



# IRAN

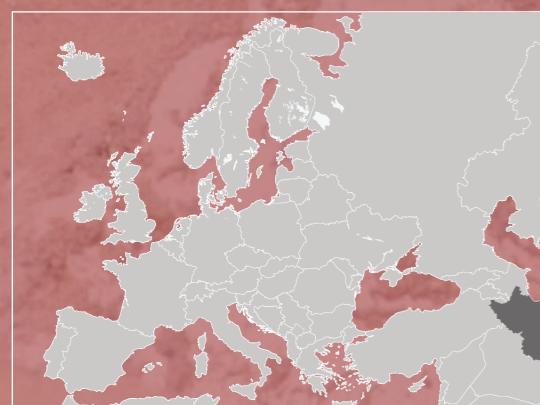
## The ultimate birdwatching destination



Iran is a huge country, around five times the UK, situated at the edge of the western palearctic region, and inside its boundaries there is a very large diversity of habitats, from high mountains (more than 5000 metres) to sea coasts (actually two different seas, the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf), from immense wetlands to forests and semi-deserts, this one being the most widespread habitat. During a single tour it's impossible to pay a visit to all of these different habitats, so we decided to concentrate on places which are able to offer the best set of Iran's birdlife, which is of course highly varied and particularly appealing for the western european birdwatcher:

Some of the birds present in Iran are among the most wanted on the wish list for the region for almost every birder: See-see partridge, Black Francolin, Indian Pond Heron, Steppe Eagle, Shikra, Great Stone Curlew, Crab Plover; Egyptian Nightjar; Indian Roller; Grey Hypocolius, Hume's Wheatear...to name but a few. During a tour in springtime, these and many more species (up to a total of almost 200) can be seen, visiting mainly different semidesert areas, agricultural land, huge wetlands, large mangrove forests and mud flats on the sea coast. Being such a huge country, visiting Iran means that you can experience also different conditions and temperatures: you can find snow in Tehran and enjoy 30+ celsius degrees in the lowlands after a short domestic flight, so be prepared for some variation weatherwise.

Iran hosts the last wild population of Asiatic cheetahs, mainly in and around Turan National Park: there are about a few dozens left of this beautiful animal, and though it's not easy at all to see, there are still chances to spot them in the open plains of the park, where Persian Wild Ass is much easier to see, and also the endemic Pleske's Ground Jay is present.



## IRAN Birdwatching & Photography



SKUA Nature promotes and develops nature tourism in Iran in collaboration with Iran Doostan Tour. Our goal is to create nature itineraries for birdwatching and photographic tours, and we also try to develop botanical and butterfly tours.

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We shall visit the very interesting Qeshm island in the Hormuz Strait, in the waters of the Persian Gulf: on the northern shore of this desert island, lies a very large mangrove forest, one of the biggest in the region. We will explore by boat the thrilling complex of mangroves and mudflats, which holds thousands of birds, usually fairly easy to approach at close range, thus allowing very good photo opportunities: Crab Plover and Great Stone Curlew are probably the star birds here, but the quality and quantity of birds here is really exciting, and thanks to its position, rare species can also turn up anytime. Indian Pond Heron is another species to look for, as well as Clamorous (Indian) Reed Warbler singing from the mangroves, while Greater Flamingo, Dalmatian Pelican, Slender-billed Gull, Western Reef Heron, Lesser crested Tern and of course loads of waders (including Broad-billed Sandpiper and both Sand Plovers) are much easier and very conspicuous.

On the island itself, where great desert environment is present, a different set of birds takes the scene: See-see Partridge (if we're lucky right at our feet at a drinking place!), Hume's Wheatear, Little Green Bee-eater, Indian Roller, Purple Sunbird and Brown-necked Raven shouldn't be hard to find, among other interesting species. Back on the mainland, exploring the coastal areas around the town of Bandar Abbas, could allow us to find other interesting species, with chances for Spotted Little Owl, Indian Sand Lark and Indian Silverbill.



Further west, Mesopotamia is waiting for us, in the Khuzestan province, which is, birdwise, arguably the most interesting one in Iran: the immense Shadegan wetland is here, to the south towards the sea, while a bit more to the north lies a very rich area where a mix of agricultural and more natural land provides great habitats for a thrilling set of species. Shadegan is truly impressive: it's a wetland which stretches literally as far as the eye can see, full of birds and devoid of roads, and therefore not easy to explore by the way. But a few places are readily accessible by car and on foot, allowing stunning views of endless expanses of reedbeds and open shallow waters, while at its edges a steppe like habitat is predominant. Species like Marbled Teal, Ferruginous duck, White-tailed Lapwing, Blue Checked Bee-eater, Clamorous Reed Warbler, Graceful Prinia and Mesopotamian Crow are present, to name but a few: during early spring a major raptor flyway passes through here, and in a few hours you can see hundreds of large raptors flying over at low height, including Imperial, Steppe and both Greater and Lesser Spotted Eagles! Of course, like every wetland, Shadegan acts as magnet for migrants, so almost anything can turn up here, so be prepared also for some serious rarity!



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Another hot spot is in the heart of the Khuzestan province, where some fascinating and most wanted species are present: Grey Hypocolius arrive here in april (though a few birds could be present also earlier in the season), while the two Babblers, Afghan Babbler and Iraq Babbler, are resident, and it will be interesting and challenging to find both of them, being quite similar but frequenting slightly different habitats. Black winged Kites have started to breed in the area, and it shouldn't be hard to find them, just like the three species of kingfisher, often in the very same stretch of river: Common, Pied and White-throated Kingfisher. Other great birds here are Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, Menetries's Warbler, Red-wattled Lapwing and Egyptian Nightjar.

Mighan lake is a very large salt lake at high altitude near the town of Arak: situated in a steppe-like area, with mountains on the background, it hosts tens of thousands of birds, varying of course according to the season. During the springtime there can be hundreds of Common Cranes and Greylag Geese together with many thousands of both Common and Ruddy Shelducks, as well as various species of ducks and waders (with possible eastern rarities) and large numbers of Greater Flamingos.

Iran is a perfectly safe country to visit, in spite of the perception we might have in western Europe: people are extremely friendly and always willing to help out and have a chat. In general, the life of an average iranian is much less influenced by religion than what we might think, and this is especially true for

younger people, who are curious and willing to open up to a western and secularized way of life. The presence of police or other military personnel is very unobtrusive and as a tourist you have always the feeling of being in a very relaxed and peaceful country. Infrastructure and logistics are almost invariably very good: paved roads are almost everywhere, and hundreds of kilometres can be covered by car in few hours. Domestic flight network is very well developed and commonly used everyday by thousands of iranians: service is good and reliable, the only downside being the somewhat regular (short) delays. Accommodation quality is very good and all rooms have western-style en-suite facilities; food is also good, with the typical meal being kebab with rice and vegetables.

CALENDAR **S O N D J F M A M J J A**

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