

# Kazakhstan

## Northwest

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### Participants

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**White-winged Lark**

**Leaders** Vaughan and Svetlana Ashby

**Day 1** Overnight flight from London to Atyrau via Moscow.

**Day 2** Arrived Atyrau at 05.30 and met with our Kazak fixer and drivers and after sorting out our kit in the airport carpark immediately headed northwest out of Atyrau, the major and quite prosperous looking city in this corner of Kazakhstan. This prosperity, however, did not extend far beyond the town with the road being very badly potholed. Our first stop was over the railway bridge just beyond the city to view the sewage pools. As we arrived three **Great White Pelicans** flew over the road and landed in the lagoon. The lagoons held a nesting colony of **Caspian Gulls** and **Black-headed Gulls**. Also present were a **Whiskered Tern**, a few **Black Terns**, a couple of **White-winged Terns** and some **Common Terns**. On the water were many **Mute Swan**, 5+ **Black-necked Grebes**, a small group of **Common Pochards** and some **Red-crested Pochards**. Over the reeds were hunting **Marsh Harriers**, some **Grey Heron** and **Glossy Ibises**, along with numerous **Common Swifts** and **Barn Swallows**. By the edge of the wetland we had a pair of **Little Ringed Plovers** and some Black-headed **Western Yellow Wagtails**, whilst in the tamarisks we found **Sedge Warbler** and a pair of **Red-backed Shrikes**. A breakfast stop outside a café further up the road produced our first **Isabelline Wheatears** (feeding fledged young) and **Northern Wheatears**. Also **Hooded Crows** and **Rooks**, many of the latter were nesting on the roadside pylons. As we continued along the road we passed a greener area of steppe. A quick stop revealed our first **White-winged Larks**, along with lots of **Calandra Larks** and **Lesser Short-toed Larks**. We continued to the village of Khamit Ergaliev and left the main road to follow a maze of tracks across the flat and featureless steppe using the GPS. Eventually 16km west of the road we found our target bird – two nice male **Caspian Plovers**. There were also good numbers of **Lesser Short-toed Larks**

and as we ate our picnic lunch an adult **Steppe Eagle** drifted over. We returned to the 'main' road taking a more direct route and then drove back to and through Atyrau, to the southern edge of the town by the Ural River. We walked through some tamarisks and quickly located our first **Sykes's Warbler**, which eventually gave everyone good views. Here we also had **White Wagtails**, and **Eurasian Tree Sparrows** amongst the **House Sparrows**. A few **European Bee-eaters** and at least 10 **Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters** were on the overhead wires. Flying down the river were some superb adult **Pallas's Gulls** and a small flock of **Rose-coloured Starlings**. We drove back into the city and had a brief stop at the cemetery where we found our first **Red-headed Bunting**. Unfortunately it started to rain before we could get everyone on to it so we gave up and headed to the east side of the Ural River to the Grand Hotel to check in.

**Day 3** After a good breakfast we crossed back over into the Western Palearctic and just south of the road bridge walked along the path on the west bank of the Ural River. In the riverside scrub we located some **Eurasian Penduline-tits** of the *caspius* sub-species with chestnut on their crown. Flying over the river we had a **Little Tern**, along with **Common Tern** and **Pallas's Gull**. Then drove back south through the city to the cemetery. Here we soon found a very obliging **Red-headed Bunting**. In this area we also had **Eurasian Collared-dove**, **Eurasian Magpie**, **Eurasian Hoopoe**, **Crested Lark** and **Pied Wheatear**. A walk round the sewage works revealed two pairs of **Lesser Grey Shrikes**, a **Common Cuckoo**, a pair of displaying **Red-footed Falcons** and **Common Kestrel**. We also had good views of Yellow Susliks. Then began our journey north, quite slow at times due to the state of the roads. A roadside stop c50km north produced first a **Long-legged Buzzard** and then a pair of **Imperial Eagles** close to a large eyrie in a dead tree. It began to rain heavily so we stopped at a roadside café for lunch, near where we saw our first **Black Kites**. The weather improved and we continued our journey. Next stop was 160km north where the road crossed a lake. There was a huge rookery in the willows. We also had a **Willow Warbler**, and a couple of pairs of **Eurasian Penduline-tits**, one at an active nest, as well as several singing **Red-headed Buntings**. The reeds held some singing **Great Reed-warblers**. Over the fields were **European Rollers** and a pair of **Northern Lapwings**. Continued north to a town where we checked in to a rather basic hotel.

