

Russia

Ural Mountains

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Participants

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Long-tailed Rosefinch

Leaders Vaughan and Svetlana Ashby and Georg Boyko

Day 1 Overnight flight from London whilst others arrived from Austria and Germany.

Day 2 Arrived Ekaterinburg at 05.00 following our flights from Heathrow and then Moscow. Vaughan, Svetlana and Georg met us and took us to drop of our gear at the Home Hotel in Ekaterinburg. After breakfast we drove to the village of Bolshoy Istock. In this area the eastern boundary of the Western Palearctic is arbitrary, following that adopted through international agreement for the *Flora Europaea* (Tutin *et al.* 1964). This arbitrary demarcation is perhaps most conspicuous around Ekaterinburg where the boundary, having followed administrative borders south to 58°30'N, extends 50 km to the east of the town, before turning southwest to the headwaters of the Ural river. From the village we followed the road down to the rather garish cemetery on the north side of the village, where we parked next to the adjacent rubbish dump overlooking the airport marshes. We began to walk through a dry scrubby area towards the bushes. Lots of singing Common Whitethroats, Tree Pipits and a few Siberian Stonechats with families. Good views also of Booted Warbler singing from small bushes. As we entered the wetter areas we had Blyth's Reed-warbler, Common Grasshopper-warbler and Reed Bunting. Georg checked out a rosefinch nest, but it had failed and there were no sign of the birds. We continued round to the much wetter western side of the wooded area. Here we had good views of singing Bluethroats (red-spotted), a Common Rosefinch and then suddenly a male Long-tailed Rosefinch. It perched high on the branch of a dead tree giving everyone good, but brief views. Thereafter we had fleeting views of it perched or in flight. Whilst waiting we had Common Swift, Barn Swallow and Sand Martin overhead. Mallard and a Common Teal flew by as did our first Green Sandpiper. In the distance we spotted a displaying Common Snipe whilst raptors included a pair of Black Kites and a female Eurasian Sparrowhawk. Singing out in the open on a

dead bush was a Lanceolated Warbler (originally thought to be a Common Grasshopper-warbler, based on its location!). Along the woodland edge we searched for Azure Tit, but found only Great Tit and had brief views of a Eurasian Golden Oriole. As we returned to the minibus some of the group had good views of a feeding Citrine Wagtail. Satisfied with our first birding of the trip we headed for the northwest side of the village and walked down to the river. Here there were lots of Black-headed Gulls with Caspian Gulls overhead. Along the track were White Wagtail and a nice *flava* Yellow Wagtail. Good views of a Siberian Chiffchaff singing from the top of a telegraph pole and then a Blyth's Reed-warbler in the riverside bushes. As we were watching the warbler a pair of Oriental Turtle-doves flew out from the bushy area giving good flight views. Around the village we had Common Starlings, Western Jackdaws, Rooks, Eurasian Magpies, Hooded Crows and House Sparrows. Next stop was on the west side of Ekaterinberg at the village of Verkhnemakarova, where we had a picnic lunch overlooking the river. Birds seen along the river included Grey Heron and a Common Sandpiper. We followed the river through meadows, where we found families of Whinchats, a Red-backed Shrike, several calling Corn Crakes and, perched out in the open on a small bush, a Eurasian Wryneck. The adjacent woodland held Garden Warblers, more Blyth's Reed-warblers, Redwing, Eurasian Blackbird, Fieldfare, Common Rosefinch, European Goldfinch and European Greenfinch. In the wetter scrubbiest areas we heard two singing River Warblers, but they would not show themselves. Returning to the village there were a few Eurasian Tree Sparrows, a Great Spotted Woodpecker and a Lesser Whitethroat. It had been a long day and after all the travelling folk were fairly shattered so we returned to the hotel for a shower, a nice meal in a nearby restaurant then an early night.

