

Kazakhstan

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Participants:

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Picture: Saxaul Sparrow

Leaders:

Algirdas Knystautas and

Vaughan Ashby

Day 1: Check-in at London Heathrow for our Turkish Airlines flight at 04.55 for departure at 06.55. Arrived in the modern Istanbul airport where we were able to bird from the terminal building seeing a male Red-backed Shrike, Barn Swallows, Hooded Crows and flights of Great Cormorants and Caspian Gulls over the Sea of Marmora. Leaving Istanbul at 17.30 local time, we arrived in Almaty at 02.30 next day.

Day 2: Everyone cleared customs smoothly except me as an eagle-eyed immigration officer had spotted a very slight wobble in the handwriting on the number in the date of the Visa! Eventually they gave me another visa (for a fee!) but this resulted in a delay of over one-hour and meant that we were unable to leave the airport until 04.00. Met Algirdas and the bus driver and were treated to some Champagne before the two-hour drive into the mountains where we were to stay at the old astronomical observatory for two nights at 2,800 metres. The drive up the mountains was in a four-wheel drive bus, which was rather fortunate as the road was appalling and it was pouring with rain. It was too late for any sleep on arrival as it was already getting light so after a quick wash and breakfast, we headed straight out to bird but unfortunately, we were defeated by rain and fog. Before getting soaking wet therefore, we decided to return to the observatory for coffee and cake. This was definitely a good plan as when we looked outside again, than there was a great improvement in the weather and we were able to bird around the observatory for a couple of hours before lunch. The first birds seen were the common but rather drab Hodgson's Rosy-finch and the beautiful Red-fronted Serins. Grey-headed Goldfinch, looking distinctly different to their commoner cousins, showed well and brief views of a superb male White-winged Grosbeak was well received. More familiar species included Carrion Crow and Water Pipit. After lunch we drove down towards Bolshoi Almaty Reservoir seeing Black-throated Accentor and two Ruddy Shelducks en-route. At the reservoir, it didn't take long to find what for some was the star bird of the tour, Ibisbill. Not satisfied with a view of one only 60 metres away, it subsequently flew towards and landed within 30 metres of us, giving superb views in the by now warm sunshine. A second bird then appeared about 60 metres away and walked away with a strong limp which may have been a distraction display so we left the birds alone, well satisfied. The scenery here is spectacular and high up on the rocky crags we could hear the haunting calls of Himalayan Snowcocks but unfortunately could not locate any. Heading back towards the observatory therefore, we made several stops en-route, one of which to see Songar Tit but unfortunately Coal Tit was nesting in its usual nestbox. Compensation however, was found in the form of two splendid male Eversmann's Redstarts with more familiar birds coming in the form of a Tree Pipit and Mistle Thrush. Arriving back at the observatory, we found two more Ruddy Shelducks in the grassy valley and were surprised to see Common Myna at this altitude. On the Juniper covered hillside in amongst more Red-fronted Serins and White-winged Grosbeaks, we found two splendid male Red-mantled Rosefinches, a marvellous end to an excellent first day. After dinner we were all glad to see our beds although, it seemed strange going to sleep at 21.00 when it was still a half-light outside.

Day 3: The morning dawned bright and clear with absolutely incredible views over the Tien Shan Mountains and brief views of a male Himalayan Rubythroat singing from a juniper outside the observatory. After an early breakfast, we drove up another 500 metres to a dilapidated seismographic and meteorological station accompanied by flocks of both Red-billed and Yellow-billed Choughs. A stop en-route to look at two Himalayan Snowcocks flying across the valley was followed by good views of a male stood on top of a hill 500 metres away. Resuming our journey upwards, we were surprised to find another pair of Himalayan Snowcocks on the grassy slope only 25 metres from the bus before they flew right in front of us. Hodgson's Rosy-finch were numerous around the buildings but far more attractive and much rarer were the two pairs of Goldenstadt's Redstarts, the males of which were extremely beautiful. It is difficult to believe that these insectivorous birds live at this altitude

