

TURKESTAN

12 – 31 MAY 2009

TOUR REPORT

LEADER: MARK VAN BEIRS

The bird of the trip on this Palearctic extravaganza was the exquisite, little Severtzov's Tit-Warbler that showed so extremely well in its attractive juniper habitat high in the Tien Shan. Birding the deserts, marshes, steppes, lakes, stony hills and alpine forests, meadows and rocky crags of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan at the best time of year produced a mouth-watering list of exciting birds. An abundance of birdsong was definitely a feature of this tour, as was the opportunity to visit some of the ancient wonders of the Silk Route at Samarkand and Bukhara. We recorded 285 species and among the many highlights we should mention Dalmatian Pelican, Marbled and White-headed Ducks, Lammergeier, Pallid Harrier, Red-footed Falcon, Saker, Black Grouse, Himalayan Snowcock, Demoiselle Crane, Macqueen's Bustard, Ibisbill, Black-winged Pratincole, Caspian Plover, Sociable Lapwing, Pallas's Gull, Yellow-eyed Dove, White-winged Woodpecker, White-winged and Black Larks, Black-throated Accentor, White-tailed Rubythroat, White-throated Robin, Eversmann's and Gldenstdt's Redstarts, Sykes's, Mntries's, Asian Desert, and Sulphur-bellied Warblers, Rufous-naped and Azure Tits, Wallcreeper, Black-headed Penduline Tit, Pander's Ground Jay, Saxaul Sparrow, Mongolian finch, White-winged Grosbeak and Pine Bunting. The most unusual bird seen on this great tour was a vagrant Namaqua Dove that we encountered at an oasis in the Kyzyl Kum desert.

We arrived in the very early morning at Tashkent, the famous capital of the little known country of Uzbekistan, after an overnight flight via Istanbul. The immigration formalities took a long time, but once cleared we found ourselves in the capable hands of our efficient agents. Our very international group - 6 nationalities - boarded two minibuses and we drove up into the Chatkal range, part of the western Tien Shan. Soon we checked into a very nice hotel, had a good breakfast and immediately started exploring the forested, hilly surroundings. By mid morning we had already seen an appealing variety of raptors riding the thermals: European Honey and Long-legged Buzzards, Black-eared Kite, Egyptian, Eurasian Black, Himalayan Griffon and Eurasian Griffon Vultures, Booted Eagle (both pale and dark morphs), Common Kestrel and Eurasian Hobby. Several Red-rumped Swallows were busy nest building and lots of European House Martins were about. We also found good numbers of

Common Nightingales, Hume's Whitethroat, several adorable Yellow-breasted Tits, a couple of White-crowned Penduline Tits building their intricate nest, Oriental Crow, Rock Bunting and lots of Common Mynas. After a good lunch and a bit of a break we walked down along a nice little valley clothed in lovely junipers. The raptor spectacle continued as a party of seven Crested Honey Buzzards and a lanky Short-toed Eagle allowed good views. A Rufous-naped Tit performed very nicely and we also noted European Roller, Masked Wagtail, an adult Brown Dipper feeding a recently fledged youngster, Blue Whistling Thrush, Asian Paradise Flycatcher and White-capped Bunting. A short owling session after dinner only yielded a distant calling Tawny Owl.

At dawn a heavy thunderstorm passed through drowning the whole hill range in abundant rain, so we had to wait a while before venturing out till the natural forces had subsided. As soon as the rain abated, the Common Nightingales started singing and Yellow-breasted Tits and Hume's Whitethroats showed well again. After a scrumptious breakfast, we boarded our vehicles and drove back to Tashkent. A short stop in the foothills produced an attractive Lesser Grey Shrike and several singing Red-headed Buntings. In Tashkent we changed vehicles and a large, comfortable bus took us through extended agricultural areas westwards to the glories of Samarkand. We happily noticed that almost no cotton is grown anymore, so maybe the Aral Sea may get a bit of extra water anyway. At the Syr Darya River (the Jaxartes of the ancient) we admired a colony of White Storks spread out over several huge pylons. A dozen of these large nests held fairly large young, which were being guarded by adult birds. Flocks of House Sparrows of the clean-looking *bactrianus* form, and a few Spanish Sparrows fed in the grassy verges, where a couple of Yellow Ground Squirrels played about. An extended stop in some barely vegetated rocky hills gave us good looks at both Pied and Variable Wheatears. A splendid adult Lammergeier sailed over low allowing for spectacular views. Nearby we found Shikra, an eyrie of Long-legged Buzzard with two chicks, Lesser Kestrel, Little Ringed Plover, Common Sandpiper, Laughing Dove, European Bee-eater and Common Raven. On the drive we gained a good insight into the daily life of the Uzbeks: the women typically dressed in rich-coloured silk, the duppi (funny square hats) of the men, the ubiquitous lepushka (flat bread), the chorpoyas (four poster beds) and the chai-kanas (tea houses). In late afternoon we rolled into Samarkand getting our first glimpse of the famous azure domes of the Registan complex.

Next day, we visited the Zerafshan mountain range to the south of Samarkand and not long after dawn strolled through a grassy valley dotted with flowering hawthorn bushes and rocky outcrops. We managed to scope a glorious male White-throated Robin singing its heart out and a very well performing Upcher's Warbler. Other marvels that showed in this flower-filled habitat included Egyptian Vulture, Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Chukar, Cetti's Warbler (amazing scope views), Eastern Orphean Warbler, Eastern Rock Nuthatch, Turkestan Shrike, several flocks of Rosy Starlings, dozens of Red-headed Buntings and a pale grey Red Fox. Nearby, we explored a patch of high plateau grassland where several modestly-clad Hume's Short-toed Larks allowed in depth scrutiny, next to European Hoopoe and several Rock Sparrows. A thorough investigation of poplar and ash copses in more secluded valleys gave us cracking views of male and female White-winged Woodpecker. Common Nightingales were amazingly common and showy here, but best of all was the pair of Asian Paradise Flycatchers building their nest in a small fruiting tree. We also noted Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, Turkestan Tit and Grey-capped Goldfinch. A range of totally denuded rocky hills held a pair of smashing Finsch's Wheatears, next to Crested Lark, Tawny Pipit, Pied Wheatear and loud-voiced Eastern Rock Nuthatches. A final stop at a nearby dam gave us a selection of widespread species like Grey Heron, Gadwall, Mallard, Northern Shoveler, Common Pochard, Black-winged Stilt and Green Sandpiper. It had been a very satisfying birdy day in a range of beautiful habitats.

A pre-breakfast walk along the reedy pools and willow scrub adjoining the Zerafshan River added Black-crowned Night-Heron, Purple Heron, White Stork, Osprey, a pair of Shikra (fabulous views), Common Pheasant (heard only), Little Tern, Blyth's Reed Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat, Greenish Warbler and Siberian Chiffchaff to the tally. After a lip smacking breakfast we visited the famous cultural sites of this 2750 year (!) old city: the Mausoleum of Timur, the splendid Bibi Khanum Mosque, the Registan Square with its blue and vivid turquoise domed madrassahs and its gaily painted minarets. Scythe-winged Alpine Swifts zoomed past these magnificent ancient buildings and we also made a quick visit to the teeming Bazaar, where we were welcomed by a marvellous assortment of sweets, fruits and nuts. After a filling shashlyk lunch we drove west along the old Silk route to the legendary town of Bukhara. A short stop yielded White-tailed Lapwing, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, Black-headed and Citrine Wagtails and Indian Reed Warbler. We checked in into a charming hotel and enjoyed a delicious dinner overlooking the old centre of Bukhara.

Just after dawn we were observing Greylag Geese, Ruddy Shelduck, Garganey, Pied Bushchat, Caspian Reed Warbler and Bearded Reedling at the edge of an extensive reedbed adjacent to a small lake. Nearby, we explored the tamarisk-lined shore of Lake Tudakul, noting Pygmy Cormorant, Kentish Plover, lots of White-tailed Lapwing, Little and Temminck's Stints, Wood Sandpiper, Ruddy Turnstone, Red Knot, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Little Owl, Oriental Skylark, Sykes's Warbler and several Yellow Ground Squirrels. Intensive scrutiny of a lake surrounded by extensive reedbeds gave us Great Crested and Black-necked Grebes, Great Cormorant, a threesome of rare Marbled Duck, Red-crested Pochard, Ferruginous Duck, Caspian Gull, Caspian Tern, lots of Spanish Sparrows and a Coypu. We enjoyed lunch at the central square in Bukhara and in late afternoon strolled through the ancient town sniffing the peculiar atmosphere and admiring the bazaars with their silk products, spices and hats and the famous Kalyan Mosque and Minaret.

Very early next morning we were on our way to the distant Saxaul-covered dunes of the Kyzyl Kum desert (the Red Sand desert). It turned out to be a day with good cloud cover and it had even rained overnight, so temperatures remained bearable throughout the day, allowing for more relaxed birding. A few minutes after arriving at our favourite spot we were already observing a singing Pander's Ground Jay through the scope and soon after we were really spoiled by an unperturbed, foraging bird doing its thing only 15m away. Excellent value. Later we observed several other Ground Jays and also found a nest with 6 chicks in a small saxaul tree. We wandered through this peculiar desert, admiring flowering bushes and plants, some giant broomrapes, an assortment of lizards and a sedate Sand Boa. We picked up goodies like Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin, Isabelline Wheatear, Scrub Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat (*minula?*), Steppe Grey and Long-tailed Shrikes and Desert Finches. Migratory species were represented by Western Grey-headed Wagtail, White Wagtail, Paddyfield Warbler, Eurasian Golden Oriole, Rosy Starlings and Ortolan Bunting, but strangest of all was a male Namaqua Dove that we found at one of the oases! A truly bizarre bird to find here, more than 2000km away from its nearest breeding grounds. On the return journey, a reed-lined lake produced a nice Moustached Warbler, a Little Grebe with stripy chicks and a Purple Heron on its reedy nest with a large rufous chick.

