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First record of the Blackstart, *Cercomela melanura*, in Turkey

by Tomasz Cofta, Robert Lasecki and Recep Karakaş

On 3 October, 2004 (9:15 to 9:20 a.m.), we observed two individuals of the Blackstart, *Cercomela melanura*, on a steep, rocky slope several metres above the southern bank of Tigris River, circa 3 kilometres east of Suçeken (Batman province). The size and shape of the birds were reminiscent of the Redstart, *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*. Grey above, throat and belly paler (grey to pale grey), with all rectrices, upper tail-coverts and rump entirely black. The birds were perching on top of rocks at a few metres distance from each other, showing clearly their shape and colour. In short flights, the fully fanned tail and the contrast between the black rump and the slate-grey back were clearly visible. No calls were heard.

Other birds of *Phoenicurus* size and shape have no black tail and uppertail-coverts and rump contrasting with the grey back and mantle. Most similar in colour are immature (first-winter) White-throated Robins, *Irania gutturalis* (especially young females), but they have pure white throats, and grey uppertail-coverts and a rump which contrasts with the black rectrices.

For the observation, binoculars (12x50, 7-35x50, 7x50), a telescope (20-45x60) and bird guides (HEINZEL et al. 1998, GRANT et al. 1999, PORTER et al. 1996) were used.

The Blackstart is new to Turkey (KIRWAN et al. 1998). It is resident in Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Niger and Chad, with northern records from Syria from the end of October to early January. Outside the West Palaearctic, it breeds in Arabia and is distributed discontinuously in sub-Saharan Africa from Mali to Somalia (CRAMP 1998). The species breeds in warm arid lower latitudes, both temperate, subtropical, and tropical and is normally found on steep terrain rather than on level areas. The observation site, Hasankeyf in south-east Turkey, (37°71'N, 41°38'E) is the northernmost record of this species in the West Palaearctic. The habitat at the site where birds were observed seems to be quite similar to the known breeding grounds of the species – dry rocky valleys and a riverbed, surrounded by steppe. The area is around 500 m a.s.l., and generally consists of rocky hills. Except for some agricultural fields, especially near the river and the road, the main habitat type over a wide area is natural steppe.

This record of two Blackstarts has been accepted by the Polish Rarities Committee.

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