting for Costa Rica and he was secretly pleased that he had acquired my services to him rather than to his competitor.

My flight from Ankara touched down at Kars airport in the early afternoon of 5 October 2008. It was one of those rural airports with a runway and a terminal building, but very little else. We quickly disembarked and our luggage soon followed. I found my case and proceeded toward the exit, expecting to see someone with a board with my name on it. There were a couple of people with boards, but none with my name. I proceeded through to the pavement outside and waited.

In the anxious minutes that followed, all sorts of nightmares began to unfold in my head, and it also dawned on me that I didn't even have a name, phone number or organisation that I could ask for. "What an idiot!" I thought to myself. I had only the first name of the man I was expecting to meet me, and I had no idea what he looked like. I could hardly go up to some official, who probably wouldn't even be able to speak English anyway, and ask where I could find Önder; it would be a bit like asking someone in England where you could find John. I was busy turning over the few options I had in my mind when I heard "Mr Brooks?" I've never been so glad to hear someone speak my name.

If someone had told me what Önder Cvrvk looked like, I could have easily picked him out from a big crowd. He was rather atypical for a Turk. Vertically challenged, somewhat corpulent with a red face partially obscured by several days of beard growth, and long greasy black hair. Despite his rather unkempt appearance, he was friendly enough, as indeed were all of the people I met on the trip. The organisation for which I was working was known as "KuzeyDoga" which means "North East" in Turkish. Önder (and his colleague Emrah) provided logistics for the company.

We were soon on our way and our first stop was at a cafe in Kars for some lunch, and then to the KuzeyDoga office. After a short time, we left for the first ringing station at Kuyucuk (pronounced koo-yoo-chook), a drive of about 40 minutes on reasonable roads.

One's first impression of Kuyucuk is that of an empty wilderness in the middle of nowhere, but it soon becomes apparent that this is far from the truth. There is a village

with a population of around 300 which I was told was made up of roughly equal numbers of Turks and Kurds. It is about 2.5 km by road from the ringing site, or about 2 km across the fields over a slight rise. The ringing site is 1630 metres above sea level at a natural lake which takes its name from the village (or maybe vice versa!). The terrain is exactly what I had always imagined steppe to be; rolling grassy plains with a few distant mountains and almost no trees. The lake is permanent - fed by melt water and underground springs - but it freezes over in winter.

Lake Kuyucuk is an important refuelling stop for many palearctic migrants, and also one of the main breeding sites for Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea* which were a permanent feature of the area while I was there. Besides the 5 to 10 thousand Ruddy Shelduck, the other main resident at the lake was the Common Coot *Fulica atra* numbering around 5000 birds.

On arrival, I was introduced to Rakesh Vyas, a Hindu Indian volunteer from Bangalore; Yakup, the site director and two biology undergraduates, Ali and Yusuf. Rakesh is a retired marketer of pharmaceuticals who had taken up various conservation interests to occupy him in retirement. He was at Kuyucuk to conduct counts of the various bird species on a daily basis - something which had not been undertaken there before. We were of similar age, had similar interests, and both spoke English, so it was not surprising that we soon became good friends and spent many hours of the three weeks we had together discussing things of mutual interest.

Rakesh would rise with the sun and go off with his telescope to the side of the lake where the sun was behind him to assess the numbers of the various birds present. In the late afternoon, he would conduct a similar survey from the other side of the lake, still with the sun behind him. In between he would assist me by writing down the biometric data, and sometimes with identification of new species.

The day I arrived at Kuyucuk, Önder took away an English ringer who was going to the other site at Aras River. I was to be the only qualified ringer on site, although both Yakup and Rakesh had considerable experience with handling birds. Yakup was a young postgraduate from the local University and this was his third season with KuzeyDoga. His main responsibility was to provide food and keep camp for the volunteers.

Cagan arrived later the first afternoon; he was a smart looking young lad who spoke more like an American than a Turk; he had obviously been in the US for several years. I would see him another couple of times at Kuyucuk before he left for a visit to Ethiopia - another destination which I would like to volunteer for.

The dozen or so nets at Kuyucuk were closed during the heat of the day and opened for the cooler evening, so it was after 18h00 when I got my first bird to ring. I soon realised that I had been thrown in the deep end, but the jizz and long hind claw soon had me looking up pipits in the bird ringer's bible "Identification Guide to European Passerines" by Lars Svensson known simply as "Svensson". The distinctive white tail markings indicated a Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta* (40) and this was confirmed by wing formula and biometrics. It would be the first of 40 individuals (as indicated throughout this text after the scientific name) that I would eventually process in Turkey.