virtually year round. Four Brandt's Rosy-finches were seen well but briefly by several members of the group but the only accentors which could be found were Brown Accentors. An immature Golden Eagle soared majestically across the face of the mountain but sadly despite the beautiful weather, the only other raptor seen was Common Kestrel. A large flock of Brandt's Rosy-finches flew over with one bird settling long enough for everyone to see it well. Finally, after much searching, we located the last accentor, Himalayan or Altai Accentor, on a nearby scree slope. Returning down the mountain, we passed a couple of Northern Wheatears. Visiting a small patch of Juniper woodland on the scree slope above the observatory valley floor, we saw both Hume's & Sulphur-bellied Warblers together with a single male Severtzov's Tit-warbler and a couple of superb male Himalayan Rubythroats, which sang beautifully from the bushes. After packing our cases and collecting our packed lunches, we headed down the mountain towards Almaty again. A number of stops were made en-route, the first of which gave us good prolonged views of a pair of Blue Whistling-thrushes, a normally elusive species. A displaying and singing male Blue-headed Redstart was seen well, completing our trio of the redstarts. Our first stop at the river gave us a pair of Brown Dipper, a noticeably larger bird than the White-throated Dipper. As we left the mountains, our last stop was in a lush valley where after a half-hour search, we located an Azure Tit, which gave close prolonged views. Arriving at our comfortable modern hotel in Almaty at 17.45, we unpacked and showered before walking across the road to a park for an evening stroll. The beautiful Russian Orthodox Church provided a beautiful backdrop to the park with Red-rumped Swallow flying high above it. Other birds seen in the park included Common Blackbird and European Greenfinch. Dinner was taken in a local restaurant.

Day 4: After breakfast, we set off on the drive to Konchelgil Camp, making a number of stops en-route. Only just outside of Almaty, we worked a small lake and almost immediately, found a male Long-tailed Shrike, an uncommon bird here, along with the first of many Lesser Grey Shrikes. Several Citrine Wagtails and Masked Wagtails were seen in the grassland around the lake over which three Collared Pratincoles hawked insects. Other waders seen included Little Ringed Plover, Common Sandpiper and Northern Lapwing whilst a Corn Bunting sang from a nearby bush. Back at the bus (this time a more luxurious road bus), several Golden Orioles flew around the poplar trees. Our next stop was at a small river and series of pools where Great & Blyth's Reed-warblers were added to our lists together with Black Tern, Common Kingfisher and Common Cuckoo. Continuing our journey, a large raptor was seen and on stopping, we were treated to the sight of both Monk Vulture and European Griffon-vulture soaring overhead at very close range. We stopped to eat our lunch at Sorbulak Koli Reservoir, in the company of thousands of breeding pairs of Rose-coloured Starlings. Numerous pelicans were roosting on the far side of the lake and we eventually managed to identify both Dalmatian & White Pelicans, both on the ground and in flight. Great Cormorants were abundant and ducks included Common & Ruddy Shelducks, Mallard, Common Teal, Gadwall, Garganey, Northern Shoveler and Red-crested Pochard. Great Crested Grebes were displaying on the lake and the first of numerous Red-headed Buntings was singing on a nearby bush whilst a cloud of Rose-coloured Starlings heralded the approach of a male Western Marsh-harrier. Driving to another vantage point around the lake, numerous Calandra Larks were displaying with a Black Kite looking for the unwary whilst a European Turtle-dove walked along the track. A small flock of waders flying across the lake in front of us were Terek Sandpipers whilst a couple of Common Redshanks were a more familiar site. Continuing our journey, raptors continue to feature with two Long-legged Buzzards, two Short-toed Eagles and a single Steppe Eagle whilst a Horsfield's Tortoise didn't seem too pleased that I picked him off the road to save him from being run over! At a river valley, we stopped to look at a Chukar which obligingly sat on a concrete post allowing telescope views for everyone and at the same time, we were able to watch two male Pied Wheatears singing and display fighting from rocks on opposite sides of the road. Walking down a track into the valley, we saw a pair of Grey Wagtails and a Little Ringed Plover on a nest. A Greenish Warbler and a Common Chiffchaff were in the bushes whilst a couple of pairs of European Bee-eaters were breeding in the adjacent sandy banks. Continuing our journey, European Rollers were everywhere and in the absence of suitable holes in trees, were nesting in holes in sandy banks next to European Bee-eaters, whilst the equally numerous Hoopoes were nesting under rocks. Stopping at a petrol station to refuel, we spent some time looking at a number of migrants in the bushes which contained a good number of Greenish Warblers and a Spotted Flycatcher. As we neared our camp and began driving off road across the steppes, we started to encounter large numbers of Lesser Short-toed Larks. A Desert Warbler of the race *nana* showed well as it worked its way through the bushes whilst on the other side of the track a Demoiselle Crane fed in the marshy area formed by a natural aquifer. Arriving at the camp, we quickly unloaded all of our gear and walked to a nearby artesian well to look for the resident and passage birds. Small numbers of Black-bellied Sandgrouse flew in to drink whilst a party of eight Ruddy Shelduck ducklings provided great entertainment. A few waders present including a small party of Temminck's Stint, a superb summer plumaged Spotted Redshank and a pair of Little Ringed Plovers (probably breeding). A passage White Wagtail frequented the pools whilst a couple of pairs of Hoopoe were breeding in the dilapidated concrete pumping houses. Turning our attention to the larks, we were able to compare Greater & Lesser Short-toed Larks side by side whilst by carefully checking all the Calandra Larks we found two pairs of Bimaculated Larks, the males of which were displaying. Returning to the camp, we found a Lesser Short-toed Larks nest close to one of the toilet tents while a couple of pairs of Barn Swallows were attempting to build nests in our tents and in the bus! We ate our dinner in the dining tent as the sun went down and went to bed under a superbly clear night sky with a nearly full moon. For those who woke during the night it was incredible to hear the song of larks by moonlight.

