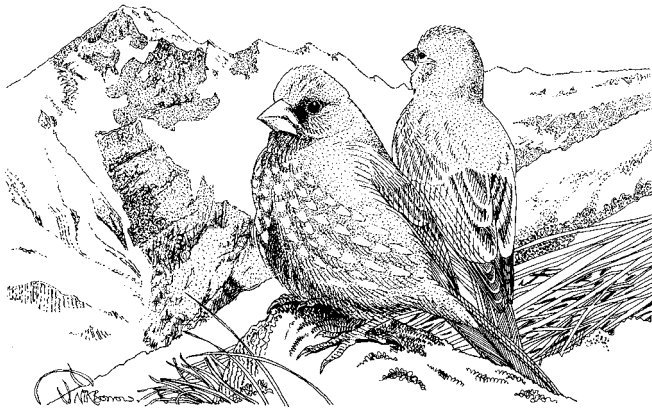


## THE CAUCASUS & ARMENIA

Friday 7th May – Thursday 20th May 2010 (14 days)

Leader: Nigel Redman

Group Size Limit: 12



Caucasian Great Rosefinches (Nik Borrow)

The Caucasus in Georgia and the neighbouring state of Armenia are an exciting destination for anyone with an interest in Palearctic birds, providing a great opportunity to see many specialities amidst some truly superb scenery.

Georgia and Armenia were for centuries Christian bulwarks that resisted the Muslim tide that swept across Asia Minor, the Caucasus and deep into Russia. After a long and turbulent history, both are now independent republics following the collapse of the Soviet Union and fiercely keen to maintain their hard-won independence.

During the first part of this journey through these two states we will explore the high Caucasus range in Georgia. A mixture of necessity and cultural ties led Georgia first to forge alliances with Czarist Russia and ultimately to seek union with her much larger neighbour. The Georgian Military Highway, which we shall explore as it winds its way across the highest mountain range in Europe (yes, Europe ends here!), was first built to facilitate troop movements, but it

now provides visiting birders with access to some of the most spectacular mountain country on earth. The splendid Caucasian Snowcock and Caucasian Great Rosefinch are endemic to this one range, which also holds the most northerly populations of Caucasian Grouse and Caucasian Chiffchaff and the most westerly population of *Güldenstädt's Redstart*, while other specialities include Wallcreeper, White-winged Snowfinch, Red-fronted Serin and the interior Asian form of the Twite (a potential split).

Armenia, where we will spend the remainder of our time, is centred on the Armenian Highlands, part of the Transcaucasus (or 'Lesser Caucasus') mountains. It is primarily a mountainous country, with an average altitude of 1800m and with extreme elevations ranging from only 380m above sea-level in the canyon of the river Debed to no less than 4095m at the summit of Mount Aragats! The territory of Armenia is relatively small, but its complex terrain and geographical situation at the junction of Europe and

the Middle East result in a rich diversity of habitats. The country is also generously endowed with rich colours and picturesque landscapes. Here one can find majestic snow-covered peaks, deep wooded gorges cut by swift mountain streams, wildflower-filled valleys and plains with orchards and vineyards, arid semideserts and the fantastical landscapes of a high volcanic plateau. This sheer variety of habitats results in a rich flora and fauna. Until recently Armenia was little known to western birders, but now the word is out that this is one of the most rewarding destinations in the entire Western Palearctic.

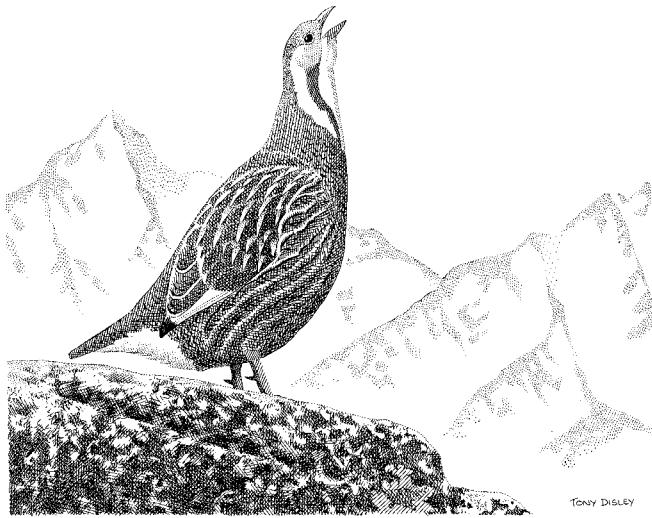
From Georgia we travel south to Dilijan in northern Armenia where deciduous forest near our hotel should produce Green Warbler and Semi-collared Flycatcher, as well as many other woodland species. At Lake Sevan, one of the largest highland lakes in the world, we will see the biggest colony of Armenian Gulls in existence and probably the first of many Rosy Starlings. Our next destination is Yeghegnadzor in the fertile Arpa Valley. Not far beyond this small town is a good area for Bimaculated Lark and Crimson-winged Finch. Afterwards we will travel to the extreme south of the country, to Meghri near the Iranian border, where orchards in arid gorges hold