An early morning's birding at the edge of the Gazelle Reserve on the outskirts of Bukhara gave us great views of a male Ménétries's Warbler and several Rufous-tailed Scrub Robins singing away in the open. We heard and glimpsed Common Pheasant and scoped a lovely European Turtle Dove. An uneventful flight took us to Tashkent, where a brief visit to the base of the nearby Chimgan Hills gave us our best looks yet at Indian Golden Orioles. We said goodbye to our efficient local crew and caught an early evening flight to Almaty, the capital of Kazakhstan.

After a short night, we met our knowledgeable local bird guide and started driving east, passing through the large city of Almaty with its scores of new glitzy buildings. We first drove through agricultural areas which gradually gave way to semi-desert. We made many short stops and had great looks at an excellent selection of species, including Great Egret, Golden Eagle, a teeming colony of Pale Martins, Desert Wheatear and Blue Rock Thrush. A relaxed vigil at a drinking pool allowed for superb looks at Linnet, Mongolian Finch, Grey-necked Bunting and Crimson-winged Finch. A Tolai Hare and scores of cute Great Gerbils were also noted.

We had a full day to explore the hills adjoining the Charyn river and its spectacular gorge, the surrounding semi-desert and the wide Ili river with its neighbouring stands of Turanga trees. A first stop added a Steppe Eagle on its ridiculously positioned eyrie on a gently sloping hillside. In a wild rocky area of broken hills a cracking Saker posed for us near her nest with three downy chicks. She also showed off her amazing flight prowess by fiercely attacking a passing Long-legged Buzzard. A male Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush and a pair of Siberian Stonechats added to the fun and we also made a short stop at the astonishing scenic gorge of the Charyn river. We strolled through the open woodland near the Ili river, where, after some initially frustrating glimpses, we managed to obtain great scope views of a couple of perched Yellow-eyed Doves. After a while we observed some territorial display, whereby they demonstrated their silvery pale backs. A couple of White-winged Woodpeckers also performed. After a hearty picnic lunch we added Saxaul Sparrow to the tally. A cracking male showed very well at its breeding hole in a telegraph pylon. Further exploration of the desert was seriously hampered by a gale force wind, but we did manage to get first rate views of a splendid Macqueen's Bustard as it was shuffling about fighting against the fierce wind gusts. What a great show!

At four o'clock next morning, some hardy Birdquesters were walking around in the village of Chilik, trying to listen to the distinctive calls of an European Scops Owl. We had to avoid several totally drunken drivers (!) and a couple of ardently barking dogs, but ended up with really nice views of this cutie. Upon leaving our guesthouse a striking Azure Tit showed well. We spent the morning in semi-desert and saxaul desert areas within sight of the illustrious Singing Sand Dune and found our first very elegant Demoiselle Cranes, a couple of perched Eurasian Hobbies, several Greater Sand Plovers, scores of Black-bellied Sandgrouse, several Tolai Hares and a lone Goitred Gazelle. At our lunch stop we found another nest of White-crowned Penduline Tit and in the afternoon we drove to the Tien Shan via the prospering city of Almaty. On the very scenic drive up to the famous observatory we saw Brown Dipper and Blue Whistling Thrush.

We awoke to a glorious morning surrounded by a wall of snow-capped mountains and started our explorations above the tree line in the Tien shan with an extended stop in an open valley covered in juniper bushes, rocks and grassy areas with snow. Here, a pair of Himalayan Snowcock walked sedately about, and Black-throated Accentor and a magnificent White-tailed Rubythroat sang from the bush tops. Other goodies included Water Pipit, Alpine Chough, Plain Mountain-Finch and White-winged Grosbeak. Higher up, our powerful "tundrabus" broke down, so we walked the two remaining kilometres to famous Cosmostantia in snow-covered surroundings. Several pairs of dazzling Gldenstdt's Redstarts gave point blank views, and both Altai and Brown Accentors delivered their tune. Several pairs of Red-billed Choughs resided in the dilapidated buildings and a pair of Northern Wheatears hopped about. After lunch and a short break, we descended a bit and visited the surroundings of the dam area where we searched the rocky stream sides for that much-wanted, very peculiar wader, the Ibisbill. We were extremely lucky as, upon arrival, a bird flushed, called and settled only a short distance away, allowing for really great scope studies. At first we could only barely discern the extremely well camouflaged back and wings amongst similar coloured rocks,

but soon the bird relaxed and showed its distinctive bill and characteristic black mask. Moments to cherish! Once satiated, we slowly worked a juniper and spruce-covered slope, where we added a female Merlin (of the race *lymani*), a smart male Eversmann's Redstart, Blue-capped Redstart, Hume's Leaf Warbler, Red-fronted Serin and a flighty Red-mantled Rosefinch to the tally.

The next day started in dense mist, but after half an hour the skies suddenly cleared and we were able to look for the avian inhabitants of a juniper-clad slope. A pair of Himalayan Snowcocks flew in and started foraging, allowing us to obtain excellent views of their lovely finery. Two cocks and a hen Black Grouse winged over and settled in the top of a spruce for great looks. Several top-heavy White-winged Grosbeaks showed well, White-tailed Rubythroats were singing all over the place, a Sulphur-bellied Warbler performed nicely and a male Red-mantled Rosefinch posed, but the highlight of the morning was that darling Severtzov's Tit-Warbler offering jaw-dropping, eye-ball to eye-ball views while it was feeding on the ground and amongst the juniper bushes. We all felt privileged to be able to admire this unique lilac-coloured gem in its awesome surroundings. In late morning it started raining so we retreated to our accommodation in the observatory. In the latter hours of the day we explored the lower conifer forest and in the very dense Tien Shan Spruces we noted an uncooperative Songar Tit, Coal and Great Tits, Goldcrest, Eurasian Treecreeper and a smart rufous and grey Red Squirrel. After a while it started raining again, accompanied by an impressive thunder and lightning show, which forced us to return to base.

When we woke up next morning, we realized it had snowed for most of the night as the whole area was covered in a fresh layer of c40cm snow. Incredibly beautiful to look at, but, alarmingly no road or track was visible and after some initial engine problems and searching our faithful bus slowly trudged down the mountain. It was a bit frightening at first, but our driver really knew what he was doing, so we soon felt more confident. We stopped a few times in the spruces admiring Spotted Nutcracker, a showy party of perched Common Crossbills, a family group of White-winged Grosbeaks and an accommodating Songar Tit. In the lower reaches we found two very obliging male Wallcreepers that kept us in trance for half an hour while foraging on a large concrete wall. Heavenly and very much appreciated moments! One of those unforgettable birding experiences! We then joined up with our regular bus, had lunch and started our journey across the exceedingly red-coloured, poppy-covered grasslands towards the northeast. An extended stop at Lake Sorbulak added a nice variety of interesting species like Dalmatian Pelican, Great Cormorant (100's of nests), Mute Swan (the real thing), Common Redshank, Common Greenshank, Terek Sandpiper (great looks) and a couple of Black Terns to the list. We continued our journey across the Taucum desert, found a concentration of Black-eared Kites, Calandra Lark, Greater Short-toed Lark and Brown-necked Raven, and reached our very well laid out camp in the early evening. Our personal yurts all had electricity, there were hot showers, a spacious dinner tent had been set up and we enjoyed an excellent dinner while the sun died spectacularly in a plethora of red colours. The champagne flowed tonight, as we still had to celebrate Nils's Ibisbill! Another reason to celebrate was the successful launch of a rocket containing our Belgian astronaut from the Baikonur cosmodrome in the west of Kazakhstan.

A very cold night ensued and soon after dawn we started scanning the endless Artemisia flats of the Taucum desert for our main target here: the inscrutable Caspian Plover. It did not take long before we found a distant bird and we gradually managed to get fairly close to this lovely species. Eventually we got good views of the cracking male. The morning chorus consisted mainly of the sweet warbling songs of Greater Short-toed Larks. While observing fair numbers of Black-bellied Sandgrouse, a few Greater Sand Plovers and a convincing Brown-necked Raven, an European Hobby caught and plucked a Greater Short-toed Lark. We spent a bit of time at waterhole, but only observed Black-bellied Sandgrouse coming in to drink. By mid morning we drove north towards the Ili river. A stop at

a reed-edged pool yielded a flighty Black-headed Penduline Tit, which obviously did not want to sit up because of the very strong winds that had started blowing. A Little Bittern gave some consolation. We explored a patch of Turanga woodland where White-winged Woodpecker, lots of Indian Golden Orioles, Common Cuckoos and Turkestan Tits obliged. Our man on the spot flushed a Pallid Scops Owl from its roost, but even after a concerted effort, we never managed to relocate it. Frustrating! Then it was back to the reedbeds and soon we obtained really good views of a distinctive Black-headed Penduline Tit with its very black hood and throat. Magic stuff, as this species is never an easy bird to get to grips with! We also observed Great Bittern, Red-crested Pochard, Ferruginous Duck, Black and elegant White-winged Terns and a Great Reed Warbler here.

Just after dawn we positioned ourselves near a waterhole where we were hoping for one or two different species of Sandgrouse, but not much happened during the first hour and after several more hours we had only bagged a fair number of Black-bellieds, even witnessing some display. We also spotted several Lesser Short-toed and Bimaculated Larks and many Calandra Larks. At another waterhole a young Steppe Eagle showed well, but not much else. In late morning we returned to camp, packed up and returned to Almaty. At our lunch stop we had another look at Lake Sorbulak with its good selection of waterbirds. Eurasian Wigeon and Collared Pratincole were new for the list, but best of all was the splendid Long-eared Owl with its four recently fledged young that interrupted our munching. In late afternoon, a run of the mill flight took us to Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan.

