

Georgia

26 April–2 May 2012

Participants

Bart Brieffies

Robert Carr

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Great Rosefinch

Leaders Vaughan and Svetlana Ashby

Day 1: A mid afternoon Turkish Airlines flight from London Gatwick saw us arriving in Istanbul mid evening with enough time for a drink/meal before our onward flight.

Day 2: Just after midnight, we boarded our flight to Tbilisi arriving before daylight. We met Georgi, our local guide, and were soon heading westwards through the city along the River Kura. As we turned off the main east west highway and started heading north towards Russia dawn was breaking but we didn't stop as the best birding was ahead in the mountains. Eventually, in the distance, we could see snow-covered peaks but there was very little snow left, it was obviously an early spring. Timing of this tour is always difficult as two of the main target birds, White-winged Redstart and Great Rosefinch are altitudinal and very hardy so they can return upslope long before their breeding season in June and July. As we left the valley and climbed up the mountains through the ski resorts, we left spring and returned to winter, as there were no leaves on the trees now. There was also little sign of snow and the situation remained the same as we reached the pass. On the north side of the pass we had brief views of a Horned Lark (*penicillata*) before stopping to eat our packed breakfasts. During this time we scanned the slopes on both sides and it didn't take us long to find our first Caucasian Grouse. Eventually we found seven including two females and although as always they were quite a distance away (they are very shy!), it wasn't difficult to make out all the features including the distinctively-shaped tail and red comb above the eye. We also heard Caucasian Snowcock calling in the distance but despite our best efforts couldn't actually see it. Water Pipits in various plumages were everywhere as were migrating White Wagtails. Continuing down the pass, we stopped on the bridge at the entrance to an avalanche shelter to look for Wallcreeper. No luck with that but we did see our first Red-billed and Yellow-billed Choughs as well as a White-throated Dipper. More importantly however, we found a small flock of Fire-fronted Serins, another much-wanted bird by many. Continuing down slope, we stopped at another bridge and were immediately rewarded with outstanding views of a pair of Wallcreepers including a singing male. Other new birds added included Black Redstart, Northern Wheatear and Twite. By now, as it was warming up, raptors were on the move including Steppe Buzzards, a single European Honey-buzzards and a trio of harriers, Western Marsh-harrier, Montagu's Harrier and the star bird, Pallid Harrier. However, the most unexpected raptor was much smaller; a beautiful male Levant Sparrowhawk. Eventually, we reached the village of Stepantsminda and birded the old

fishponds on the outskirts. Several Mountain Chiffchaffs were seen together with a Eurasian Bullfinch and our only Green Sandpiper of the tour whilst a Golden Eagle glided along the ridge but no sign of any White-winged Redstarts or Great Rosefinches. As it was late morning by now, we checked into our hotel followed by lunch. In the small park next to the hotel we found Eurasian Treecreeper, Blue, Coal and Great Tits. The views from the hotel rooms were spectacular and depending on whether you were facing east or west you got the close rugged peaks rising to 4,451 meters or the magnificent Kazbegi peak at 5,033 meters with its glacier. In the afternoon, we headed out to the lower slopes on the east side of the valley but despite an extensive search, still we could find neither White-winged Redstart nor Great Rosefinch. Compensation was had however, with a number of other new species including Common Cuckoo, Rufous-tailed Rock-thrush and Ring Ouzel but pride of place went to superb views of two mighty Lammergeiers, this is surely one of the best places in the world for spectacular views. By now, everyone was pretty tired so we headed backed to the hotel for dinner and the log.