Day 5: After a dawn cup of coffee, we walked to the waterhole again where the number of Temminck's Stints had increased to fourteen together with a single Little Stint. There were even more Black-bellied Sandgrouse than the previous evening but unfortunately no Pallas's Sandgrouse. We were however, more than compensated by two special birds, a male McQueen's Bustard displaying about 400 metres away and two Mongolian Finches coming in to drink. Another careful search through the larks yielded a couple of Oriental Larks before the call of breakfast became too strong. After breakfast we visited another artesian well where we found a Syke's Warbler and a couple of Tawny Pipits and were able to study the differences between House Sparrows as the much cleaner looking migrational form with striking white cheeks sometimes known as Indian House Sparrow could be found breeding here. Visiting a third artesian well, we were surprised to find the pair of Ruddy Shelducks with their 8 ducklings, which had walked nearly a mile across the desert. Also at the pond were female Bluethroat and Common Rosefinch. A walk around the sparsely vegetated desert failed to locate Greater Sand Plover but in amongst the numerous Greater Short-toed Larks, we found a pair of Mongolian Short-toed Larks. Overhead a spiral of raptors were all European Honey-buzzards of both the pale and dark forms. Returning to the camp for lunch, we added another bird to the camp list, Eurasian Collared-dove. In the afternoon we drove towards Lake Balkhash seeing the 'Steppe' form of

Southern Grey Shrike together with Isabelline Shrike en-route. Stopping at a series of small lakes, we continued to add new species including Little Grebe, Paddyfield Warbler and European Reed-warbler, which here are the *fuscus* form sometimes thought to be a separate species, Caspian Reed-warbler. Red-crested Pochard & Ferruginous Duck were quite common here and we saw our first Oriental Turtle-doves of the tour. Just as we were about to turn around and head back to camp, a White-winged Woodpecker's nest was found and after a short period it came out and showed superbly for everyone. Meanwhile one of the Cetti's Warblers eventually showed well and just as we were leaving a Turkestan Tit showed briefly. Returning to camp we spent another night under a superb night sky.