In the early hours we left the amazing conurbation of Astana, with its incredible array of very modern buildings, looking so very different from the provincial town I remembered only ten years ago. A frightening evolution! A leisurely drive took us through promising steppe land and at our first stop in good habitat we already bagged several of the important species. A Sociable Lapwing performed beautifully, lots of big Black Larks showed off their magnificent flight display, several smart White-winged Larks allowed close inspection and a couple of cracking male Pallid Harriers were much appreciated. A pair of Common Cranes, a Pallas's Gull and scores of Sykes's Wagtails added to the fun. Elsewhere we had cracking views of several dainty Red-footed Falcons and another stop gave us more Sociable Lapwings, but also a small colony of Black-winged Pratincoles and some Gull-billed Terns. At noon we arrived at our lodgings in some private houses in a small village in the middle of the endless steppes and were immediately overwhelmed by Kazakh hospitality. In the afternoon we visited several huge lakes surrounded by extensive reedbeds and wide muddy margins. Birds were everywhere and we stood in awe at the amazing number of migrants. Gems included a pair of eye-catching Black-throated Divers, small numbers of handsome Red-necked Grebes, a single Whooper Swan, dozens of Mute Swans, flocks of graceful Greater Flamingos, a handful of Northern Pintails amongst many other ducks, a pair of ghostly Merlin of the race *pallidus* at the nest, Pied Avocets, Curlew Sandpipers, Little Stints, Dunlins, a single Broad-billed Sandpiper, 1000's of delicate Red-necked Phalaropes spinning about, a bunch of Slender-billed Gulls, scores of Steppe Gulls and a reeling Savi's Warbler.

Next morning we drove back into the steppe and surveyed a couple of huge lakes in the Kurghaldzhin area. A patient wait at a small pool produced great views of Twite, several Booted Warblers, a vocalizing Common Grasshopper Warbler and lots of Sykes's Wagtails. At a large lake we discovered two drakes of endangered White-headed Ducks amongst a good variety of more widespread wildfowl. At least 3000 Red-necked Phalaropes were pirouetting about and we witnessed a feeding frenzy of Dalmatian Pelicans and Great Cormorants. Other interesting species here included Black-necked Grebe, Eurasian Teal, Montagu's Harrier, Oystercatcher, Grey Plover and Little and Common Gulls. We enjoyed a leisurely lunch, which included a few glasses of vodka, at our respective houses and in the afternoon visited some riverside bushes that gave us Bluethroat, Red-

backed Shrike, Barred Warbler and an Icterine Warbler. In late afternoon we returned to the architectural wonders of Astana.

On the last birding day of the tour we paid a visit to an area of pine forest to the north of Astana. It took a while, but then we heard a distinctive Yellowhammer-like song and soon scoped a splendid male Pine Bunting. Several more males performed in the course of the morning. A well-vegetated pond held a pair of fine Slavonian Grebes, an Ortolan Bunting was uttering its simple phrase along a forest edge and we also noted Common Chaffinch and Siberian Chiffchaff. Our last birding venture of the tour took us to a marshy lake that held the usual culprits, but a Great Bittern, a couple of Common Quail, lots of elegant White-winged Terns and several very well-performing Bluethroats made our visit really enjoyable.

SYSTEMATIC LIST

Species which were heard but not seen are indicated by the symbol (H).

Species which were not personally recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (NL).

Subspecies names are given where known and/or appropriate, either in a comment or in parentheses.

GAVIIDAE

Black-throated Diver (B-t Loon, Arctic Loon) *Gavia arctica*: Fair views of two in breeding attire on a reed-edged lake in the Astana steppes.

PODICIPEDIDAE

Little Grebe (Dabchick) *Tachybaptus ruficollis*: Small numbers were noted near Bukhara and on the Astana lakes.

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*: A couple were seen at Lake Tudakul and then many more at Lake Sorbulak and on the Astana lakes.

Red-necked Grebe *Podiceps grisegena*: Good numbers around Astana, with 15 or more seen in a day.

Horned Grebe (Slavonian Grebe) *Podiceps auritus*: Excellent views of a pair in exquisite breeding plumage on a small lake north of Astana. Slavonia is a geographical and historical region in eastern Croatia.

Black-necked Grebe (Eared Grebe) *Podiceps nigricollis*: One showed briefly at Lake Tudakul, and 20 were found on the Astana steppe lakes, all in splendid breeding plumage.

PHALACROCORACIDAE

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*: A large colony could be seen in the distance at Lake Tudakul, and many showed on the Astana lakes. The subspecies involved is *sinensis*.

Pygmy Cormorant *Phalacrocorax pygmeus*: Our first were seen around roadside canals en-route to Samarkand, and at Lake Tudakul we had some good views of several birds perched and in flight. This species is treated as NEAR THREATENED by BirdLife International in "Threatened Birds of the World".

PELICANIDAE

Dalmatian Pelican *Pelecanus crispus*: Great views of six at Lake Sorbulak were followed by regular observations of small numbers on the Astana lakes. This species is treated as CONSERVATION DEPENDENT by BirdLife International in "Threatened Birds of the World".

ARDEIDAE

Great Bittern *Botaurus stellaris*: Two were seen in flight at lakes in the northern Taucum desert and another showed at a reed-edged lake north of Astana. We also heard the distinctive booming.

Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus*: A brief flight view of one at Lake Tudakul, was followed by excellent views of perched and flying birds at small lakes in the northern Taucum desert.

Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*: A dozen were seen at the Zerafshan river near Samarkand, a couple at Lake Tudakul and another two in the Taucum desert.

Great Egret (Great White Egret) *Egretta alba*: Small numbers were seen in Kazakhstan, many sporting the black bills of breeding plumage.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*: A scattering of sightings, both in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. The highest numbers were noted at Lakes Tudakul and Sorbulak. Also regularly seen at the Astana lakes.

Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea*: Several were seen around Lake Tudakul, but best of all were the birds nesting on pools by the road in the Kyzyl Kum desert. The large rufous young showed well in the reedbed nest.

CICONIIDAE

White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*: 30 were counted along the road from Tashkent to Samarkand, their colony of nests scattered along the roadside pylons near the Syr Darya River (the Jaxartes of the ancients). A single bird was found roosting along the Zerafshan river near Samarkand.

PHOENICOPTERIDAE

Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus*: A 1000+ showed very well at several steppe lakes in the Astana area. We observed some display and marvelled at their beautiful flight colours.

ANATIDAE

Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*: A single at Lake Tudakul preceded hundreds seen at the Astana steppe lakes. These are the 'real thing' here and not part of the introduced population of western Europe.

Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus*: Four birds were seen on two days on the Astana steppe lakes.

Greylag Goose *Anser anser*: Regular observations of this well-known species at lake Tudakul and on the Astana steppe lakes. These pink-billed birds are of the eastern *rubrirostris* race.

Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea*: Regularly seen, our first were at Lake Tudakul, then more were out in the Charyn area, and we also found them quite high in the Tien Shan. We saw a pair with chicks at Lake Sorbulak and also small numbers on the Astana steppe lakes.

Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*: Numerous on the Astana steppe lakes.

Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope*: Small numbers were noted on the Astana steppe lakes. Penelops is old Greek for a kind of duck.

Gadwall *Anas strepera*: Four were seen at Lake Tudakul, and then many more on the Astana steppe lakes.

Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca*: Three were seen on a lake in the Astana steppes.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*: Regular encounters at most of the various wetlands we visited.

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*: Small numbers of this elegant duck were noted on the Astana steppe lakes.

Garganey *Anas querquedula*: This handsome fellow was found at Lake Tudakul, at Lake Sorbulak and then more numerous at the Astana steppe lakes.

Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata*: Regular observations, but most common in the Astana area.

Marbled Duck (Marbled Teal) *Marmaronetta angustirostris*: Good flight views of three over the reedbeds at Lake Tudakul. It is treated as VULNERABLE in "Threatened Birds of the World", BirdLife International's magnum opus on the sad fate of 10% of the world's avifauna.

Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina*: Many of these exotic beasts were seen along our route, with 25 at Lake Tudakul, a dozen at Lake Sorbulak, and many more around the Astana steppe lakes, where several females were swimming around with chicks.

Common Pochard *Aythya ferina*: A few at Lake Tudakul preceded fair numbers at the Astana steppe lakes.

- Ferruginous Duck (Ferruginous Pochard) *Aythya nyroca*: Six were seen at Lake Tudakul, two at Lake Sorbulak and eight on small lakes in the Taucum desert. An attractive species. This species is treated as NEAR THREATENED by BirdLife International in "Threatened Birds of the World".
- Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*: Two were at Lake Tudakul, and then a handful more were seen on the Astana steppe lakes.
- White-headed Duck *Oxyura leucocephala*: It took a while, but eventually we found two nice blue-billed drakes on an Astana steppe lake. This species is considered as ENDANGERED in "Threatened Birds of the World, BirdLife International's magnus opus on the sad fate of 10% of the world's avifauna.