**Day 4** Up at 06.00 for breakfast and then headed back over the Ural River and into the Western Palearctic. By the road junction near the petrol stations we had a small flock of **Western Jackdaws**, a **Crested Lark** and a **Steppe Buzzard**. We then followed the main track heading west out into the steppe. By the track we had lots of **White-winged Larks**, **Calandra Larks** and an immature **Steppe Eagle**. 24km along the track we had a superb **Demoiselle Crane** walking about 50m from the track giving amazing views. As we stopped to admire it a small group of **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** flew over. Continuing west we found some **Southern Grey Shrikes** of the *pallidrostris* race one pair with a nest on a telegraph pole. After 34km along the track we entered an area steppe with thicker, deeper vegetation and here we had our first **Black Larks**. The males gave great views as they perched on bushes or ridges and some did their slow nightjar-like display flight. In all we must have seen about 60 Black Larks – mostly males, just a handful of the browner females. We also had lots of **Isabelline Wheatears**, **Calandra Larks**, **Lesser Short-toed Larks** and some **Eurasian Skylarks**. In areas of short grass (old lake beds?) there were **Greater Short-toed Larks** and also a **Eurasian Hobby** that was just perched on a mound. Several **Long-legged Buzzards** were seen. The steppe was good for mammals with Hare, a Steppe Marmot, Hare and a very nervous Saiga Antelope. After having done over 70km we stopped for lunch. It was decided it would take too long to get out to the steppe lakes so we began the journey back east. En route stopped to check out some warblers, which led to a bit of debate about which species but analysis of photographs suggested they were **Sykes's Warblers**. Other birds seen included **Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters** and a couple of **Twites**. With time to spare we stopped off at the linear lake west of the fuel stations. Out on the water were **Great Crested Grebes** and **Common Coot**. Lots of **Black-winged Pratincoles** were hawking for food and gave good views as they rested on the lake shore. Feeding along the shore were **White Wagtails** and a **Pied Wheatear**.

**Day 5** We decided to concentrate on Bagyrlyay today, the long narrow meandering lake formed by damming an old river channel. First we walked south from the causeway west of the fuel stations. It was a lovely calm morning. In the reeds we saw two **Paddyfield Warblers**, **Sedge Warblers** and heard a booming **Great Bittern**. In the adjacent scrub were **Common Chiffchaff**, **Garden Warbler** and a pair of **Grey Partridge**. Nice views of a flyby adult male **Pallid Harrier**, whilst other flybys included a **Purple Heron**. Returned to the causeway and started to drive north up the west side of the lake. There was a good variety of waterfowl, mainly **Mute Swans**, c20 **Garganeys**, c10 **Gadwalls**, a pair of **Mallards**, a few **Common Pochards**, 30+ **Red-crested Pochards** and a drake **Tufted Duck**. There were also several pairs of **Great Crested Grebes** and four pairs **Black-necked Grebes**. Along the shoreline were a scattering of waders – **Northern Lapwing**, **Little Ringed Plover**, a few **Little Stint**, a **Dunlin**, a **Curlew Sandpiper**, two **Ruff**, two **Marsh Sandpiper**, three **Wood Sandpiper**, a few **Common Redshank** and a **Eurasian Curlew**. Many were glorious in full summer-plumage. Also came across a few small colonies of **Bank Swallows (Sand Martins)**. In marshy areas there were many **Grey Herons**, 10+ **Great Egrets** and in one a pair of **Ruddy Shelducks** with a large brood. On marshy points and on small islands there were colonies of nesting **Black-winged Pratincoles** (100+ pairs) with **Black-winged Stilts** and on the islets breeding **Common Terns** and a few pairs of **Little Terns**. Feeding over the lake were six **Black Terns** and two **White-winged Terns**, whilst four **Gull-billed Terns** were resting on the shore of the lake. Perched on telegraph poles were two superb adult **White-tailed Eagles**, we also had an immature fly by and could see a nest on a distant tree. **Great Cormorant**, **Glossy Ibis** and an **Eurasian Spoonbill** were all observed flying over the lake. Most of the surrounding areas were heavily-grazed by horses, with some sheep, cattle and the occasional Bactrian Camel. These areas held lots of **White-winged Larks**, **Calandra Larks** and **Lesser Short-toed Larks**. Nice views of a single Sykes's **Western Yellow Wagtail**. There were isolated farm steadings, which attracted **Eurasian Hoopoe**, **Lesser Grey Shrike** and at one a **Whinchat**. In the scrubber areas **Red-headed Buntings** were common. We had driven about 15km north up the shore and crossed over another causeway onto the east side of the lake. Here at there was a very large marsh with lots of ducks including **Northern Shoveler**, **Eurasian Wigeon** and **Northern Pintail**. There was also a nice group of 21 **Dalmatian Pelican**. Having had a very good day's birding we headed back down the main road to our hotel.