Day 6: Departing camp after an early breakfast, we retraced our steps to the lakes and although we didn't see the White-winged Woodpecker again, a Common Nightingale showed well and we had excellent views of several Oriental Turtle-doves. Brief views of a Shikra, excellent close view of a Dalmatian Pelican flying over and several Eurasian Hobbies completed our birding here before we headed to a small area of dry woodland. This proved an excellent site with Eastern Imperial Eagle seen even as we disembarked the bus. It didn't take long for us to all have excellent views of at least 2 pairs of Turkestan Tits and a White-winged Woodpecker. The Eversmann's Doves however, proved a little more difficult initially just seen in flight. After half an hour, not only had they been seen well by everyone through telescopes but also photographed! Moving on to a Moslem cemetery, we added a singing male Rufous Bush-robin to our lists as we left the bus and Stone Curlew shortly afterwards. The main purpose of our visit here didn't take long to find either, Saxual Sparrows were most obliging, watched for prolonged periods including nest building alongside Eurasian Tree Sparrow. A pair of Desert Finches were also seen here by a couple of lucky group members. Continuing on to the Ile River bridge, we had to watch out for the holes in the bridge whilst birding! A couple of male Spanish Sparrows were seen however, together with several Montagu's Harriers quartering the reedbeds and a pair of Eurasian Oystercatchers at an unusual inland breeding site. On the way back to Almaty, both Common Quail and Common Pheasant were heard but the only other birds of note seen were a pair of Brown-necked Ravens. We checked into our comfortable hotel again and had the whole enormous dining room to ourselves for dinner.

Day 7: An early start after breakfast in the bar. Heading up into the hills southeast of Almaty, our first stop was at a small gorge. Within a few minutes of arriving, we were watching a fine male White-capped Bunting singing on a rocky outcrop. Several Chukar escaped us up the rocky slopes and a Golden Eagle drifted majestically overhead. Another bunting higher up the gorge turned out to be a singing male Rock Bunting but a male Blue Rock-thrush proved rather elusive. Leaving still needing the third special bunting of the area, it wasn't long before one was spotted further up the pass, a fine male Grey-necked Bunting. Continuing on down to Charyn Yellow Gorge, a real oasis in the barren desert, three Black Storks circled overhead and Crag Martins dashed around the cliffs. Our next stop was the Charyn Red Gorge, a much more barren area with no water. Nevertheless, two Common Swifts, two Common Ravens, single Booted & Golden Eagles and a number of Shore Larks (looking strangely out of place) showed that life could exist even in this inhospitable habitat. In fact a number of Great Gerbils belied their presence by having perfect rings of cropped vegetation around their burrows! Returning back across the high plains between the two gorges, careful scrutiny of the kestrels showed that the majority was Lesser Kestrels and one male in particular gave excellent views. Continuing on to Charyn Hunting Lodge, our overnight base, we settled into our rooms, ate dinner then went listening for European Scops-owl. The noise from the frogs was absolutely deafening but eventually one was heard and after 15 minutes of trying to locate it, good views were obtained by torchlight.

Day 8: Needing to be at a drinking pool by 08.30, we set off straight after breakfast resisting the temptation to stop for birds we had seen before. Arriving at the drinking pool on time, we found large numbers of Black-bellied Sandgrouse already in the area. After an agonising wait, eventually a couple of Pallas's Sandgrouse were seen in flight and eventually, excellent views of several more were had coming in to drink. Crossing the road, we headed down to the middle reaches of the Ile river where several shallow lakes have been formed surrounded by barren desert and sand dunes. We once more boarded a four-wheel drive bus and literally bounced our way along the desert track stopping en-route to look at a pair of Desert Wheatears. The last half-mile of journey had to be made on foot due to flooding, we literally had to take our shoes and socks off and wade through it! A Savi's Warbler was heard reeling but not seen and an Isabelline Shrike and a pair of Citrine Wagtails showed well but the sight that greeted us on arrival at the river was amazing, literally an oasis in the desert. We spent about an hour viewing the lake watching Common & Black Terns, large numbers of Great Cormorants and a few great White Egrets and Dalmatian Pelicans. A flyover Greylag Goose and two Great Bitterns in flight were new for the tour but unfortunately, the White-tailed eagles failed to put in an appearance. Good numbers of Eversmann's Doves were seen flying over adjacent woodland and another Turkestan Tit was seen on the walk back to the bus. Arriving back at our coach, we were all pleased to wash under a refreshing water pump except Vaughan who put his whole head under it (and very refreshing it was too!). The return journey to Almaty was uneventful and we checked into the same hotel again for the night.