ACCIPITRIDAE

- European Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus*: Two showed well overhead in the hills to the east of Tashkent.
- Crested Honey Buzzard (Oriental Honey Buzzard) *Pernis ptilorhyncus*: Seven were migrating together over the hills to the east of Tashkent. The distinctive tail pattern of the males was really obvious.
- Black-eared Kite *Milvus lineatus*: Regular observations, with single birds seen near Tashkent, near Bukhara, several patrolling the plains in the Charyn area, many around Kanshengyal (migrants on the move?) and a few in the Astana area.
- Lammergeier (Bearded Vulture) *Gypaetus barbatus*: A splendid observation of an adult in the hills to the east of Samarkand. Another bird showed well in the Tien Shan above Almaty. The Spanish name of this glorious species is Quebrantahuesos (= the Bonebreaker).
- Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*: Great looks at two near Tashkent and three more showed very well at Aman Kutan, near Samarkand.
- Eurasian Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus*: Five of these monsters obliged at Beldersay and two more were seen at Aman Kutan, near Samarkand.
- Himalayan Griffon Vulture *Gyps himalayensis*: Six performed well at Beldersay, where we could compare them directly with the previous species. Several more were identified in the Charyn area.
- Eurasian Black Vulture (Monk Vulture, Cinereous Vulture) *Aegypius monachus*: Two were seen around Beldersay and another was noted in the Charyn area. This species is treated as NEAR THREATENED by BirdLife International in "Threatened Birds of the World".
- Short-toed Eagle *Circaetus gallicus*: Two singles were seen in Uzbekistan, one near Tashkent and one at Aman Kutan, near Samarkand.
- Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*: Frequently seen around wetland habitats, particularly numerous around Samarkand and Bukhara, and also in the Astana area.
- Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus*: Small numbers of this very attractive and elegant species were seen in the Astana region. Fantastic, close up views of cracking males on several occasions. This species is treated as NEAR THREATENED by BirdLife International in "Threatened Birds of the World".
- Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus*: A few observations in the Astana steppes. Best was the well-performing subadult male at the White-headed Duck lake.
- Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*: Singles were encountered at Aman Kutan near Samarkand and in the Charyn area.
- Shikra (Little Banded Goshawk) *Accipiter badius*: No fewer than 18 observations this year. Best were the showy birds by the Zerafshan river at Samarkand and the obliging birds along the Amu-Bukhara canal.

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*: Small numbers of the *vulpinus* race were seen in Uzbekistan and in northern Kazakhstan. A bird of the race *japonicus* was noted in the Tien Shan above Almaty.

Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus*: Many of these splendid birds were seen throughout the tour, from the very south in Uzbekistan to the northern steppes of Kazakhstan. Several active eyries were also found.

Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis*: A bird sitting on a ridiculously-situated nest was noted in the Charyn area and three birds showed well in the Astana steppes.

Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*: Six sightings of this well-known bird of prey in the greater Almaty area.

Booted Eagle *Hieraaetus pennatus*: Five observations of this dashing species, including a single pale morph and four dark morph individuals. Remember the "landing lights"!

PANDIONIDAE

Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*: A single bird showed well along the Zerafshan River near Samarkand. Strangely enough, a new species for the Birdquest Turkestan tour!

FALCONIDAE

Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni*: Great looks at five near Samarkand and another four performed well in the Charyn area. Adorable males! This species is treated as VULNERABLE by BirdLife International in "Threatened Birds of the World".

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*: Seen very regularly throughout the tour.

Red-footed Falcon *Falco vespertinus*: Some wonderful views of these lovely birds close to their old Rook nests in roadside shelter belts near Astana.

Merlin *Falco columbarius*: We had a good look at a female of the race *lymani* in the Bolshoi Almatinskiy and then superb views of male and female of the ghostly race *pallidus* near their nest in the Astana steppes.

Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo*: Quite a few were encountered, mostly in Uzbekistan, the Charyn area, the Taucum desert and the Astana steppe. While trying to concentrate on Caspian Plovers in the Taucum desert, we witnessed a Hobby catching and then plucking a Greater Short-toed Lark. What a show!

Saker (Saker Falcon) *Falco cherrug*: Fantastic views of a large female near her eyrie containing three downy chicks in the Charyn desert. She sat for a long time on a nearby hilltop and then showed off her flying prowess by chasing a Long-legged Buzzard away. Sadly, a lot of Saker Falcons are still illegally captured in Kazakhstan for use in falconry. Cherrug is derived from the Hindi word *charg* for the female Saker. The tiercel (male) is known as *chargela*.

PHASIANIDAE

Black Grouse *Tetrao tetrix*: Good looks at two males and a female in the Tien Shan. We saw them in flight and also admired them foraging in the top of some large spruces.

Himalayan Snowcock *Tetraogallus himalayensis*: Excellent studies of singing and feeding birds amongst the crags of the upper reaches of the Tien Shan. Fabulous telescope views of males and females. The number four in the Bird of the Trip game. The distinctive Palearctic genus *Tetraogallus* consists of five closely-related species, which all occur in remote and steep mountainous areas and are all highly-desired by Palearctic birding enthusiasts. One has to work to see snowcocks!!!

Chukar (Chukar Partridge) *Alectoris chukar*: A single was seen on the rocky hills at Aman Kutan and several more showed well in the Charyn area.

Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix*: As we tried to home in on their liquid calls we flushed several getting fair flight views of at least three in a grassy area near Astana.

Common Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus*: Heard calling in several localities in Uzbekistan and also in the Charyn area, which would have been the typical encounter. We had brief views of a pair (appropriately of the race *zerafshanicus*) in the early morning at the Amu-Bukhara canal.

RALLIDAE

European Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus* (H): One was emitting its pig squeals at a lake in the Kyzyl Kum desert.

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*: A few observations of this very well-known species, both in Uzbekistan and in Kazakhstan.

Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra*: Common on the Astana steppe lakes, also seen at Lake Tudakul and one or two other wetlands.

GRUIDAE

Common Crane *Grus grus*: Several pairs were found on the Astana steppes.

Demoiselle Crane *Anthropoides virgo*: Perhaps the most attractive member of its family, our first encounter was with eight birds in the Charyn desert. In the Taucum desert we found several small flocks and we also had regular encounters with these elegant birds in the Astana steppes.

OTIDIDAE

Macqueen's Bustard *Chlamydotis macqueenii*: We were lucky to see a single bird during a severe storm in the Taucum desert, offering a good prolonged view while it was running and stumbling across the flat plain. In previous years we have seen many more, and the sad truth is that the Houbara-hunting Arab falconers have moved into Central Asia, and this appears to be the net result. At the current rate of decline, the prediction is that soon there will none left! The Central Asian population is now highly endangered due to excessive hunting by these wealthy Arabs in the Gulf region, Pakistan, and now Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. We were told that in both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, Arab-sponsored "scientists" collect eggs of wild birds, which are brooded and reared in captivity and the resulting semi-wild birds released just in time for the falconers to kill!! Very dubious stuff!! This species is treated as NEAR THREATENED by BirdLife International in "Threatened Birds of the World".

HAEMATOPODIDAE

Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*: One was seen in the northern steppes.

IBIDORHYNCHIDAE

Ibisbill *Ibidorhyncha struthersii*: A single bird was scoped by the river at the Bolshoi Almatinskiy lake, it's partner perhaps sitting tight nearby! It showed off its amazing prowess of turning itself into a stone. Always a great bird to see! It is the only species in its family. The favourite species for Nils and Leonardo and the number three in the Bird of the Trip game.

RECURVIROSTRIDAE

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*: Frequently seen at various wetlands along our route, most commonly near Bukhara and around the Astana steppe lakes.

Pied Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta*: Fair numbers of these elegant waders were seen at the Astana steppe lakes.

GLAREOLIDAE

Collared Pratincole *Glareola pratincola*: A single was noted over the Amu-Bukhara canal and another one showed well at Lake Sorbulak.

Black-winged Pratincole *Glareola nordmanni*: One of the best birds in the Astana area, we had multiple encounters. Particularly memorable was the colony around the shores of a small marshy lake, where they were very vocal about our presence. Many great looks. The scientific epithet refers to Alexander Von Nordmann (1803-1866), a Finnish/Russian naturalist and explorer. This species is treated as DATA DEFICIENT by BirdLife International in "Threatened Birds of the World".

CHARADRIIDAE

Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*: Pairs were seen frequently along our route, usually on open areas near waterholes. Remember the yellow orbital ring.

Kentish Plover (Snowy Plover) *Charadrius alexandrinus*: 15 were seen at Lake Tudakul, where a male was spotted squatting over its nest. We also noted a pair at a salt lake in the Astana steppe.

Greater Sand Plover *Charadrius leschenaulti*: Four were found on the Sugaty plain, and then several more were seen around Kanshengyal. The race involved is *crassirostris*.

Caspian Plover *Charadrius asiaticus*: Our first contact was at some distance, and after walking several hundred meters closer, we enjoyed great views of a richly-coloured male on the endless plain at Kanshengyal. Always a great bird to see well.

Grey Plover (Black-bellied Plover) *Pluvialis squatarola*: A single summer-plumaged bird was seen on the Astana steppe lakes.

Sociable Lapwing (Sociable Plover) *Vanellus gregarius*: In spite of the well-known rarity status of this bird, we did remarkably well at finding them. On our first morning in the Astana area we found several together on a short-grazed sward. Later the same day we had great scope views of a pair that obviously had a nest nearby, so we swiftly vacated the area. This species is treated as VULNERABLE by BirdLife International in "Threatened Birds of the World".

White-tailed Lapwing (White-tailed Plover) *Vanellus leucurus*: We saw c15 at Lake Tudakul including several very confiding birds, and another six were seen at the Amu-Bukhara canal.

Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*: Plentiful in the Astana area, with odd individuals encountered in the Charyn area and at Lake Sorbulak.

SCOLOPACIDAE

Red Knot (Knot) *Calidris canutus*: Two migrants in breeding plumage showed briefly at Lake Tudakul.

Little Stint *Calidris minuta*: Two were seen at Lake Tudakul, and then hundreds more showed well on the shores of the Astana steppe lakes.

Temminck's Stint *Calidris temminckii*: Six were seen very well at Lake Tudakul, then we found several more at the waterholes in the Taucum desert. A few were also noted at the Astana steppe lakes. The bird is named after Coenraad Jacob Temminck (1778-1858), a Dutch ornithologist, collector and author.

Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*: Hundreds of lovely summer-plumaged birds could be enjoyed around the Astana steppe lakes. Many great studies.

Dunlin *Calidris alpina*: Scores were seen around the Astana steppe lakes, all involving big and very bright individuals (nominated).