The next bird also provoked some debate between Yakup, Rakesh and myself. It was a choice between the very similar (in winter plumage) Grey and Yellow Wagtails. Eventually we settled on Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* (6). In fact, we never did catch a Grey while I was there.

And as the evening progressed, we processed Northern Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita* (176), Corn Bunting *Miliaria calandra* (54), Pied Wagtail *Motacilla alba* (6), Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola* (3), and then the prize of the evening - a diminutive Jack Snipe *Lymnocyptes minimus* (3) - the first for the site. Cagan was so excited that he wanted to ring it himself, but fortunately he left it for me. After he'd left, we got another one, the last bird of the evening! There was a third and final one eight days later.

Another of the more interesting birds caught on that first evening was a Siberian Stonechat *Saxicola maura* (6). Until very recently, this, like our own African Stonechat, had been a sub-species of the complex European Stonechat *Saxicola torquatus*. The white and light russet rump easily distinguishes the Siberian species from the much darker rump of its European congener which I would later catch at the Aras site.

That first evening proved very productive with 24 birds from 10 species. There were still a few Barn Swallows *Hirundo rustica* (18) and Sand Martins *Riparia riparia* (5) around, but these were just about the last of the season. I would only get one more Sand Martin and a few more swallows. Other ringers before me had processed hundreds of these, and on one notable occasion had so many swallows that they just couldn't ring them all. They kept them in a small tent overnight and let them go en masse the following morning. The tent was never the same again!

Our accommodation was basic to say the least. It was a small brick building about 5 m², containing 4 beds (two double bunks), food stores crudely packed along one wall, and a Middle Eastern style hole-in-the-floor toilet (with a bucket of water). There was no electricity and the water was in a tank on a small trailer outside. In order to shower, we had to walk to a disused school at the edge of the village, which is now occasionally used as a guest house. After walking the road route a couple of times, Rakesh showed me how to walk the shorter route across the fields. The problem was that the village could not be seen from the ringing site because of the low hill in between. One had to fixate on a distant landmark and walk as straight as possible until the minarets of the mosques came into view. Going back the other way, it was a distant electricity pylon which provided the necessary guidance, but there were several and one had to fix on the right one.

The next morning, I began a routine which became the norm for my stay at the lake, getting up at dawn to unfurl the nets. Since the nets in Turkey were stretched between steel supports (probably 20mm water pipe), there was a problem with sliding the loops up and down the rusty poles. As you can imagine, the rough rusty surface soon wore through the loops and they frequently broke. The simple expedient of tying together the two broken ends was the quick fix solution, but after a few days, I decided to leave the nets up all day and just furl them at night.

Other than the job in hand, there's nothing much to do at the site, so while Yakup and the students were relaxing or doing other things during the middle of the day, I would patrol the nets every hour or so and then process the resulting catch, if any. In general, of course, most of the birds were caught in the first two or three hours of the day, with a little flurry in the last hour or so. As the weather got colder, we found we were catching nothing much after sunset, so we cleared the nets soon after dark and furled them, giving us the evening free. Earlier in the season, ringers had been operating for much of the early night and resting during the heat of the day, but now it was October and I soon found that this strategy was mostly a waste of precious sleeping time.

My arrival at Kuyucuk coincided almost exactly with the arrival of huge flocks of Calandra Larks *Melanocorypha calandra* (307). They were particularly active in the early morning and late afternoon and swirled around us in a similar manner to Queleas *Quelea quelea* before settling in the short grass to sleep or forage. Considering that they were frequently in flocks up to about 2000, it is not surprising that we caught and ringed more than 300 in the 11 days I was there, and not a single retrap.

On the Monday morning, my first full day at the lake, the first 10 birds out of the nets were all Calandra Larks. After the initial routine book searching for identification, they became an absolute pleasure to handle. They are a nice size to hold (about the same as a bulbul), and they don't struggle at all - well, most of them don't. I do recall one particularly aggressive male who chirped and twitched the whole time. Calandra Larks sexes can be separated on wing size (females 116 - 126, males 128 - 141 mm) with about 99% accuracy, and this particular male was at the very lower end of its range. I concluded that it was being aggressive to make up for its diminutive size. Although quiet in the hand, these larks always had a lot to say when released (very reminiscent of our White-browed Sparrow Weavers *Plocepasser mahali*). I decided that their parting words translated to "Thank you for the ring, have a nice day". Yeah, right!

On a more scientific note, I found that females outnumbered males by almost exactly 4 to 1. I also did an analysis of hind claw length which showed that although the males had a slightly greater average claw length than females (17 vs 16mm), the female range (11 to 24mm) completely overlapped the male range (14 to 21mm).