Day 9: A very early start as we had a long journey to make. Stops en-route were kept to the minimum to ensure that we arrived at the camp on the shores of Lake Alakol at a reasonable time. The stops that we did make however, were very productive. The first stop was at a small lake where Black-necked Grebes in summer plumage were the highlight. The next stop was at a rocky escarpment where Eastern Rock Nuthatch was heard and, with a little perseverance we all had good views of a single bird. Just as were leaving, a female Pallid Harrier flew high over the ridge whilst other species seen here included Crag Martin, Grey-necked Bunting and many Chukar. Continuing our journey, a stop for a raptor proved very fortuitous as the initial sighting of a Stepper Eagle led to a Booted Eagle, several Eurasian Hobbies and the star bird, a Saker Falcon, seen soaring with a Common Kestrel for a good size comparison. Lunch was taken in a delightful valley where the surprise was seven Eurasian Oystercatchers flying over. Two further stops produced a superb male Rufous-tailed Rock-thrush totally out of habitat and a group of about 20 Black Kites around a village. Arriving at the camp at about 18.00, we were pleased to see a steady stream of Great Black-headed Gulls flying over. Whilst moving into our tents however, the shout went up 'Relict Gull', but unfortunately, only a couple of members of the group managed to get out of their tents in time to see the bird. From then on we closely scrutinised all of the Caspian, Black-headed and Great Black-headed Gulls flying over but although we added Mute Swan, Northern Pintail, Little Gull, Caspian & Little Terns and good numbers of White-winged Black Terns to

our lists, there was no repeat performance. Once again, we followed the routine of the previous camp, eating in the dining tent and going to bed early.

Day 10: Before breakfast, a small party of Bearded Reedlings and a few Gull-billed Terns were seen as well as species seen the previous day. By now determined to see Relict Gull, we set off for a walk along the lakeshore. Many birds were seen during the 4-hour walk but not one of them was a Relict Gull! We came across good numbers of passage waders including Whimbrel, Grey Plover, Ruddy Turnstone, Common Greenshank, Temminck's Stint, a superb summer plumaged Ruff and single Black-winged Pratincoles and Marsh Sandpipers. In a breeding colony of Collared Pratincoles, a pair of Greater Sand Plover was found alongside several pairs of Kentish Plovers. There were lots of Dalmatian Pelicans and a couple more Greylag Geese were seen. Heading back to camp for lunch, we were determined to be vigilant for Relict Gulls at all times. In the afternoon we checked out a different part of the lakeshore seeing a Short-toed Eagle en-route. Unfortunately, the bridge to the shore didn't look strong enough to support the coach so we decided to walk. Hearing a Common Quail calling, we walked through the grass putting up three of them in the process. Several male Bluethroats were found in some bushes whilst a Black Stork flew overhead and several Eurasian Curlews were in the surrounding grassland where Common Snipe were drumming, Richards Pipit displaying, Sky Lark singing and a couple of Siberian Stonechats sat on bushes. Although we saw a couple of Paddyfield Warblers, we couldn't reach the area for Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler as it was just too far away. Returning to camp for dinner, we waited for a repeat performance of the Relict Gull, but it wasn't to be.