Broad-billed Sandpiper *Limicola falcinellus*: Paul did very well finding this rarity amongst lots of Little Stints at one of the steppe lakes near Astana. Great scope views of this distinctive wader.

Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*: Only small numbers were seen around the Astana steppe lakes, where several males were already in their 'jousting' plumage, and hustling around each other in preparation for the lekking season.

Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*: We found several vocal pairs around the Astana steppe lakes.

Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus* (NL): A single summer-plumaged bird was seen at Lake Sorbulak.

Common Redshank *Tringa totanus*: This well-known species was present around the Astana steppe lakes, and quite a few were noted at Lake Sorbulak.

Marsh Sandpiper *Tringa stagnatilis*: Just a few very nice summer-plumaged birds were observed around Astana.

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*: A couple of sightings of this distinctive wader.

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*: A single bird was seen by a lake near Samarkand.

Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*: Two were seen at Lake Tudakul and three more were noted at a pool in the Kyzyl Kum desert. The onomatopoeic Russian name is 'Fifi'!

Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus*: Four were studied at close range at Lake Sorbulak and several more were seen at various steppe lakes near Astana. A splendid wader!

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*: Odd birds were encountered along our route, often along rivers.

Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*: Two lovely summer-plumaged examples were found at Lake Tudakul and another nine were seen at the Astana steppe lakes.

Red-necked Phalarope (Northern Phalarope) *Phalaropus lobatus*: Great encounters during our two days around the Astana steppe lakes. We easily saw over 7,000 birds as on several lakes they dotted the water like midges! Quite a spectacle seeing hundreds of these jewels pirouette together!

LARIDAE

Pallas's Gull (Great Black-headed Gull) *Larus ichthyaetus*: Small numbers of these impressive gulls were noted around the Astana steppe lakes. Always spectacular.

Little Gull *Larus minutus*: Just a single bird was seen on the Kurghalzhin lakes.

Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus*: Seen around all the major wetlands visited, particularly in the north.

Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei*: At least 1,000 were seen around the Kurghalzhin lakes, all in full breeding flush. Many great looks.

Mew Gull (Common Gull) *Larus canus*: Just a few were noted on the Astana steppe lakes.

Caspian Gull *Larus [cachinnans] cachinnans*: Just two at Lake Tudakul, and then more at Lake Sorbulak where they nest. Scattered records of small numbers at several wetlands in southern Kazakhstan.

Steppe Gull (Baraba Gull) *Larus [cachinnans] barabensis*: Most of the many big gulls seen around Astana were of this form, showing darker upperparts than the above, a less brutal looking bill and a more rounded head, and a smaller white mirror on the underside of the wingtip.

STERNIDAE

Gull-billed Tern *Sterna nilotica*: We saw eight around the Kurghalzhin lakes.

- Caspian Tern *Sterna caspia*: We found six at Lake Tudakul, and then several on the Astana steppe lakes where we saw a group of twelve.
- Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*: Seen frequently in the Astana area, a couple near Sorbulak, and rather commonly at various localities in Uzbekistan. Many of the birds showed much black on the bills, which is typical of the form *minussensis*. Central and eastern Kazakhstan is an area of intergradation between this form (breeding from central Siberia and the Altai eastwards) and the nominate race.
- Little Tern *Sterna albifrons*: A good number were seen at Lake Tudakul, and also found on other pools and rivers in Uzbekistan. We also found a few at Lake Sorbulak and at the Astana steppe lakes.
- Black Tern *Chlidonias niger*: A couple were noted on Lake Sorbulak and c15 showed well at lakes in the northern Taucum desert. Several more were seen about the pools and reedbeds of the Astana region.
- White-winged Tern (White-winged Black Tern) *Chlidonias leucopterus*: We had our introduction to these extremely delightful birds in the Taucum desert, and then we saw dozens more over the marshes and ponds of the Astana region. Riitta's favourite.

PTEROCLIDIDAE

- Black-bellied Sandgrouse *Pterocles orientalis*: We saw three at Lake Tudakul, c25 in the Charyn deserts and c50 in the Taucum desert. We obtained great looks at interacting birds at the waterholes in the Taucum desert.

COLUMBIDAE

- Rock Dove *Columba livia*: Too many!
- Yellow-eyed Dove (Yellow-eyed Stock Dove, Pale-backed Pigeon) *Columba eversmanni*: Excellent views of six birds in the Turanga (*Populus euphratica*) woods by the Ili river. Great scope studies of perched birds and lovely display flights. A real speciality of this tour. This species is treated as VULNERABLE by BirdLife International in "Threatened Birds of the World".
- Common Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus*: These familiar birds were encountered in small numbers all along our route.
- European Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur*: Just a handful of observations of this lovely, but declining species.
- Oriental Turtle Dove (Rufous Turtle Dove) *Streptopelia orientalis*: In Uzbekistan, first encountered at Aman Kutan and along the Zerafshan River near Samarkand, then plenty more seen along the Amu-Bukhara canal. They were regularly encountered in Kazakhstan, at the Ili River, in the Tien Shan, at Kanshengyal and in the Astana area. These all refer to the race *meena*.
- Laughing Dove (Palm Dove) *Streptopelia senegalensis*: Common in the drier parts of Uzbekistan and often seen in towns and villages.
- Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*: Commonly seen in Uzbekistan, and regular in small numbers in southern Kazakhstan.
- Namaqua Dove *Oena capensis*: The biggest surprise of the tour was finding a male of this mainly African species at an oasis in the Kzyl Kum desert in Uzbekistan. The nearest known breeding location is southern Israel, which is c2800km away as the dove flies. There have been observations in Kuwait, which is only c1800km away.

CUCULIDAE

Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*: Seen and heard virtually throughout, with many excellent observations.

STRIGIDAE

Pallid Scops Owl (Striated Scops Owl) *Otus brucei* (NL): A bird was flushed by our knowledgeable Russian guide in a Turanga grove near the Ili River in southern Kazakhstan, but concerted efforts by the whole group to re-find it, failed miserably.

European Scops Owl *Otus scops*: A great encounter near our lodgings at Chilik, with great views of one sitting in the open on a bough of an elm tree.

Little Owl *Athene noctua*: Five very pallid examples were seen in the middle of the day in the Bukhara area.

Tawny Owl *Strix aluco* (H): We heard the distinctive vocalizations in the distance in the Beldersay area, near Tashkent.

Long-eared Owl *Asio otus*: Fantastic looks at an adult and four recently fledged youngsters during our lunch stop near Lake Sorbulak. Well found, Leonardo!

APODIDAE

Common Swift *Apus apus*: Common in Uzbekistan, especially around the ancient cities. Rather thin on the ground in Kazakhstan and only noted in the south.

Alpine Swift *Apus melba*: A delightful accompaniment to the wonderful monuments in Samarkand, where numerous low-flying birds gave excellent views.

MEROPIDAE

Blue-cheeked Bee-eater *Merops persicus*: Plenty of these beauties were seen around Bukhara and along the road to the Kyzyl Kum desert.

European Bee-eater *Merops apiaster*: Regularly encountered, but most numerous in Uzbekistan. We also noted them in small numbers in the Charyn area and even in the Astana steppes.

CORACIIDAE

European Roller *Coracias garrulus*: Seen most frequently in Uzbekistan and in the south of Kazakhstan, a delightfully common roadside bird!

UPUPIDAE

Eurasian Hoopoe *Upupa epops*: Seen and heard regularly throughout the tour, with a hidden nest indicated by food-carrying parents at a Kanshengyal waterhole.

PICIDAE

White-winged Woodpecker *Dendrocopos leucopterus*: We had great looks at a pair of this Central Asian endemic in the poplars at Aman Kutan, near Samarkand. We also saw them very well at two different locations in the Turanga woods along the Ili river.

ALAUDIDAE

Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra*: Plenty of these big, noisy fellows in the Taucum desert, along the road out there and around our yurts.

Bimaculated Lark *Melanocorypha bimaculata*: Less numerous than the above, but present in small numbers around Kanshengyal in the Taucum desert.

- White-winged Lark *Melanocorypha leucoptera*: A good scattering of these pretty larks on the Astana steppes, less numerous than the following species around Kurghalzhin. Several excellent scope studies of this fine lark. It is endemic to the arid steppes of central Eurasia, occurring from just east of the Black Sea till extreme north-western China.
- Black Lark *Melanocorypha yeltoniensis*: One of the spectacular highlights of this tour, with hundreds of individuals seen on the Kurghalzhin steppes. Many males were seen along the roadside, taking to the air in their unusual 'air-rowing' displays. A truly exquisite species!
- Greater Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla*: A small number were found in the deserts around Charyn, but they were very numerous around Kanshengyal with singing birds all around our camp, where some started singing as early as 4am! We also found a few in the Astana steppes.
- Hume's Short-toed Lark *Calandrella acutirostris*: Superb scope studies at five near Aman Kutan, song-fighting and running about on a barren upland pasture. These demure birds showed the dark lores and dark culmen typical of this species, and sing a less elaborate song than the above species.
- Lesser Short-toed Lark *Calandrella rufescens*: We found small numbers in the Taucum desert and had great scope views of this subtly-plumaged species. The identity of these birds has been the subject of some debate, and the race involved is *heinii*.
- Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*: Often seen along our route, particularly in the Bukhara region and in the Kyzyl Kum desert.
- Oriental Skylark *Alauda gulgula*: A single was seen song-fighting at Lake Tudakul, in its favoured habitat of vegetated patches close to water. We recorded several more in the Charyn area.
- Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis*: The other numerous lark on the steppes around Astana. Great to hear so many sing together.
- Horned Lark (Shore Lark) *Eremophila alpestris*: Two showed all too briefly on the Sugaty Plain, favouring the stonier areas over 1000m. The race here is *brandti*.