Later that day, we had our first Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus* (7), Moustached Warbler *Acrocephalus melanopogon* (29) and pretty little Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica* (34), the latter species being in the same genus as the usually drab Nightingales.

If you are a food lover like me, and you enjoy looking for new culinary experiences, Kuyucuk would not be among your top choices. In the great spectrum of epicurean delights, the offerings were filling and wholesome, but definitely not cordon bleu. Breakfast was usually a kind of omelette with tomatoes and some sort of chopped up spicy sausage thrown in (I never had the courage to ask what it was made of). When ready, the pan it had been cooked in was plonked unceremoniously in the middle of the table and everyone was given a fork and a lump of dry bread. (I never once saw margarine or butter at either ringing site.) Surprisingly, the bread which was only delivered every week or so, and already sliced at that, stayed remarkably fresh. I'm told there is some special ingredient which goes into this particular bread to keep it from going stale. To eat, one bit mouthfuls of bread from a lump held in one hand and took forkfuls of the shared omelette with the other until all the food was gone.

Yakup soon had me groaning in disgust when he smeared his bread with a liberal helping of chocolate spread and continued to eat this with the omelette; somehow, I never imagined anyone eating chocolate omelette. "I like sweet" he declared. However, he soon got his own back when I put milk in my tea - unheard-of in Turkey - he and the students were convulsed with laughter and loathing at my strange habit. Lunch was usually some weird combination of what was available. One memorable meal consisted of freshly boiled pasta - and nothing else! To make this relatively boring and tasteless meal more appetising, someone had the brilliant idea of pouring on tomato ketchup.

When you are hungry, it's relatively good. Maybe I'll make it at home, but then again, maybe not.

The next day's ringing included a Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* (7) and a small group of Rock Sparrows *Petronia petronia* (4) which we never saw subsequently. These are considerably bulkier than our slim-line Yellow-throated Petronia *Petronia superciliaris*, but still sported the yellow throat spot which soon led to the correct identification. I couldn't help wondering why our Yellow-throated Petronia is so-called if all petronias have a yellow spot on their throat, at least, all three of the European species do. Ours would surely be more aptly called the White-browed Petronia, as indicated by its scientific name and its more obvious feature, wouldn't it?

During the middle of the morning, Yakup and I were disturbed by shouting and went out to see Yusuf running towards us flapping his arms madly. We rushed back to the reeds with him and found Ali struggling with an immature Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea* (1) caught in the net. Yakup quickly took charge and soon had the hapless bird under control. He gave the students a quick lecture about the danger posed by herons and the like. When cornered and under stress like this, they have been known to attempt to stab their captors in the eyes with their sharp pointed bill. Zephné Bernitz likes to tell a story about her husband who was once attacked in the face by a Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus*; she shows the photograph of her bloodied spouse, announcing that "Herman was a little bitten by a Little Bittern!"

Day 4 produced the first of several Common Starlings *Sturnus vulgaris* (14), which seen up close, are very prettily marked with little heart-shaped spots. More importantly that day, we were visited by Cagan and a whole government delegation who were there to begin the process which would eventually lead to Lake Kuyucuk being declared a RAMSAR site. Under Turkish law, the site first has to be declared a "Nature Development Area" which was the purpose of the visit by officials. They had a detailed topographical map of the lake and its surroundings and first went off to do a final survey before marking all of the key features on the map. When the map had been suitably marked, a short, hand-written document was prepared and signed by several of those present. Thus done and signed, Lake Kuyucuk officially became a Nature Development Area. Unfortunately, as Cagan later explained, this status affords the lake very little real protection, and there are two more stages which must be gone through before RAMSAR status can be conferred. Nevertheless, it was an all-important start and Cagan was visibly delighted.

KuzeyDoga used first year University biology students at the ringing stations; the students gained valuable course credits merely from their presence on site. Frankly, I could never understand what KuzeyDoga gained from their participation, and I reasoned that it was probably just a charitable gesture. Ali and Yusuf were the two young lads at Kuyucuk when I arrived, and they used to do most of the net rounds, except during the quiet middle of the day when I did most of them myself. They rarely assisted with anything else; if they had helped with meal preparation, or cleaning and tidying up, etc., I could have made a case for them being there. If they understood English, I could have tried to encourage an interest in birds and their conservation, but neither spoke more than a word or two in my tongue.