Levant Sparrowhawk, Syrian Woodpecker, Eastern Orphee Warbler and Sombre Tit, and here among rocky outcrops we should be able to see Rufous-tailed Wheatear as well as Upcher's Warbler and Eastern Rock Nuthatch. This is also our base for exploring a high mountain area where we have good chances of seeing Caspian Snowcock.

In the vicinity of Yerevan we will explore arid and scrub-covered hillsides in search of such specialities as the beautiful White-throated Robin, Finsch's Wheatear, Grey-necked Bunting and, with luck, Pale Rockfinch and Mongolian Finch, and also the extensive Armash fish ponds in the Araks valley where the inhabitants include Pygmy Cormorant, Marbled and White-headed Ducks, Ménétries's Warbler and the recently established White-tailed Lapwing and Paddyfield Warbler. We will also explore the spectacular volcanic slopes of Mount Aragats, where among the dwarf junipers we will search for Radde's Accentor and the *magna* form of the Bluethroat. By the end of our travels we will have encountered a large number of sought-after birds and enjoyed some spectacular scenery and some superb wildflowers, never mind the hospitality of the friendly people of Georgia and Armenia.

Birdquest pioneered bird





*Caucasian Snowcock (Tony Disley)*

tours to the Caucasus region as far back as 1982.

### Itinerary

**Day 1** Evening flight from London bound for Tbilisi, arriving after midnight for an overnight stay.

**Day 2** The capital city of Georgia is situated along the banks of the Kura River and is one of the most attractive cities of the region, with many fine old churches in the Georgian style and an ancient fortress that dominates the valley. From Tbilisi we follow the historic Georgian Military Highway over the Jvari (or Krestovyy) Pass to Stepantsminda (formerly Kazbegi) for a three nights stay. At first the road runs through the cultivated Kura Valley, but soon we are climbing through the forested foothills until the trees are left behind and we wind our way upwards through the magnificent scenery of the high Caucasus. The top of the pass (the unmarked border between Asia and Europe) is situated at 2395m and from there we drop down the Terek valley to Stepantsminda, the view dominated by a continuous wall of

huge, snow-capped peaks including the great white dome of Kazbek (5047m), the highest mountain in the Central Caucasus. We will stop along the way to look at raptors such as Eurasian Griffon and Eurasian Black Vultures, Common Buzzard and Common Kestrel. Other likely species today include Common Swift, European Bee-eater, Barn Swallow, White Wagtail, Common Redstart (of the interesting form *samamiscus*, in which the male has a white wing panel), Northern Wheatear, Common Blackbird, Great Tit, Red-backed Shrike, Hooded Crow, Common Raven, Common Chaffinch, European Greenfinch, European Goldfinch and Ortolan Bunting.

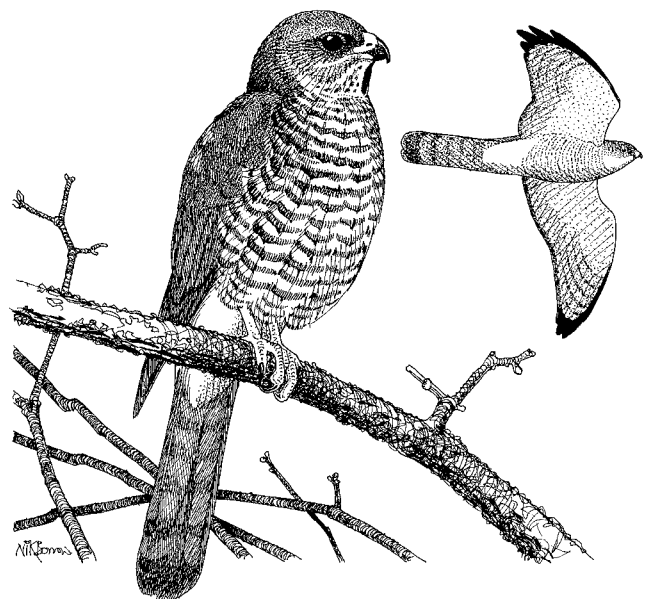
**Days 3-4** During our stay at Stepantsminda, a large village on the Terek river, we shall explore the high Caucasus. The woodland, scrub, streams and open areas hold Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Corn Crake (much easier to hear than see), Common House Martin, Tree Pipit, Grey Wagtail, White-throated Dipper, Winter Wren, Dunnock, Ring Ouzel, Mistle Thrush, Common Whitethroat, Caucasian Chiffchaff (split