HIRUNDINIDAE

- Sand Martin (Bank Swallow) *Riparia riparia*: A reasonable number were seen in the Bukhara region, and also at Lake Sorbulak, Kanshengyal, and more numerous around Astana.
- Pale Martin *Riparia diluta*: A colony in a sand pit near Chilik was very active and allowed close scrutiny of this recent split from the previous species. They are clearly quite different from Sand Martins, with a diffuse breast band, broad at the sides but tapering to nothing in the centre with a dirty wash on the throat and a more contrasting dark face. The upperparts are clearly pallid and they show some scalloping on the upper tail.
- Eurasian Crag Martin *Hirundo rupestris*: One showed well over the Kokpek gorge in the Charyn area.
- Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*: Almost daily observations with a maximum of 60 at one of the Astana steppe lakes.
- Red-rumped Swallow *Hirundo daurica*: Great looks on and around the nest at the hotel at Beldersay near Tashkent, and several more noted around Samarkand and at Aman Kutan.
- Common House Martin *Delichon urbica*: A happy colony thrives at the Beldersay hotel with some nesting in alcoves on our balconies. We also saw them at odd places in southern Kazakhstan.

MOTACILLIDAE

- Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris*: Regular in the Charyn and Sugaty Plain area, usually visible as it performed its creaky song-flights. A couple were also seen at Aman Kutan and around Astana.

- Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis*: Several performed their happy song flight in the Tien Shan, and we also saw it in the Astana area.
- Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta*: A handful were seen at higher elevations in the Tien Shan. They look much more brown and buff than western European birds and relate to the race *coutellii*.
- Sykes's Wagtail *Motacilla [flava] beema*: Good numbers of these were found around pools and damp margins on the Astana steppe. They obviously like to follow herds of sheep and cattle. Colonel William Henry Sykes (1790 –1872) was an Indian Army officer, politician and ornithologist.
- Black-headed Wagtail *Motacilla [flava] feldegg*: Plenty of these very distinctive birds around Lake Tudakul where they were vocal and obvious. The call is quite different from our Yellow Wagtails.
- Western Grey-headed Wagtail *Motacilla [flava] thunbergi*: One was seen at a waterhole in the Kyzyl Kum desert.
- Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola*: Our first was a migrant on a pool near Bukhara. Then we saw one at Lake Tudakul and a further three at steppe lakes near Astana, all of the grey-backed nominate race.
- Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*: A small number were encountered along our route, at Beldersay, Aman Kutan, a migrant in the Kyzyl Kum desert and several in the Tien Shan.
- White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*: A single migrant was seen by a pool in the Kyzyl Kum desert.
- Masked Wagtail *Motacilla [alba] personata*: An endearing bird, with many encountered in Uzbekistan and a few found in southern Kazakhstan.

CINCLIDAE

- Brown Dipper (Pallas's Dipper) *Cinclus pallasii*: Two showed very well while feeding a fledged youngster along a torrent at Beldersay near Tashkent. We saw another three on streams in the Tien Shan. Peter Simon Pallas (1741-1811) was a German author and naturalist in Russian service, who travelled widely in Siberia and Kirghizia.

TROGLODYTIDAE

- Winter Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes* (H): A single was briefly heard in the Tien Shan above Almaty.

PRUNELLIDAE

- Brown Accentor *Prunella fulvescens*: Three were seen very well at Cosmostantsia in the Tien Shan, singing with gusto from dilapidated buildings. A central Asian endemic.
- Black-throated Accentor *Prunella atrogularis*: Many were seen and singing in the junipers of the Tien Shan (*huttoni*). A species with two widely separate populations, one in the northern Urals (nominate) and one in the north-western Himalayas (*huttoni*).
- Altai Accentor (Himalayan Accentor) *Prunella himalayana*: Great views of four around snow-covered Cosmostantsia in the Tien Shan. It is endemic to the Himalayan region.

TURDIDAE

- Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin (Rufous Bush Chat) *Cercotrichas galactotes*: Several sightings of some very showy and vocal birds (*familiaris*). We began with a single in the Kyzyl Kum desert and then two at the Amu-Bukhara canal that performed as well as any could, singing from telephone wires and from the tops of bushes. In Kazakhstan we found one in the Charyn area.

- Common Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos*: Plentiful and noisy at Beldersay, where we scoped a couple. They were with us all through Uzbekistan (except in the Kyzyl Kum). In Kazakhstan they were very audible in the Charyn area and also in bushes near Astana. These birds of the race *hafizi* visibly differ from western populations by being greyer with a more contrastingly rusty tail, and having pale edges to their wing coverts and a pale supercilium, plus their songs sounds rougher.
- Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica*: About a dozen performed incredibly well in bushes and reedbeds in the Astana area. The race involved is *pallidogularis*, which shows a pale blue throat with a bright rufous spot and a narrow rufous lower breast band. Fantastic scope studies!
- White-tailed Rubythroat (Himalayan Rubythroat) *Luscinia pectoralis*: A dozen of these jewels were seen in the Tien Shan, emerging from the junipers to sing. We also saw a couple of females, which is quite unusual as they normally skulk. The number five in the Bird of the Trip game.
- White-throated Robin (Iranian) *Irania gutturalis*: Just one of these attractive chats at Aman Kutan, a male singing from the top of bushes among the rocks. What a cracker.
- Eversmann's Redstart (Rufous-backed Redstart) *Phoenicurus erythronota*: Splendid scope views of a male of this handsome chat in the spruces of the Tien Shan. The bird is named after Eduard Friedrich Eversmann (1794-1860), German naturalist, author and collector in Kirghizia and Siberia.
- Blue-capped Redstart (Blue-headed Redstart) *Phoenicurus caeruleocephalus*: Two males showed very well among the spruces of the Tien Shan.
- Güldenstädt's Redstart (White-winged Redstart) *Phoenicurus erythrogaster*: Six birds performed very well among the snow-covered buildings at Cosmostantsia in the Tien Shan. These hardy birds seemed little concerned with the snowy conditions! Johann Anton Güldenstädt (1745-1781) was a Baltic German naturalist and explorer in Russian service. The favourite bird for Jean-Yves.
- Siberian Stonechat *Saxicola maura*: Two were seen in the Charyn area, three in the Tien Shan and then not again until we reached the Kurghalzhin steppe where we saw several.
- Pied Bushchat (Pied Stonechat) *Saxicola caprata*: Quite a few were obvious and vocal around Lake Tudakul and the Amu-Bukhara canal. The range of this bird stretches from Iran and Uzbekistan right across southern Asia to New Guinea!
- Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina*: Our first were in the Kyzyl Kum desert, with more seen around the Charyn region, then commonly in the Taucum desert. They are a remarkable mimic, at Kanshengyal we heard them imitate Greater Short-toed Lark and a whinnying horse!
- Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*: Fairly common and visible on the steppes around Astana.
- Pied Wheatear *Oenanthe pleschanka*: Quite a few were seen in rocky hills in Uzbekistan and south-east Kazakhstan. They were most numerous around Aman Kutan.
- Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti*: Only found in the Charyn area where we found them in the sparsest desert habitat. A fine-looking fellow!
- Finsch's Wheatear *Oenanthe finschii*: We had a great encounter in rocky hills near Aman Kutan. A pair was seen, but it was the handsome male that chose to show off the most. This must be the furthest north-western part of their range.

Variable Wheatear (Eastern Pied Wheatear) *Oenanthe picata*: A pair of the race *capistrata* was seen in rocky roadside habitat as we travelled to Samarkand. Despite close scrutiny, they are a bit perplexing, but these seem to show a whiter and more restricted white cap, a more extensive black breast, a more regular tail pattern and a noticeably more compact and smaller shape. They also seemed to favour the actual rocky slopes while the Pieds seemed to stick to the tops of the hills. It has also been suggested that *capistrata* is part of a 'hybrid-swarm' with Pied Wheatear! A confusing collection of black-and-white birds!

Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius*: Three were seen in the Charyn hills.

Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush (European Rock Thrush) *Monticola saxatilis*: Great looks at a male and a female of this attractive species in the rocky hills of the Charyn area.

Blue Whistling Thrush *Myophonus caeruleus*: Several were seen quite well at Beldersay. Two more showed well in the Tien Shan.

Common Blackbird *Turdus merula*: Not uncommon at Beldersay, Aman Kutan and in the Tien Shan forests where they are represented by the race *intermedius*.

Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris* (H): We heard the quiet song in a forested area north of Astana.

Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*: Seen at both ends of the Tien Shan, in the Bolshoi Almatinskiy and at Beldersay.

SYLVIIDAE

Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti*: Perfect and prolonged scope views of a singing bird at Aman Kutan. We also heard it along the Zerafshan river and in bushes on the Astana steppes. The bird is named after Francesco Cetti (1726-1778), an Italian mathematician, naturalist and author.

Scrub Warbler (Streaked Scrub Warbler) *Scotocerca inquieta*: Two typically rather furtive birds showed well among the Saxaul bushes in the Kyzyl Kum desert. We even managed to scope them for really good views!

Savi's Warbler *Locustella luscinioides*: We saw one perched up 'reeling' in a large reedbed on the Astana steppes.

Common Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella naevia*: A splendid scope look at one in full voice, in bushes on the Astana steppe.

Moustached Warbler *Acrocephalus melanopogon*: Great looks at one in the reedbed of a lake in the Kyzyl Kum desert. Interestingly, they completely ignored the recordings of the song of Spanish birds. The race involved is *mimica*.

Paddyfield Warbler *Acrocephalus agricola*: Several good sightings of this reed-loving species, both in Uzbekistan and in Kazakhstan.

Blyth's Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus dumetorum*: Regularly recorded (seen and heard) all along our route through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. One of the most regularly recorded warblers.