Day 3 We left Ekaterinberg at 07.00 for the c. 500km trip east of the Urals north to Severouralsk. With a couple of short stops this took us about six hours. We then headed west into the Urals spotting a few roadside Northern Wheatear on the outskirts of Severouralsk. The journey to the campsite was only 60km, but due to the poor road and a couple of dodgy bridges it took us another five hours to reach our final destination. The campsite was in a small clearing in the forest and facilities were rather basic, though having crossed the administrative boundary we were back in the Western Palearctic. After our meal, cooked on an open fire, we had a short walk finding Common Raven, Eurasian Nutcrackers, Grey Wagtail, Red-flanked Bluetail, Arctic Warbler and Eurasian Siskin.

Day 4 During the night we were serenaded by singing Oriental Cuckoo, Red-flanked Bluetail and European Robin. Got up at 06.00 and went for a short walk finding Northern Bullfinch, giving their trumpet like call, Garden Warblers and a Eurasian Woodcock. Returned to the camp for breakfast – porridge! It then started to rain. After an hour or so the rain stopped so we decided to head back east a bit and check out one of the accentor sites. We left the 'road' and walked up the track through some nice woodland towards Sosvinsky stn. In the woodland good views of Red-flanked Bluetail, Willow Tit, a Siberian Tit, Eurasian Nuthatch, Brambling and we heard a Scaly Thrush singing. Flocks of Common Crossbills regularly flew over heading west. As we got higher into the scrub zone we came across our first Olive-backed Pipits. Higher still in areas of low birch and firs we began our search for accentors. There were lots of Arctic Warblers up here along with Willow and Yellow-browed Warblers. Common Cuckoo appears to replace Oriental in this zone. We followed up several singing accentors but all turned out to be Dunnocks. We had also worked our way up on to the flank of the ridge and had to cross a large boulder field. This gave us a good view of the forests and allowed us to scan the treetops but some of the group found it tough going. A couple of Common Redpolls and our first Black-throated Thrush were scant reward for our efforts. Our return journey across the boulder field was slow but uneventful and as we returned to the scrub we flushed a Willow Grouse. It had been a nice sunny day and the breeze had kept the mosquitoes at bay.

Day 5 We were up for a 06.00 breakfast to find it was a bright sunny morning. We drove about 12 km west to the base of Kwarkush Mountain. The journey took almost two hours, with yet another dodgy bridge to cross. We started to hike up the track once again through some very nice areas of mature forest. Here we had good views of a perched Oriental Cuckoo and Black-throated Thrush as well as Willow Tit,

European Robin, Redwing, Arctic and Greenish Warblers, Brambling and Eurasian Siskin, whilst once again flocks of Common Crossbills headed west. As we got higher we reached the birch scrub zone. Here we came across several Black-throated Thrushes, Fieldfares, lots of Arctic, Willow and Yellow-browed Warblers and Little Buntings. As we reached the top of the track the forest opened out and there were large patches of willow scrub. We headed towards one of these and very quickly picked up a singing Siberian Rubythroat – most of the group got onto it but there was a bit of tension as it disappeared. After a short wait it was relocated and we all got tremendous views of this top target bird – we could even see it inflating its ruby throat patch as it sang. In the same area we had Whinchat, a splendid male Common Rosefinch, Bluethroat, Song Thrush, Reed Bunting and more surprisingly a calling Corn Crake. After a leisurely lunch break, listening for displaying snipe, we walked along the slope looking for snipe. Had a singing *blyth's* Lesser Whitethroat, Common Redpoll, a pair of Northern Bullfinches and more Little Buntings. Eventually flushed one snipe – a Great Snipe. I then walked up towards the snow patches with Georg. On this higher area were many Meadow Pipits and a pair of European Golden-plover. Feeding along the edge of the melting snow were more Black-throated Thrushes, Redwings and in the scrub many Greenish and Willow Warblers. We cut back down to the willow patch getting further good views of the rubythroat and another Great Snipe, which dropped down into the middle of the willows. Headed back down the track and returned to the minibus after a very successful day. On the drive back towards the first bridge we had a pair of Hazel Grouse cross the road in front of us and a Siberian Chipmunk. Once again we disembarked prior to crossing the bridge. On the river was a pair of Common Sandpiper with a chick and a White-throated Dipper. Arrived back at camp c19.30 to get good views of our Oriental Cuckoo on the top of the adjacent Siberian Pine as we celebrated a good day with a tin of Russian lager.

