

TODAY'S ZAMAN

The rise of the Four Horsemen... Yet another nail in the coffin of Turkey's biodiversity

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Kara Göl (Black Lake) (L), Ewoud van der Ploeg at work (top right), *Anax ephippiger* (middle right), Nymph (larvae *Anax ephippiger*) (bottom right)

In a small corner of this beautiful but fading country, in the village of Okçular, Muğla, can be found all that remains of what the locals call Kara Göl or Black Lake.

It once stretched over many square kilometers of the Dalaman River flood plain until villagers cut drainage canals in the mid-1960s, making fertile land available and viable year-round. This also eliminated the scourge of malaria in the area.

What was left was a small, seasonal lake that appeared with the coming of the autumn rains and faded with the coming of summer. Small it may be, but what a gem; beautiful in its reflections, beautiful for the wide variety of birds and other wildlife that populate its shallow pools and lagoons, just beautiful!

A recent visit by two biologists, Christophe Brochard and Ewoud van der Ploeg, specialists in

dragonflies, has established beyond all doubt the importance of this quiet corner of southwestern Turkey. They came because two years ago I recorded and photographed one of Europe's and Turkey's rarest dragonflies, *Anax ephippiger* "the vagrant emperor," in my garden. Last year I recorded this beautiful creature at other sites nearby.

Where were they breeding? Black Lake was the obvious answer but scientists need proof, and now we have it. Christophe and Ewoud spent many hours over several days wading through the mud in the full heat of the sun searching for exuviae (the shed skin of the nymph).

They were successful. In fact they were not just successful, they were spectacularly successful. They found enough exuviae for their own research and to pass on to colleagues around Europe and Turkey. And the spectacular part? They found several examples of the nymph that were close to "hatching." They were able to take these to their temporary laboratory, where the process of transformation into this extremely rare and beautiful dragonfly could be photographed for the first time.

Help from 200 volunteers

Their research program covers the whole of Europe, including Turkey, with help from a small army of over 200 volunteers. The results will be published in book form some time next year and, with Christophe's camera skills, it promises to be a fascinating insight into a little understood and appreciated family of predators.

Okçular has shown itself to be a very special place with incredible biodiversity. It is the home of perhaps Turkey's rarest endemic plant, *Alkanna mughlae*. Here too is found the critically endangered, indigenous sub-species of fire salamander, *Lyciasalamandra fazliae*, and the rare, native toad *Pelosatus syriacus*, among so much else.

But, much of these will be threatened if plans to drain Kara Göl proceed. Our village is split between those who want access to their land year round and those who believe this last vestige of a once great lake should be left for all to enjoy. If the lake goes so will the frogs, toads, dragonflies, birds and many plants and Okçular, Turkey and the world will be a little poorer... and the Four Horsemen will look down and smile.