Day 3: An early start and we were back to the slopes on the east side of the valley to look for snowcocks. Within a few minutes we were hearing them and eventually we found a calling male. By diligently scanning the slopes we were to eventually see no less than five of these amazing birds during the course of the morning as well as a further two Caucasian Grouse. Job done, so we headed back for breakfast before returning to the same slopes. We started at the same place we had finished earlier and carefully worked the buckthorn bushes at the bottom on the slope. By now the group had spread out to check as much ground as we could when suddenly we found a pair of Great Rosefinches feeding in the grassy boulder slopes. Gradually everyone caught up and we were treated to prolonged views of these very localised birds. The male in particular sat up on rocks for a couple of minutes showing his raspberry-red spotted plumage to very good effect. Fuelled by our success we re-doubled our efforts to find the redstart and amazingly, within a relatively short time we found a male White-winged Redstart feeding in the bushes. It was equally obliging and we spent a considerable time admiring it as it sat on the top of the buckthorn bushes. With Mountain Chiffchaffs also in the bushes, we had seen no less than 5 of the 6 specialty birds of the area, an amazing achievement and as if to celebrate, Lammergeiers drifted over us again giving us a very close fly-past and good numbers of Eurasian Griffons were present. So it was back to the hotel for lunch where Eurasian Crag-martins were present and in the afternoon, we explored the Terek River valley. In the village of Kobi (largely abandoned) good numbers of Fire-fronted Serins were present. Turning west along the valley, valley roadside birds included our first Whinchats, Northern Wheatear, two Red-throated Pipits and Ring Ouzels were almost common! Eventually we reached the abandoned village of Ketrisi and were surprised to see a Russian MI8 helicopter parked outside a house on the opposite side of the valley. It later transpired that this is used for taking climbers to Kazbegi! We carefully checked the fields around the abandoned village and were rewarded with excellent views of Twite, Common Sandpiper, Horned Lark and several stunning male Rufous-tailed Rock-thrushes. So, after along day in the field we headed back to our hotel for dinner.

Day 4: An early morning visit to the marshes south of town to look for Corn Crake. Eventually, after a bit of a cat and mouse game, we enjoyed brief views (one of them was in flight!). During our search, we also found two Ortolan Buntings. Sky Larks were singing over the heavily-grazed grassland and as we walking across it we found several Red-throated Pipits on passage together with Black-headed Wagtails. We then headed further south towards the pass looking for White-winged Snowfinch. Normally they are quite easy to find but this year with little snow around they were less conspicuous. Nevertheless, our efforts were rewarded and we found a very confiding pair. With the border having recently been re-opened with Russia, traffic was a lot greater than in previous years and some of the large lorries were totally unsuitable for the extremely poor road conditions. So much so that the road ahead of us became blocked by a lorry stuck in the mud so we turned around and headed back north to our hotel for lunch. In the afternoon, we decided to try the western side of the valley. First we checked an area of woodland by the junction of the road to Kazbegi and were rewarded with a small fall of warblers. Together with Common Chiffchaffs and a couple of Willow Warblers we were delighted to find a Green Warbler. This bird normally only arrives in numbers mid May with the first birds arriving early May so we were very pleased to get this one. Sadly, it wasn't viewable for long and was obviously intent on moving on. We wound our way up through the narrow streets of Gergeti and then into the pastures above us where the Caucasian race of Eurasian Jay gave excellent views. We then walked up the

path towards Tsminda Sameba church. The birch woodlands were leafless and only Coal Tits were conspicuous until we found a recently-arrived Tree Pipit. At first we quietly watched the bird from a distance but eventually decided to move closer. Little did we know that it would remain absolutely motionless allowing us to approach within five metres!

Day 5: This morning we headed back to the wood close to Gergeti village but there was no sign of any warblers. Heading through the narrow streets and up through the pastures we drove all the way to Tsminda Sameba church this time. The views were spectacular and some went inside the church whilst others birded outside. We then started the walk up towards Kazbegi mountain but there was no need to go too far as we had already seen the specialty birds and the walk was long and hard! During our short walk, we did enjoy good numbers of both species of chough and on the next hillside two Caucasian Grouse were seen flying along the skyline. We then decided to walk back down the hill, firstly on the road and then on a track. There were very few birds about although some wonderful Camberwell Beauty butterflies kept our interest. Eventually we descended to yesterday's Tree Pipit spot and were pleased to see the Caucasian race of Eurasian Wren. Meeting our drivers, we returned down through Gergeti and checked the woods again but what caught our attention were good numbers of Eurasian Griffons circling and landing on the east side of the river. A quick drive around to the spot gave us excellent views of up to 20 birds although they were quite shy and those on the ground soon took off. Obviously there was a carcass on the opposite side of the ravine and as an added bonus two Lammergeiers also came to check out the action! This made us rather late for lunch but nobody minded! During lunch a couple of Peregrines were seen soaring over the cliff below Tsminda Sameba church. After lunch we headed a short distance south then east towards the village of Sno. There was very little evidence of migration except for a Eurasian Hoopoe so after half an hour with the track deteriorating we decided to head back to some fishponds. A walk around these and along the adjacent river added several species to our list including Grey Heron, Little Ringed Plover, Wood Sandpiper and Ruff along with many Common Sandpipers and several White-throated Dippers. With the sun still shining as we returned to the main road, we checked the large grazing area south of Stepantsminda to look for migrants and were surprised to see a pratincole. Notoriously difficult to identify without good (or flight) views we approached carefully and were pleased to find that it was the much rarer Black-winged Pratincole. This was re-enforced when eventually it flew off show the characteristic black underwing with no white trailing edge.