Day 6 Another 06.00 breakfast. Whilst waiting at the minibus before heading back east spotted two Red Squirrels on the road. Coal Tit and a Common Wood-pigeon were also observed along the roadside. We had decided to return to the accentor area at Sosvinsky Stn and as we began our walk up the track got good views of an immature male Pine Grosbeak on top of one of the conifers. Georg then radioed us to say he had found a Scaly Thrush nest. We cut east of the track for c150m into the mature forest. Georg pointed out the nest and we sat and waited. Eventually a superb adult Scaly Thrush landed by the nest and started to feed worms to its brood of six hungry chicks. We got superb views of the bird and were treated to some intimate moments as it did some nest hygiene by eating one of the offered faecal sacs and then briefly brooded the chicks. Continued up the track towards the hut at Sosvinsky Stn. I walked down through the meadows in a fruitless search for Pine Bunting. Lots of Redwings, Little Buntings, singing *blyth's* Lesser Whitethroat, a pair of Bohemian Waxwings and a Peregrine soaring overhead. We then checked out the mixed woodland for accentors. Although we did not locate any we had Olive-backed Pipit, Willow Tit, Red-flanked Bluetail, Common Redstart and Arctic and Greenish Warblers. Georg then suggested a 'short-cut' for the return route. This turned out to be a horrendous mistake as we scrambled down boulder scree and then tried to follow the river through dense vegetation negotiating jumbles of boulders and fallen logs. I was at least rewarded with a male Eurasian Capercaillie near the roadside. Most were just glad to have made it without injury. When we eventually got back to the mini bus we were informed that Klaus and Gabby had seen the accentor by the track that we had originally planned to take. We were not amused! It appears that as Dunnock numbers increase in these higher altitude forests, Black-throated Accentor numbers are declining.

Day 7 Our final day in the forest and our last chance for the accentor. We got up early for a 05.00 breakfast, packed up the camp and headed back to the site where Klaus and Gabby had seen the bird. It was another bright, sunny morning. We waited patiently getting good views of a female Red-flanked Bluetail and a family of Eurasian Nutcrackers. Once again singing accentors turned out to be Dunnocks. After more than two hours the group began to spread out a bit. Suddenly a call from Klaus alerted us to another singing accentor. I ran down the track and got my bins on the bird – at last a Black-throated Accentor singing on top of a fir tree. Unfortunately it dropped from view just as the rest of the group were arriving. Despite further searches we could not find it again. Our only reward was a fine adult male Pine

Grosbeak seen by the side of the track as we headed off. We returned to the minibus and started our journey back to Ekaterinburg. Loggers conducting temporary bridge repairs en-route caused a short delay in our progress. Stopped for lunch in a café on the outskirts of Severouralsk where I found a pair of Eurasian Linnets and a Common Redstart. It started to rain as we began the long 5+ hour journey back to Ekaterinburg, for a nice shower, a beer and a comfortable bed.

Day 8 Our final day. After a leisurely breakfast headed out to a birch wood near Shuvakish north of Ekaterinburg. In a damp marshy area got incredible close views of a singing Lanceolated Warbler. The surrounding trees held Great Spotted Woodpecker, a pair of Icterine Warblers, Pied and Spotted Flycatchers, Tree Pipit and Chaffinch. Overhead were a pair of Steppe Buzzard and we heard Common Cranes. Returned to the hotel to finish packing and to check out. After lunch we revisited the airport marshes but saw nothing new in our short visit before it was off to the airport to check in for our Aeroflot flight back to Moscow, then Heathrow.

Bob Swann