from Mountain), Twite, Red-fronted Serin, Common Linnet and Common Rosefinch, whilst the alpine meadows and rocky slopes are home to Eurasian Crag Martin, Horned Lark, Water Pipit, Alpine Accentor, Black Redstart, Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush, White-winged Snowfinch and Caucasian Great Rosefinch (now treated as specifically distinct from the Spotted Great Rosefinch of the Tibetan Plateau and Central Asia). Amongst the snow patches and boulder slopes we should encounter the striking Gldenstdt's Redstart, yet another species restricted within the Western Palearctic to the high Caucasus. In the more open areas amongst the high altitude azalea scrub male Caucasian Grouse display, fluttering into the air to reveal their gleaming white underwings, whilst from the high crags Caucasian Snowcocks (a species found only in these mountains) give their curlew-like whistles. Rocky gullies are the haunt of that avian butterfly, the delightful Wallcreeper, and overhead we will look out for the dramatic silhouette of the Lammergeier, as well as Golden Eagle and Red-billed and Alpine Choughs. As well

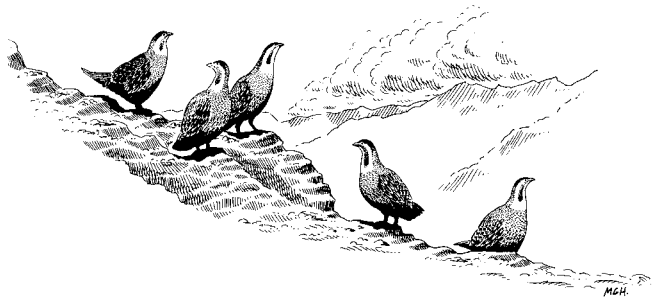
as possessing some fine birds, these mountains hold the East Caucasian Tur, a close relative of the Ibex, and we may well see some picking their way across the precipitous mountainsides. As we walk amidst the simply awesome mountain scenery our progress will be enlivened by myriads of alpine flowers, the swards dominated by primulas, gentians and fritillaries.

**Day 5** Today we will make our way back to Tbilisi and then continue southwards to the Armenian border and beyond to Dilijan for a two nights stay. We can expect to see a few new birds along the way, including European Roller, Lesser Grey Shrike, Eurasian Tree Sparrow and both Black-headed and Corn Buntings.

**Day 6** Our hotel is situated in montane deciduous forest of mainly beech and oak with extensive areas of thick undergrowth. Here we will spend the morning exploring the forest and open meadows in pursuit of the area's specialities: Black Woodpecker, Semi-collared and Red-breasted Flycatchers, and Green Warbler. Other species present in this superb



*Levant Sparrowhawks (Nik Borrow)*

*Caspian Snowcocks (Michael Hodgson)*

area include European Honey Buzzard, Northern Goshawk, Booted and Lesser Spotted Eagles, Stock Dove, Common Wood Pigeon, Common Cuckoo, European Green, Lesser Spotted, Middle Spotted and Great Spotted Woodpeckers, European Robin, Common Redstart, Song Thrush, Garden Warbler, Blackcap, Common Chiffchaff, Spotted Flycatcher, Long-tailed, Coal and Blue Tits, Eurasian Treecreeper, Eurasian Nuthatch, Eurasian Golden Oriole, Eurasian Jay, Hawfinch and Eurasian Bullfinch. At night, Tawny Owl can often be heard calling.