On Thursday, 9 Oct., Ali and Yusuf were replaced. I had just about got into a routine with Yakup, Rakesh and the students and now they were going home. Önder

arrived at the site with not two, but three new students and one, Aysu, was female! Thoughts of some decent meals crossed my mind, especially when I saw that she was not so slim (she reminded me of the saying "never trust a thin chef"). All fantasies concerning an improvement in our meals quickly evaporated in the days that followed.

When the new students arrived, I immediately started wondering about the sleeping arrangements. Previously, Rakesh and I had shared the brick building, Yakup and Ali had shared the small tent behind the caravan, and Yusuf had slept on a bench in the caravan. I assumed Aysu would sleep in the caravan while either Ulvi or Umut, the two new male students, would sleep in one of the bunks above Rakesh or me.

When he left on that Thursday afternoon, Önder took a bag of dirty washing from me for cleaning; this included two of the three pairs of shorts I had with me. I joked that it wouldn't need to be back the next day, but Saturday would do as I would be running out of clean stuff by then. Little did I know....

That evening, Rakesh and I climbed into bed as usual and read for a while with our torches. Soon, Ulvi came in and climbed into the bunk above Rakesh. Imagine our surprise when Aysu followed a short time later and climbed into the bunk above me! The next day, it was apparent from all the coughing, sniffing and sneezing that Aysu had acquired a nice cold; perhaps this was good for the rest of us as, from that second day, she slept by herself in the caravan and only Ulvi bunked down with Rakesh and me.

The next day produced our first Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus* (11) which is remarkably similar to the Chiffchaff. Scientifically, one separates them on a few key features of the wing formula, but with experience, one can normally say straight away which species one has. This day also produced our one and only Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula* (1) - now why do I feel a pun coming on?

In the middle of the morning, our "security officer", Mehmet arrived with a Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo* (1), although exactly how he had acquired it escaped us. I ringed and processed it as normal and when we released it, it only flew about 30 metres before settling into a reed bed where it stayed the whole day. We were easily able to recover it that evening so we kept it in a box where it would be warmer. We released it again the next day, but it was still reluctant to fly away, but it did eventually make its way a bit further into some other reeds. It stayed there all day and when we went to recover it again for another night in our makeshift hotel, it took flight again and landed about a kilometre away. At that point we decided to leave it to nature and we never saw it again.

The nets at Kuyucuk were either strung across narrow strips of reed bed, or set perpendicular to the shore of the lake out into the shallow water. In general, the latter tended to catch waders, especially Dunlin *Calidris alpina* (11) and Little Stint *Calidris minuta* (25), while the reed beds provided us with various passerines. The substrate in the reed beds was sticky black mud with a shallow covering of water; it was that kind of mud that wants to hold onto you and not let go. I developed a technique of twisting my foot as I lifted it out of the water to take the next step, but often two or three twists were necessary to dislodge the foot and so one had to be very careful not to lose one's balance. I suppose it was inevitable that one morning, while unfurling the nets, having become a little over-confident, I took a step forward and my body moved, but my foot didn't. Next second, I was sitting in the muddy water cursing loudly. Luckily, no-one else was around to share my embarrassment.

My shorts and the back of my coat (it was -2° C at the time) bore the brunt, but I didn't have another pair of shorts as Önder hadn't yet returned my washing, so I had to put on a pair of long trousers. I dried the coat and shorts by laying them on the concrete steps and allowing them to dry in the sun. I found that once dry, the mud brushed off the coat fairly easily, but the shorts were another story. Two days later, when Önder had still not returned my washing, I decided to wash out the shorts by hand under the tap of the water trailer. Not perfect, but by the time the sun had done its job, they were at least wearable.

One of the things I learned about Turks is that they are not altogether reliable; I should have guessed from the incident at the airport that when Önder said he would return my washing in "a day or two", it wasn't going to happen. I'm afraid I'm rather spoilt when it comes to washing; we have a magic box in our bathroom at home where I put my dirty washing each night. After a day or two, it disappears and re-appears by magic in my wardrobe, all clean and freshly ironed. So when Önder eventually returned my bag of washing six days later, I was somewhat taken aback to get a heap of clothes which had obviously just come straight from the washing machine - not even dry!

Saturday, 11th was notable only for our sole Sedge Warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus* (1) and the fact that I had almost run out of clean clothes.

We were frequently visited by the head of the village and his son Mehmet who had brought us the buzzard. One or other (and sometimes both) would normally drive from the village in their tractor and then spend several hours drinking tea with us and even sharing our meals. We often had two visits a day and sometimes they would make themselves useful by chasing horses or cattle from the proximity of our nets, but I'm not convinced that either had anything really useful to contribute to the project.