Caspian Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus fuscus*: Several were seen singing away in the reedbeds at Lake Tudakul and also along the Zerafshan river. Although not greatly different to European Reed Warbler *A. scirpaceus*, the song seems simpler and less varied, more strangled and less 'throaty'.

Indian Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus brunnescens*: Noisy and easy to locate, we found dozens in the reedbeds around Lake Tudakul. We also saw it near Samarkand.

Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus*: Good looks at one in the northern Taucum desert and regularly heard in the Astana reedbeds.

Eastern Olivaceous Warbler *Hippolais pallida*: Several were seen singing and skulking in the trees at Aman Kutan. A few more were found in the Kyzyl Kum desert and in the Charyn area.

- Booted Warbler *Hippolais caligata*: This demure fellow was seen well and fairly often in the Astana region, most numerous in bushy areas in the steppe, where we had great looks at multiple examples singing their bubbling little song. One or two birds performed on wires, allowing for perfect scope views. The darker feet were quite obvious!
- Sykes's Warbler *Hippolais rama*: The southern counterpart of the above, preferring trees and taller vegetation and having a very different song. We saw them commonly in the tamarisks at Lake Tudakul and also quite regularly in the Charyn area.
- Upcher's Warbler *Hippolais languida*: Great scope views of a vocal songster boldly holding territory at Aman Kutan and another was singing in the Kyzyl Kum desert. Remember the loose-hinged tail!
- Icterine Warbler *Hippolais icterina*: A single bird was found in a bushy area along the Nura river in the Astana steppes. A new bird for this tour!
- Ménétries's Warbler *Sylvia mystacea*: Fantastic scope views of a showy male along the Amu-Bukhara canal near Bukhara.
- Asian Desert Warbler *Sylvia nana*: Four birds – a pair feeding two youngsters - showed very well in the Kyzyl Kum desert and another was found in the Charyn area. We were able to discern the pale eye.
- Eastern Orphean Warbler *Sylvia crassirostris*: Eight of these big fellows were seen at Aman Kutan, giving us very good looks as they sang throatily from the Hawthorn bushes. Birds breeding here are of the race *jerdoni*, which winters in India unlike other forms of Eastern Orphean Warbler which go to Africa. Another split in the offing?
- Barred Warbler *Sylvia nisoria*: It took a while, but eventually we obtained excellent views of a singing bird in riverside bushes in the Astana steppes.
- Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca*: Some birds seemingly of the *curruca* or perhaps *blythi* form were seen around Astana, then other migrant birds not specifically racially identified were seen in Uzbekistan around Samarkand and Bukhara. We saw several of the form *halimodendri* (Steppe Lesser Whitethroat) that has a distinct warbling song, in bushes by the Ili river in south-eastern Kazakhstan.
- Hume's Whitethroat *Sylvia althaea*: Common around Beldersay and at Aman Kutan, the most striking difference between this and European *curruca* birds is the loud warbling song, instead of a harsh rattle. It prefers mountains and its breeding range extends from here through to northern Pakistan.
- [Desert Whitethroat *Sylvia minula*: A couple of birds seen in the Saxaul bushes of the Kyzyl Kum desert could have been this form, but we did not see them well enough to really distinguish them.]
- Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis*: We had a couple of sightings in Uzbekistan and heard it in the Astana region. These grey-mantled birds should be of the race *rubicola*.
- Greenish Warbler *Phylloscopus trochiloides*: Several migrants were encountered in Uzbekistan (the Samarkand area and near Bukhara). In Kazakhstan we only found some singing birds in shelter belts north of Astana.
- Hume's Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus humei*: Common and vocal in the Bolshoi Almatinskiy (living up to its German name of 'Tien Shan Warbler') with a few birds seen in the northern Taucum desert.
- Dusky Warbler *Phylloscopus fuscatus*: A single skulking migrant was found in a juniper area in the higher reaches of the Tien Shan, above Almaty.
- Sulphur-bellied Warbler *Phylloscopus griseolus*: Fantastic views of one or two on a rocky juniper slope in the Tien Shan.
- Siberian Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus tristis*: Several migrants were seen near Samarkand and then we had great looks at two of these in the Astana area, singing their very un-Chiffchaff like song!

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*: A single bird was seen in the Bolshoi Almatinskiy spruces.

Severtzov's Tit-Warbler (White-browed Tit-Warbler, Stoliczka's Tit-Warbler) *Leptopoecile sophiae*: Fantastic looks at several in the junipers in the higher reaches of the Tien Shan. Perfect views of this uniquely coloured dainty jewel! THE BIRD OF THE TRIP and the favourite bird for Hilary, Noel, Anita, Kinta, Paul and Gerry. The bird is named after Nicklai Alekseevich Severtsov (1827–85), Russian naturalist, explorer and biogeographer. The scientific epithet probably refers to Tzarina Maria Alexandrovna (1824-1880), formerly Princess Maximiliane, Wilhelmine, Auguste Sophie Marie, wife of Alexander II, Tzar of all the Russians. Note that the Handbook of the Birds of the World (HBW) places this species, together with the closely related Crested tit-Warbler in the family Aegithalidae, the Long-tailed Tits!

MUSCICAPIDAE

Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*: Many migrants were encountered in Uzbekistan: at Beldersay, at Aman Kutan, Tudakul, the Amu-Bukhara canal and in the Kyzyl Kum desert. In Kazakhstan we saw it in the Taucum desert and near Astana.

Asian Paradise Flycatcher *Terpsiphone paradisi*: We saw one at Beldersay near Tashkent and a total of three of these marvels at Aman Kutan. We obtained great views of a female gathering nesting material and building her nest. A delightful and very attractive species.

TIMALIIDAE

Bearded Reedling (Bearded Tit, Bearded Parrotbill) *Panurus biarmicus*: A few showed at Lake Tudakul and we also had a couple in reedbeds around Astana.

PARIDAE

Songar Tit *Parus songarus*: It took a while, but eventually we obtained great looks at this species in the spruces of the Tien Shan (nominate). Two others were glimpsed and heard. This species is represented by three separated populations in China and neighbouring regions.

Rufous-naped Tit *Parus rufonuchalis*: This handsome tit was beautifully seen near our well-appointed hotel in the Chatkal range. Here at the western edge of its range that extends as far east as Nepal.

Coal Tit *Parus ater*: Small numbers were noted in the spruce forest at Bolshoi Almatinskiy.

Azure Tit *Parus cyanus*: A bird of the *tianschanicus* race showed well near our guesthouse at Chilik. We also found this race in the northern Taucum desert. We saw a single bird of the brighter white *hyperrhiphaeus* race near Astana.

Yellow-breasted Tit *Parus flavipectus*: Delightfully common at Beldersay near Tashkent and another five were seen in the Aman Kutan area, near Samarkand. Many excellent encounters.

Great Tit *Parus major*: Just a few were seen, in shelter belts along the road from Almaty, and also in the Astana area.

Turkestan Tit (Turkestan Great Tit) *Parus bokharensis*: This Central Asian endemic was seen at Aman Kutan, Samarkand and in the Ili valley Turanga woods. The scientific epithet obviously refers to the city of Bukhara.

SITTIDAE

Eastern Rock Nuthatch (Great Rock Nuthatch) *Sitta tephronota*: Five birds were seen in classic rocky habitat at Aman Kutan. They showed particularly well and we also found a nest being built in a rock cleft.

TICHODROMADIDAE

Wallcreeper *Tichodroma muraria*: Fantastic prolonged scope studies of two males on a concrete wall in the lower reaches of the Tien Shan above Almaty. The birds had obviously been pushed to lower levels by a severe snow storm. Definitely one of those must see birds!! It scored very well in the Bird of the Trip game.

CERTHIIDAE

Eurasian Treecreeper (Common Treecreeper) *Certhia familiaris*: A single bird was seen in the spruces of the Bolshoi Almatinskiy.

REMIZIDAE

Black-headed Penduline Tit *Remiz macronyx*: Good looks at two males at reedy lakes in the northern Taucum desert (Kazakhstan). One male showed a dark hood and a pale throat, but our second bird had a completely black hood and throat, convincing us all. Variation is well documented in this scarce species! Some authorities consider this taxon as a subspecies of European Penduline Tit. The race involved is *ssaposhnikowi*. A new species for our Turkestan tour and for your leader!

White-crowned Penduline Tit *Remiz coronatus*: Good views of several during the tour, with two building a nest near our Beldersay hotel, and another two at their nest at our lunch stop between Chilik and Almaty.

ORIOLIDAE

Eurasian Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus*: Four migrant birds showed well in a fruiting mulberry tree at an oasis in the Kyzyl Kum desert and another two were seen in the Astana steppes!

Indian Golden Oriole *Oriolus kundoo*: This species differs from the above in having a big black teardrop behind the eye and much yellow in the wings. In Uzbekistan we saw this one below our Beldersay hotel and near Samarkand, while in Kazakhstan we saw several in the Charyn area and also in the Turanga woodland along the Ili river.

LANIIDAE

Turkestan Shrike *Lanius [isabellinus] phoenicuroides*: We had good looks at four at Aman Kutan (Uzbekistan), then more in Kazakhstan with several showing well in the Charyn region.

Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*: Excellent looks at a female on the Astana steppe. A lucky soul saw a male in bushy habitat north of Astana.

Long-tailed Shrike *Lanius schach*: A couple of sightings of birds belonging to the *erythronotus* race in southern Kazakhstan.

Lesser Grey Shrike *Lanius minor*: Commonly found wherever trees adjoined open country, all the way from Bukhara to the Charyn area, plus several close to Astana.

Steppe Grey Shrike *Lanius pallidirostris*: In the Kyzyl Kum desert we saw five birds, and although no *pallidirostris* bill or facial features were noted, it's possible that this form is highly variable. There is more work to be done on the taxonomy of Central Asian Grey Shrikes!

CORVIDAE

Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica*: Recorded almost daily! The race involved is *bactriana*.