**Day 7** Today we move south to Yeghegnadzor for an overnight stay. On leaving the forested hills behind, we pass along the entire western side of huge Lake Sevan, the largest mountain lake in the Caucasus and one of the largest highland lakes in the world. The main attraction here is the region's largest colony of Armenian Gulls, but the lake shore usually attracts numbers of Great Crested Grebes and Ruddy Shelducks, along with smaller numbers of Black-necked Grebes, while in the extensive areas of Sea Buckthorn and other shrubbery we will look for Cetti's, Marsh and Barred Warblers. Eurasian Hoopoes are positively common in this area and we are likely to encounter the first of many attractive Rosy Starlings. The

abundance of food attracts good numbers of raptors, including Long-legged Buzzard, Eurasian Hobby and sometimes Montagu's Harrier. We will also visit a marshy area where we may find the handsome Citrine Wagtail and the thick-billed form of the Common Reed Bunting (here of the race *caspia*). After Lake Sevan, the road climbs through spectacular mountains via the recently re-opened Sulema Pass, which boasts one of the best roads in Armenia. We will stop along the way at an ancient caravanserai where travellers have broken their journeys for almost a millennium. From here the road continues down to Yeghegnadzor in the fertile Arpa Valley.

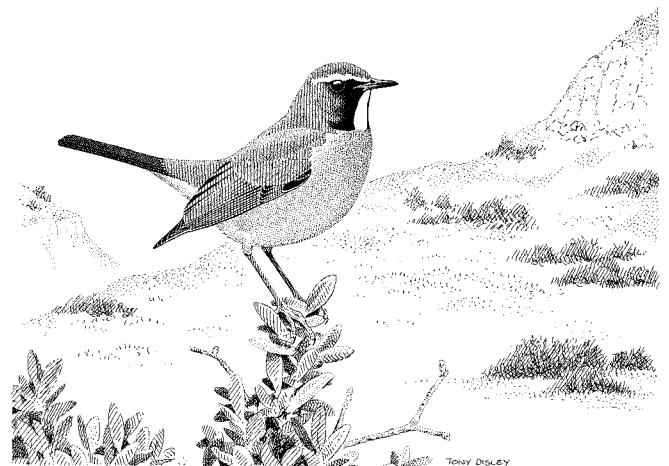
**Day 8** Today we will make the long journey south to Meghri, a town situated on the Araks river on the border with Iran, for a three nights stay. The route first follows the Arpa river groves, but later crosses a mountain pass, after which we enter an extensive area of highland plateau steppe with tall grassland, complete with calling Common Quails. One of only two known Armenian colonies of Lesser Kestrels is located here and a selection of other raptors includes Black Kite, Egyptian Vulture and Short-toed Eagle. During this section of the journey we will also be looking for Bimaculated Lark, Blue Rock

Thrush, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler and the attractive and unusual Crimson-winged Finch. We will make a lunch stop near the small but attractive town of Goris, which is situated in a spectacular rocky gorge where we should be able to observe good selection of soaring raptors. The road between Goris and Meghri continues to a second wooded pass, where many of the species mentioned for Dilijan occur, and then over an even higher pass above the treeline.

**Days 9-10** Although at higher altitudes the Meghri region is clothed in deciduous forests, at lower elevations it is characterized by a dry climate with arid terrain and rocky gorges dominated by juniper, Christ's Thorn and Pallas's Buckthorn. In this interesting habitat we will search for Sombre Tit, as well as other species typical of arid habitats. In orchards of walnut, pomegranate and fig trees we have good chances of finding the much sought-after Levant Sparrowhawk at one of its traditional breeding sites, as well as Syrian Woodpecker, Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin, Common Nightingale, Eastern Orphean Warbler and Lesser Whitethroat. In a dry rocky area close to the border with Iran we should find several pairs of Rufous-tailed (or

Red-tailed) Wheatears (now often treated as distinct from Kurdish Wheatear), Upcher's Warbler, Eastern Rock Nuthatch and, with luck, See-see Partridge (a species only very recently discovered in Armenia). We will start our ascent of the high mountains early in the morning to look for our main target in the Meghri region, the impressive Caspian Snowcock. The road first climbs up steep arid rocky slopes, but as the elevation increases we pass through mountain meadows with shrub and flower fields. Finally we will reach alpine meadows with impressive cliffs hanging above steep rocky slopes – the habitat of Caspian Snowcock. We will spend much of the morning here scanning the rocky slopes in search of our target bird, and with persistence we should obtain good views. While we are looking for snowcocks we may be fortunate enough to spot a small party of Wild Goats. Other birds we should encounter in the high mountains include Chukar, Alpine Swift, Eurasian Skylark, Meadow Pipit, Alpine Accentor, Whinchat, Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush and Rock Bunting.

**Day 11** Today we return to Yerevan for a three nights stay, stopping along the way for anything of interest. The

*White-throated Robin (Tony Disley)*

city itself is home to a small population of Laughing Doves.