A couple of my visits to the village were made somewhat easier by getting a lift with Mehmet on his father's tractor. It was a rough ride with precarious hand-holds, but the discomfort was worthwhile just for the time it saved. On one particular day I only got an opportunity to shower late in the afternoon. Mehmet took me on the tractor and said I must just call at his house opposite the school when I was ready to return. It was beginning to get dark by the time I reached the shower so I turned the light on for the first time, discovering with great delight that this simple action was enough to get the water heater to work! Until that evening, I had been enduring almost cold showers, but subsequent repeat tests proved that the shower heater worked fine as long as the lights were on. It made the whole experience a lot more pleasant, especially since the weather was becoming decidedly cooler.

Refreshed and content from my best shower yet, I trotted across the road to call Mehmet. His English was not strong enough for him to explain what was happening, but he seemed not to be getting the tractor out. After a couple of minutes, his young brother came over to me with a small pony and asked me to hold it by the reins. As at the airport, my mind started creating all sorts of worrying scenarios; I had only been on a horse once before in my life, and that one was much bigger and had a saddle. The pony and I eyed each other benignly. I was rather relieved when, after a few more minutes had passed, Mehmet appeared from a nearby barn with a small, two-wheeled cart which he and his brother soon hitched up to the pony. Mehmet sat on one wheel arch and I sat on the other for the five minute trip back across the fields. The experience was both pleasant and memorable, being the first time I had used such a mode of transport.

On the Sunday, exactly a week after my arrival, we had another interesting experience. We were relaxing in the early afternoon when we saw a group of local people approaching across the fields from the direction of the village. There were about 20 people altogether; one person was on a bicycle, several more were on a cart drawn by a horse, but most were on foot. Their quiet, unexpected appearance over the brow of the hill was like something out of a Jane Austen novel. After Yakup had conversed with them, it transpired that they had come to Kuyucuk for a wedding and were now on a relaxing walk before going home. A couple of young girls delighted in looking through our telescopes at the birds on the lake, while an older woman in what was presumably fairly traditional garb, and who seemed to be the matriarch of the group was quite relaxed as I took a few photos of her and the rest of her entourage. After about half an hour, they all slipped away as quietly as they had arrived.

Monday was only notable for the first Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* (6) and the first Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus* (3). As most South African ringers know, one has to be extremely careful in separating Reed Warblers from the almost identical Marsh Warbler *Acrocephalus palustris*. I used the Wallinder score method plus a couple of other less accurate features. The measurements taken for this exercise must be done very carefully; I would normally repeat each 2 or 3 times to make sure not to make a mistake. However, in all cases, the result came out clearly in the range of the Reed Warbler and in fact, no Marsh Warblers were caught while I was there.

That evening, I spoke to Cagan on the phone and he told me that the BBC were coming to make a short documentary about Kuyucuk. Cagan had found out that the BBC World crew (normally based in Istanbul) were in the area covering a story about the re-opening of the border with Armenia. Cagan persuaded the group to delay their return by a day and do a short piece on Kuyucuk. The following morning, the trio consisting of Turkey-based English interviewer Sarah Rainsford, plus English-speaking Turkish cameraman and female sound engineer arrived before dawn to get pictures of the sun coming up in the area. They stayed most of the morning filming all aspects of the site including an off-the-cuff interview with yours truly. That night I dreamed of fame, fortune and Hollywood, but once I'd seen the finished 3 minute clip, I came back to reality. I'll stick to bird-ringing. For those who may be curious, the clip can be viewed at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7789585.stm>

while there is a photo of me doing the interview at:

<http://picasaweb.google.com/cagan1/KarsAndIgdirdirFieldwork#5295925421699232338>

On the Wednesday, it was time to close the site for the season. We ringed birds until lunch time and then closed and took down all of the nets. I was rather appalled at the way in which the nets were just pushed into bags after tying the loops together in a bunch. I couldn't help feeling sorry for the poor guys who would have to untangle each net in the spring. The poles were loaded onto the back of a cart supplied courtesy of Mehmet with his tractor. We eventually took these to the old school and loaded them inside through a window. The remaining supplies, pots, pans, etc were quickly bundled into Önder's vehicle and taken to some other storage facility in the village. With everything stored away for winter, we put our own belongings in the vehicle and climbed aboard for the trip back to Kars.

As we left, I couldn't resist glancing over my shoulder for a last wistful look at the lake which had been my home for the previous 11 days. I would miss the lake and its birds, but I was looking forward to better living conditions at Aras River.



Entrance to Kuyucuk Lake



Our 5* Hotel



Breakfast with Mehmet & father, Yakup serving



The wedding party



Turkish girls looking through our telescopes



Wedding party matriarch