Day 6: Our last morning in Stepantsminda so we headed up pre-breakfast to the slopes on the east side of the valley. We were rewarded with sightings of two more Caucasian Grouse, a single Caucasian Snowcock and good numbers of migrating Yellow Wagtails and Water Pipits. Once again we started checking the scree slopes and buckthorn bushes and were extremely pleased to find up to six Great Rosefinches with both males and females perching up on the bushes. Not only that, as a female White-winged Redstart was seen by some of the group. With Mountain Chiffchaffs being quite numerous now we had once again see five out of the six specialty birds within an hour! We returned to the hotel for breakfast followed by an exciting few minutes around the park where Whiskered Tern and both Spotted and Red-breasted Flycatchers were seen. Once again we headed to the wood on the edge of Gergeti but only Common Chiffchaffs and Willow Warblers were present. After returning to the hotel and packing up, we headed south for the last time towards the pass firstly stopping for brief views of a European Roller then European Bee-eaters migrating north. Our next stop was at the tunnel for Alpine Accentor, which eventually showed very well. Continuing up over the pass our journey was rudely interrupted by a traffic jam behind a lorry stuck in the mud. They tried to move it but without success so we were getting concerned that we were going to be severely delayed. The police arrived, good we thought. They had a look at the situation but just drove off! Vehicles then tried to get around it with the first ones making the situation even worse. Eventually common sense prevailed and out came some shovels and the edge of the road was leveled to allow some vehicles (including ours!) to pass. We lost less than an hour so we were OK and still had time to stop for lunch in Mleta which consisted of delicious Khachapuri, a kind of cheese pastry not dissimilar to pizza! We continued our journey down the pass to the valley bottom where we were met with the extraordinary sight of thousands of goats and sheep coming up the hill to their summer pastures. We made a number of stops to try for Green Warblers for those who wanted better views but unfortunately without success. We did however; add Purple Heron and Middle Spotted Woodpecker to our list. Eventually we reached

Anaruri Castle for a brief cultural stop before continuing our journey back to Tbilisi for an overnight stay seeing our first Common Swifts of the tour around our hotel.

Day 7: An early start to catch a 04.15 flight from Tbilisi to Istanbul. As we gained an hour on the flight we arrived before 06.00 and with our onward flight not until 12.20, we had arranged to visit the Bosphorus. After clearing immigration, we met our local ground agent who had arranged for a bus to take us to a ferry crossing on the Bosphorus straits. Everything went like clockwork and by 08.00 we were joining the throngs of commuters crossing between Europe and Asia. Alpine and Common Swifts screamed over our heads around the ferry terminal and the *desmarestii* race of European Shag swam around the ferries. The crossing takes only around 15–20 minutes and the interesting bit is in the middle where flocks of Yelkouan Shearwaters can be seen commuting between the Black and Mediterranean Seas. We were not disappointed and were soon enjoying good views of flocks of Yelkouan Shearwaters as they skillfully avoided the numerous ships. We remained on the boat on the Asian side of the straits watching Yellow-legged Gulls and a single Caspian Gull before making the return journey. With plenty of time in hand, we decided to repeat the journey to enjoy more views of shearwaters and this completely confused the ticket collector who insisted that we got off and then back on again! Fortunately our ground agent was able to explain what we were doing and all was well! After the second return journey, we took a walk on the European side to have some breakfast and view the Blue Mosque. Breakfast was taken in traditional Turkish style in a local restaurant before we had brief looks at the Blue Mosque from the outside. All the time, Alpine Swifts were giving spectacular views whilst a couple of Laughing Doves and Alexandrine Parakeet were added to the list. With time running out, we returned to the airport to catch our onward flight back to the UK landing in Gatwick mid afternoon at the end of a very enjoyable and productive tour.