**Day 6** Having got all our target species we had a bit of a spare day today. We decided to revisit Bagyrlyay but drive south down the east shore. These sections of the lake have a lot more reeds than the areas we explored yesterday. There were lots of **Great Reed-warblers**, some **Sedge Warblers**, **Paddyfield Warblers** and at least two singing **Eurasian Reed-warblers**. In the reeds we also saw **Bearded Tit**, heard **Water Rail** and **Moorhen** and flushed at least four **Purple Herons**. **Western Marsh-harriers** hunted over the reeds and surrounding area. A few kilometres south at a bend in the lake we had a least 44 **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** coming in to drink in small groups. There was also a **Kentish Plover** on the lake shore and a **Common Sandpiper**. Along the lakeside we found more colonies of **Black-winged Pratincoles**, including one of at least 90 pairs. We drove about 6km south of the causeway where we stopped for lunch and found a **Little Bittern** and another two **Eurasian Penduline-tits**. After lunch headed back towards town and checked out the scrub along the Ural River on the west bank just south of a bridge. In a line of dying trees we had a nesting **Eurasian Hobby**. There were many flocks of **Rose-coloured Starlings**, one of at least 250+. Amongst the scrub were **Lesser Grey Shrikes**, **European Bee-eaters**, **Eurasian Magpies** and **Eurasian Tree Sparrows**. A final visit to a small village just north of the bridge revealed little new – masses of **House** and **Eurasian Tree Sparrows**, along with a few **Northern** and **Pied Wheatears**.

**Day 7** After breakfast we packed and began the journey back south. Although the hotel had been basic (because they are waiting for grants to improve it) with mostly shared facilities, the service we received was extremely friendly and the food excellent. A roadside stop for four **Red-footed Falcons** 16km south of the Inderbor junction revealed a couple of male **Little Bustards** and several **Red-headed Buntings**. Next stop was by a canal 80km further south where we picked out a pair of **Demoiselle Cranes** and also had nice views of another pair of **European Rollers**. Returned to Atyrau and visited Victory Park where Long-tailed shrikes

had bred the previous year. Unfortunately no sign of them, just a couple of pairs of **Red-backed Shrikes**. Lots of **Common Swift** overhead and **Common House-martin**. We returned to the Ural River, where a **Black-crowned Night-heron** flew low over the reeds and we had nice views again of **Pallas's Gulls**. In the scrub and reeds more *caspius* **Eurasian Penduline-tits**. In low tamarisks superb views of feeding **European** and **Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters**, as well as several more **Sykes's Warblers** and another **Common Cuckoo**.

**Day 8** Our final full day. We decided to head back into the steppes north west of Atyrau. We drove back up towards then a few kilometres beyond the village of Hamit Erghaliev. After about 8km west out along a track into the steppe we located a pair of **Caspian Plovers**. Continued another 7km further west to an area of short grass steppe where we found a few pairs of *branti* **Horned Larks**, one pair feeding fledged chicks. In the same area were **Lesser** and **Greater Short-toed Larks** and two **Long-legged Buzzards**. As we returned east we found a pair of **Demoiselle Cranes** with a single chick close to the Caspian Plover site. On reaching the main road we headed back towards Atyrau. A final stop at the sewage pools revealed a few wildfowl and waders including a distant group of **Pied Avocets**.

**Day 9** Up very early for our Aeroflot flight back to Moscow, which we were then informed would be delayed by two hours. This led to a rush through the terminals in Moscow to get our connecting flights back home. Arrived back in London minus luggage but this was all delivered to us within a couple of days by a very efficient Aeroflot (unlike British Airways!) service

**Bob Swann**