Day 11: Just as we were all waking, the cry went up 'Relict Gull' but once again, not everyone managed to get out of their tents in time! Breakfast was taken with a scout outside and binoculars at the ready! After breakfast we returned to the area for Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler via another route. No problem with a bridge this time but the coach managed to get stuck in the mud! Whilst we were waiting, we decided to walk to the intended site as it was only a mile away. A Western Grasshopper Warbler sang from a conspicuous perch and several more Bluethroats were seen. Despite extensive searching, we were unable to find any Pallas's Grasshopper Warblers, probably because of low water levels. A couple of Barred Warblers showed well and a surprise find was a pair of Red-backed Shrikes. Other birds seen included more drumming Common Snipe, Siberian Stonechats, a pair of Common Redstarts, displaying Richard's Pipits, Blyth's Reed-warblers & Paddyfield Warblers. We returned to find the coach still stuck so ate our lunch whilst waiting for help. Fortunately, this didn't take long and we were soon on our way again, this time to the east shore of the lake. It was quite a long drive but eventually we arrived close to the village we needed to reach on the lakeshore. The road however, bypassed the village and despite spending nearly an hour looking for a track to it, we were always defeated by a river, railway line or an impassable track. Asking locals made things even worse, they either didn't know or sent us on a 'wild goose chase', and it was as if they didn't want us to get to the village. One can only speculate as to the reason! Returning to the main road before we became completely lost, we decided to reach the lakeshore via another route. This proved an extremely good plan as almost immediately we got out of the coach to scan the lake; we found an adult summer plumage Relict Gull on an island just offshore. Jubilant, we began to study the bird when it flew off. Fortunately, we saw where it landed and after walking a further half-mile, found it again with a second bird. This was indeed a special moment which was relished until eventually both birds flew off and were joined by a third. The return journey to the camp was certainly a happy one, enlivened by flocks of Demoiselle Cranes flying over and good numbers of Lesser Kestrels. As we reached the four-mile access track to the camp, the heavens opened making our progress in the mud difficult to say the least! We arrived back at camp to find that most of the tents had partly blown down. Reconstruction was necessary but difficult with the inevitable clouds of mosquitoes. It was a good job we had seen the Relict Gulls!

Day 12: After an uncomfortable night, we were glad to board the coach and start the journey back to Almaty. A Common Crane landed close to our camp before leaving giving us our first new bird of the day. It was only with great skill that our driver managed to get through the mud to the main road. We decided to make as much progress as we could before making any stops and so, it was not until we reached the Eastern Rock Nuthatch site that we made our first lengthy stop. Three brief stops were made however, the first when two Daurian Partridges ran across the road, the second when a superb male Common Pheasant (a real wild bird!) refused to move out of the road and the third when we found only the second Long-tailed Shrike of the tour. A Laughing Dove was also seen from the coach. The Eastern Rock Nuthatch again showed well and we also saw a second bird and the nest. Two Blue Rock-thrushes perched on top of the cliffs whilst a couple of Golden Eagles soared overhead. Chukars, Crag Martins and Grey-necked Buntings were again present. We arrived back at our hotel in Almaty in the early evening.

Day 13: Our last day and we decided to revisit the observatory in the mountains, ostensibly to look for Songar Tit and to see some of the specialities again. It was an extremely pleasant relaxed day and although no new birds were seen (we failed to find a Songar Tit), we were pleased to see Brown Accentor, Himalayan Rubythroat, Sulphur-bellied Warbler and Severtzov's Tit-warbler again. The weather was glorious and on the way up the mountain, we saw Monk Vulture, Eurasian Griffon-vulture, Oriental Turtle-dove and Common & Red-mantled Rosefinches again whilst on the way down, Brown Dipper, Black-throated Accentor, Eversmann's Redstart, Greenish & Hume's Warblers, Grey-headed Goldfinch and White-winged Grosbeak were seen. We returned to the hotel for a farewell dinner at a local restaurant and a few hours sleep before our flight home.

Day 14: A very early start for a 05.20 flight back to London via Istanbul. The emigration officers did not want to let me leave however, as he couldn't understand why I had two visas in my passport!! Arrived back in London Heathrow at 10.30..