

BIRDS OF ARMENIA: PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE



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If you look the Armenia from space, it appears as a little dot. If you come closer you can recognize its shape, which looks like a woman's face profile and also you could see the big water body, which is the lake Sevan. Armenia appears to be very small, but if you decide to cross the country, it would take two-three days. Traveling in Armenia is hard because of its mountainous relief with elevation range of 370-4090m and majority of the area lying above 1000 m above sea level.

Such variety of elevation creates variety of landscapes and habitats. Different habitats are occupied by different species of birds, which are living in semi-deserts, juniper woodlands, deciduous forests, mountain steppes, subalpine zone, wetlands, and other types of habitat. Armenia is inhabited by 350 species of birds, which are migrating, breeding and wintering in the area. Such a big diversity of species is determined by geographical position of Armenia (being part of Caucasus Mountains, Armenia became a biogeography bridge between Europe and Asia) and diversity of habitats.

However the situation with birds was worsened with development of country. One of the historical milestones was the year 1936, when Soviet Government started project related to drainage of Lake Sevan and adjacent Lake Gilli. With complete drainage of the latter, many species left the area and several of them left Armenia. Great Cormorant, Common Crake, Black Tern and some other species are not breeding in Armenia anymore due to lost wetland habitat. Velvet Scoter, which was breeding on the cliffs surrounding the Lake Sevan, could not survive, because the water edge went too far from the breeding cliffs, and thus ducklings had very little chances to survive traveling from the cliff to lake shore and crossing newly built road on their way.

Not only waterbirds became endangered due to lose or degradation of habitats. Houbara Bustard disappeared because of occupation of flat semi-desert area of Sardarapat Steppe by agriculture. Number of many raptor species declines because of the intensive use of DDT (very strong and persistent chlorine-organic pesticide). Several Raptor and Grouse species decline in number because of poaching.

With new stage of industrial pressure related to mining development, factory exploitation, timber production and occupation of new lands for agriculture, the danger of continuous lost of habitats is not disappearing. The worst part of it is the lack of adequate Environmental Impact Assessment, which has to answer one general question: How the current project/activity will affect the ecosystem and biodiversity? If the situation continues like now, we will lose many of our flora and fauna, including birds.

We have to remember that every habitat has its

Spoonbill - Photo by Karen Aghababyan © Acopian Center for the Environment, AUA
Spoonbill. After drainage of Lake Gilli, Spoonbills disappear from Armenia. Later in 1990s
they restarted their breeding in Armenia occupying Ararat Plain.

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own diversity of plants and insects, birds, reptiles and other organisms. Semi-deserts are inhabited by Rock-nuthatches, Wheatears, Hippolais Warblers and Buntings; juniper woodlands attract Red-fronted Serin and Sombre Tit; deciduous Forests provide "flats" in different "floors" for Woodpeckers, Thrushes, Tits, Flycatchers, Robin, Finches, and many others; subalpine areas support a very little variety of high-mountain specialists, which cannot live in lower elevation; and wetlands give food and refuge for fish-eaters like Grebes and Cormorants, for plant-eaters like Coot and Moorhen, and for invertebrate-eaters like variety of Plovers, Stilts, Avocet, and Sandpipers. Many species are adapted to live in the cities. That is why we can



Little Owl - Photo by Karen Aghababyan © Acopian Center for the Environment, AUA
 Little Owl. Can breed near human settlements helping agriculture in control of rodents' numbers.



Great Cormorant - Photo by Karen Aghababyan © Acopian Center for the Environment, AUA
 Great Cormorant. Do not breed in Armenia anymore due to lost habitat - wetlands of Gilli area.

hear Nightingale on summer evenings in Yerevan, or observe Woodpeckers, Falcons and Hoopoe in city parks. Some species are generalists and like the Black Redstart can live in every elevation and almost every habitat if the major requirement - wall with cracks or little holes - is fulfilled. Some bird species from south are started occupation of southern Transcaucasia. In 2002 Mongolian Trumpeter Finch started breeding in Armenia, in 2003 See-see Partridge occupied south of the country, in 2009 Shikra built their nests in Yerevan. Will these birds have a chance to continue living in our country, or they will find this place unfriendly? It depends on us: our attitude towards

nature, our knowledge about our environment, our understanding of issues and our readiness to change something.

Still you can see Great Cormorant visiting Armenia during winter. Still there is couple of pairs of Spoonbill, Dalmatian Pelican and Black Stork left in the country. Still you can see Lammergeyer, searching for the carrion and showing their bright orange body (so unusual for big raptor), and you can hear sharp whistle of Caspian Snowcock in high mountains. Still in spring hundreds of song-birds start displaying and singing in order to build the nest and to raise their nestlings.

We can lose these things easily, because we have high technologies allowing us to make a huge hole (digging an opencast mine) instead of outstanding mountain or to make a flat-land on the place of forest (getting timber for furniture), which was growing several hundred years. We have strength and power. We just do not have understanding of consequences.

If you move back to space, you can recognize dead spots in Armenia. Those spots do not change the color. Flowers do not bloom there in the spring and leaves do not change the color in the fall. We want that our country will keep changing colors every season.



Lammergeyer - Photo by Karen Aghababyan © Acopian Center for the Environment, AUA
 Lammergeyer. There are only 8-10 pairs of this specialized scavenger in whole Armenia.



Yellow Wagtail - Photo by Karen Aghababyan © Acopian Center for the Environment, AUA
 Yellow Wagtail. This species occupies wet meadows and marshes.