Pander's Ground Jay *Podoces panderi*: A splendid species that obliged by appearing right on the roadside, where it foraged at close range for c15min! Great stuff. In the vast landscape of the Kyzyl Kum desert we observed a total of ten adult birds. We also found a nest containing six juveniles in a small Saxaul tree. The Pander's Ground Jay is endemic to the deserts of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and there is a small isolated population to the

southeast of Lake Balkash in southern Kazakhstan. The bird is named after Heinrich Christian Von Pander (1794-1865), a Latvian/German geologist and palaeontologist. It was voted as the second best bird of the tour! The five species of ground jay (genera *Podoces* and *Pseudopodoces*) are all enigmatic species of remote, hard to reach places that appeal very much to Palearctic birding fanatics.

Spotted Nutcracker *Nucifraga caryocatactes*: Excellent views, eventually, of a couple in the spruce zone of the Tien Shan above Almaty (*rothshildi*).

Alpine Chough (Yellow-billed Chough) *Pyrrhocorax graculus*: Excellent views of two in the higher reaches of the Tien Shan above Almaty.

Red-billed Chough (Chough) *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*: Six birds were seen around Cosmostantsia, high in the Tien Shan. The birds showed well and obviously had nests with young in the derelict buildings.

Western Jackdaw *Corvus monedula*: Seen frequently almost throughout the tour, all were of the silver-necked *soemmerringii* race.

Rook *Corvus frugilegus*: Common throughout much of the tour. Around Astana they are blamed for the decline of the Sociable Lapwings, and indeed this may be a contributing factor, but I think it's more to do with the Lapwings needing a very short-grazed sward, which is now scarce due to the lack of both domestic and wild herbivores.

Oriental Crow *Corvus orientalis*: These were encountered regularly, particularly along the fringes of the Tien Shan and outlying hills.

Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix*: Taking over from the above in the Astana region, though in smaller numbers.

Brown-necked Raven *Corvus ruficollis*: 13 were seen in the Taucum desert, showing paler feet than the next species and with flight feathers that usually appear greyer than the underwing coverts. Several of the birds seen had a distinctive brown wash all over their bodies.

Common Raven *Corvus corax*: Two were seen at Aman Kutan, and we also encountered a couple near Samarkand. We also noted two in the Tien Shan.

STURNIDAE

Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*: Seen throughout except in open desert or high mountains, always less numerous than the following species!

Rosy Starling (Rose-coloured Starling) *Sturnus roseus*: In Uzbekistan we saw c1000 on the move going north-eastwards at Aman Kutan. Smaller numbers were noted in southern Kazakhstan. Many great views of these attractive birds were obtained.

Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*: Seen daily (even at 2750m in the Tien Shan) until we shook them off by flying to Astana!

PASSERIDAE

Saxaul Sparrow *Passer ammodendri*: Some wonderful looks in the Charyn deserts at five individuals, the lovely males showing off their ginger-and-black head markings, peeking out of their nest holes and chirping away merrily. Restricted to Central Asia. Although in Mongolia they are usually only found in Saxaul tree (*Haloxylon ammodendron*) habitat, in Kazakhstan they seem to prefer Turanga woodland and the neighbourhood of villages close to the desert.

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*: We saw a great number of 'non-House Sparrows' in Uzbekistan and also in the Kazakh deserts, this is the migrant *bactrianus* form, which is significantly brighter and smarter with a big black bill, and tends to shun human habitation.

Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis*: Good numbers were seen at Lake Tudakul and in the Kyzyl Kum desert oases.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*: A scattering of sightings all along our route through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

Rock Sparrow (Rock Petronia) *Petronia petronia*: Excellent views of several at Aman Kutan (Uzbekistan) and good views again of several near the Saker Falcon eyrie in the Charyn area.

FRINGILLIDAE

Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*: Heard and briefly seen in a wooded area north of Astana.

Red-fronted Serin (Fire-fronted Serin) *Serinus pusillus*: Perfect scope views of several in the spruce/juniper zone of the Tien Shan above Almaty. Several birds were song-fighting and chasing each other with all the joys of spring.

European Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris*: Small numbers were noted at widely scattered localities, both in Uzbekistan and in Kazakhstan.

Grey-capped Goldfinch *Carduelis caniceps*: Seen especially well in the wooded valleys at Aman Kutan, where displaying and singing birds obliged at length.

Common Linnet *Carduelis cannabina*: Several showed very well while coming in to drink at a puddle in the Charyn desert. The race involved is *bella*.

Twite *Carduelis flavirostris*: Great scope studies of a pair at a drinking pool in the Astana steppes. These birds are quite different from the fairly drab races we see in western Europe.

Common Crossbill (Red Crossbill) *Loxia curvirostra*: Very satisfying scope views of a dozen of these widespread birds in the spruces of the Tien Shan. The race involved is *tianschanica*.

Plain Mountain Finch (Hodgson's Mountain Finch) *Leucosticte nemoricola*: Small numbers were seen in the higher reaches of the Tien Shan.

Crimson-winged Finch *Rhodopechys sanguinea*: Superb views of several at a drinking puddle in the Charyn desert (nominate).

Desert Finch *Rhodospiza obsoleta*: c15 of these smart birds were seen very well at water holes in the Kyzyl Kum desert. Several were also seen coming to puddles in the Charyn desert.

Mongolian Finch (Mongolian Trumpeter Finch) *Bucanetes mongolicus*: Fantastic views of 100+ at a water puddle in the Charyn desert. Their sweet calls being a constant companion during our wait for bigger fry.

Common Rosefinch (Scarlet Rosefinch) *Carpodacus erythrinus*: Small numbers were noted at widely scattered localities, both in Uzbekistan and in Kazakhstan.

Red-mantled Rosefinch *Carpodacus rhodochlamys*: A pair of these fine finches perched up for exquisite views in the junipers near the Tien Shan Observatory. Gorgeous!

White-winged Grosbeak *Mycerobas carnipes*: Vocal and bold in the junipers and spruces of the Tien Shan, even in the snow! c20 birds obliged and allowed close scrutiny.

EMBERIZIDAE

Pine Bunting *Emberiza leucocephalos*: This fine species was our target bird for our last birding day of the tour. We found four jousting males in a shelter belt north of Astana, and we obtained excellent scope views.

White-capped Bunting (Chestnut-breasted Bunting) *Emberiza stewarti*: Two were singing away by our hotel at Beldersay near Tashkent. Several more were noted in the Charyn area. Handsome!

Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia*: Six showed well at our hotel at Beldersay near Tashkent and we found a few more in the Charyn gorges.

Ortolan Bunting *Emberiza hortulana*: Three were noted at drinking pools on migration in southern Kazakhstan and we had great scope views of singing males in a weedy field to the north of Astana.

- Grey-necked Bunting (Grey-hooded Bunting) *Emberiza buchanani*: Ten or more were seen singing away on rocky hillsides in the Charyn area. We also observed them coming in to water puddles.
- Common Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*: Three showed quite well at Lake Tudakul and refer to the 'parrot-billed' *pyrrhuloides* form (with very fat bills and much less black/more white around the head and breast). Several more typical-looking birds were seen in the reedbeds around Astana.
- Red-headed Bunting *Emberiza bruniceps*: A prominent and vocal fellow, with many seen in the hills at Aman Kutan, in the Charyn area and very commonly en route to and around Kanshengyal in the Taucum desert.
- Corn Bunting *Miliaria calandra*: A single bird was seen singing in a weedy field en route to the Taucum desert.

MAMMALS

- Steppe Pika *Ochotona pusilla* (H): One was heard in the Astana steppe. Strange vocalizations!
- European Hare *Lepus europaeus*: A few were seen in the Astana steppes.
- Tolai Hare *Lepus tolai*: Several were seen, in the Ili and Charyn area.
- Eurasian Red Squirrel (Red Squirrel) *Sciurus vulgaris*: A couple of observations of these handsome creatures in the Tien Shan.
- Bobak Marmot *Marmota bobak*: Dozens were seen on the Astana steppes.
- Long-tailed Marmot *Marmota caudata*: Some nice views of several of these furry fellows in the Tien Shan. They were very confiding!
- Yellow Ground Squirrel *Spermophilus fulvus*: Seen frequently in the drier parts of Uzbekistan and southern Kazakhstan.
- Muskrat *Ondatra zibethicus*: A few were noted at Lake Sorbulak and at lakes in the Taucum desert. An introduced species from North America.
- Great Gerbil *Rhombomys opimus*: Plenty in the Charyn area. Really cute!
- Coypu *Myocastor coypus*: We saw one of these large rodents swim at Lake Tudakul. Another introduced species.
- Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*: A very pallid individual was seen at Aman Kutan.
- Eurasian Wild Boar *Sus scrofa*: One of these brutes showed briefly along a reed edge in the Astana steppes.
- Goitred Gazelle *Gazella subgutturosa*: A proper wild one was seen in the Charyn desert. Released animals were also seen in the reserve at the Amu-Bukhara canal.

REPTILES

- Horsfield's Tortoise *Agrionemys horsfieldi*: Regular encounters with these endearing creatures in the hills and deserts.
- Desert Sand Boa *Eryx miliaris*: This was the snake that obliged so well in the Kyzyl Kum desert.
- European Grass Snake *Natrix natrix*: A rather large individual showed to some of us in a pool at Lake Sorbulak.
- Sunwatcher Toadhead Agama *Phrynocephalus helioscopus*: These were the more common lizards in the Kyzyl Kum desert.

BIRDS OF THE TRIP

| | |
|----------------------------|----|
| 1. Severtzov's Tit-Warbler | 39 |
| 2. Pander's Ground Jay | 24 |
| 3. Ibisbill | 14 |
| 4. Himalayan Snowcock | 13 |
| 5. White-tailed Rubythroat | 12 |
| 6. Wallcreeper | 11 |