**Days 12-13** We will spend the first full day in the intensively cultivated Araks (or Aras) river valley at the foot of Mount Ararat. The Armash commercial fishponds, located at the junction of Armenia with Iran, Turkey and the Nakhichevan enclave of Azerbaijan, are an extensive wetland area surrounded by saline semidesert. Some 20 ponds occupy more than 1500 hectares and are surrounded by reeds and several muddy patches. The ponds hold significant numbers of waterbirds throughout the year, with the most notable species including Pygmy Cormorant, Little Bittern, Squacco and Purple Herons, White Stork, Glossy Ibis, Marbled, Ferruginous and White-headed Ducks, and the elegant White-tailed Lapwing (which has recently re-established in Armenia). Here we may also see Little Grebe, Black-crowned Night Heron, Cattle and Little Egrets, Grey Heron, Mallard, Gadwall, Northern Shoveler, Garganey, Common and Red-crested Pochards, Tufted Duck, Western Marsh Harrier, European Water Rail, Common Moorhen, Common Coot, Black-winged Stilt, Pied Avocet, Collared Pratincole, Kentish and Little Ringed Plovers, Northern Lapwing, Ruff, Wood, Green and Common Sandpipers,

Common Redshank, Black-headed Gull, Gull-billed and Little Terns, migrating parties of White-winged and Whiskered Terns, Common Kingfisher, Lesser Short-toed Lark, Sand Martin, Black-headed Wagtail, Great Reed, Sedge, Moustached and Ménétries's Warblers, Caspian Reed Warbler (split from European) and Bearded Reedling. There is also a good chance of finding two recent colonists of the area – Paddyfield and Savi's Warblers. Less usual species include Eurasian Spoonbill, Greylag Goose, Common Shelduck and Slender-billed Gull, and at this time of year we could encounter migrants such as Great White Pelican, Osprey or Blue-cheeked Bee-eater. Later we will visit the extremely dry hills near Vedi. Here an ancient river bed with loose rocky soil and eroded ravines sparsely covered with tamarisk, buckthorn and spurge hosts the beautiful White-throated Robin (or Irania), Finsch's and Eastern Black-eared Wheatears, and Grey-necked Bunting, and with luck we will also see Pale Rockfinch or Trumpeter Finch, both of which are irregular at the northern edge of their breeding distribution, or the recently discovered, but equally irregular, Mongolian Finch. Other species we may encounter in this area include Greater Short-toed and Crested Larks, Isabelline Wheatear, Woodchat Shrike and Rock Sparrow.

Our second morning will be spent on the spectacular volcanic slopes of Mount Aragats, at 4095m the highest peak in Armenia. On the way up we pass through orchards and woodlands, where we may encounter European Turtle Dove, while higher still the slopes are scattered with boulder outcrops and are covered with fields of alpine flowers, dwarf junipers and Dog Rose bushes. We will explore the latter habitat in search of the *magna* form of the Bluethroat (which usually lacks a white throat spot), the *armenica* form of the Siberian Stonechat (which may represent part of a distinct species, Caucasian Stonechat), Wood Lark and the localized Radde's Accentor. We will also search some nearby cliffs for the noisy Western Rock Nuthatch. In the afternoon we will visit one or two other localities in the Yerevan region in search of anything we may have missed.

**Day 14** Morning flight bound for London, arriving in the early afternoon.

#### **Accommodation & Road**

**Transport:** The hotels/guesthouses are mostly of normal Birdquest standard, although largely at the simpler end of the range. At Yeghegnadzor and Meghri we will be staying in private houses with simple facilities and shared bathrooms. Road transport is by small coach or 4x4s and roads are

mostly reasonable.

**Walking:** The walking effort is mostly easy to moderate, but there are two optional fairly strenuous hikes in the mountains.

**Climate:** Rather variable. It is often warm or hot, dry and sunny at low altitudes, but it is sometimes cool, overcast and rainy at this season. At higher altitudes temperatures range from cool to cold and it could even snow at the highest altitudes.

**Bird Photography:** Opportunities are quite good.

**Tour Price:** £2780, €3280, \$4587 London/London (or £2230, €2631, \$3680 Tbilisi/Yerevan). Price includes all transportation (including all flights), all accommodations, all meals, bottled water, some drinks, all excursions, all entrance fees, all tips for local drivers/guides and for accommodations/restaurants, leader services.

**Single Room Supplement:** £273, €322, \$450.

**Deposit:** £300, €354, \$495. If booking more than 12 months before departure, the initial deposit is only £150, €177, \$248.

**Linking Birdquests:** This tour can be linked with Mongolia or with Amurland & Ussuriland. Please contact us for further information.