



*We admired the glorious Pander's Ground Jay both in Turkmenistan and in Uzbekistan (Mark Van Beirs)*

# **CENTRAL ASIA SPECIALITIES**

**9/11 - 21/24 MAY 2019**

**LEADER: MARK VAN BEIRS**





*The adorable Yellow-breasted Tit is usually considered as a race of Azure Tit, but their ranges are widely separated and they sure look different (Mark Van Beirs)*



Our Central Asia tour started with a big bang as on the Turkmenistan pre-trip we managed to observe the rare and truly enigmatic Zarudny's (or Asian Desert) Sparrow, one of the hardest to see birds in the Palearctic! This rarity hadn't been seen in its remote haunts by western birdwatchers for over ten years. We obtained cracking views of a male and two recently fledged young in the barchan dunes of the famous Repetek reserve. The favourite highlights of our visit to the varied habitats of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan included the unique Ibisbill (foraging in a mountain stream), the unusual White-headed Duck (displaying at close range), the magnificent Himalayan Snowcock (terrific scope studies of a foraging bird) and the endearing Pander's Ground Jay (singing from the tops of bushes and running about like a Roadrunner). Other much appreciated specialities were Marbled Duck, Red-crested Pochard, Ferruginous Duck, Dalmatian Pelican, Bearded Vulture, Pallid Harrier, White-tailed Eagle, Macqueen's Bustard, Demoiselle Crane, Sociable and White-tailed Lapwings, Caspian Plover, Black-winged Pratincole, Pallas's Gull, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Yellow-eyed Pigeon, White-winged Woodpecker, Red-footed Falcon, fluffy Azure and enchanting Yellow-breasted Tits, White-winged and Black Larks, Streaked Scrub Warbler (in its own family!), an overwhelming variety of Phylloscopus, Acrocephalus and Sylvia warblers, Wallcreeper, Rosy Starling, White-throated Robin,



*A record shot of the increasingly rare Zarudny's Sparrow (Mark Van Beirs)*



Himalayan Rubythroat, Eversmann's, Blue-capped and Güldenstädt's Redstarts, Finsch's Wheatear, Black-throated Accentor, White-winged Grosbeak, Red-mantled Rosefinch, Red-fronted Serin and White-capped, Grey-necked and Red-headed Buntings. We also enjoyed the impressive avian spectacles of dozens of lekking male Ruff, of thousands of pirouetting Red-necked Phalaropes in breeding attire and of scores of superbly elegant White-winged Terns dancing over reedy lakes. Altai and Bobak Marmots, Siberian Roe Deer and Goitered Gazelle represented the mammal department and an interesting selection of reptiles included Common Sand Boa, Sheltopusik, Desert Monitor Lizard, several agamas and lumbering Horsfield's Tortoises. Next to the natural history side, we also greatly valued the visits to the amazing Silk Road cultural heritage towns of Bukhara and Samarkand, where we wandered amongst the atmospheric, spectacular madrasas, mosques and bazaars.



*The historic centre of Bukhara is an UNESCO World Heritage Site (Mark Van Beirs)*

After a leisurely breakfast at our hotel in Bukhara, one of the most prominent cities in Uzbekistan, we started to drive west to the Turkmenistan border. The rather lengthy border crossing was quite tedious, but around noon we finally arrived at our unexpectedly clean and efficient hotel in the modern town of Turkmenabat. The journey along irrigated fields and patches of desert produced a selection of widespread species like Eurasian Collared and Laughing Doves, Common Swift, Eurasian Magpie, Western Jackdaw, Rook, Carrion Crow (race *orientalis*), Barn Swallow, Common Myna, Pied Bushchat and some House Sparrows of the delicate, immaculate-looking form *bactrianus*. In the afternoon we crossed the famous Amudarya River (the Oxus of ancient history) and enjoyed our first exploration of the fabulous Repetek reserve, which consists of impressive barchan dunes and extended stretches of undulating Saxaul-covered desert. It was rather hot and quiet at first, but gradually the temperature dropped and we started to note a bit of activity. Best of all were the magnificent Pander's Ground Jays that ran about like manic roadrunners and regularly posed for excellent scope views. A Shikra flew slowly past and a couple of nice Steppe Grey Shrikes were keeping an eye on things from the tops of the bushes. We also found Western Marsh Harrier, Long-legged Buzzard, Common Cuckoo, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, Eurasian Hoopoe, Common Kestrel and Crested Lark.





*A fledgling Zarudny's Sparrow; The desert habitat of this much-desired species (Mark Van Beirs)*

A very early start got us to the best accessible area of barchan dunes of the Repetek reserve not too long after dawn. In this fabulous habitat of scarcely vegetated, impressive sandy dunes we scanned and scanned and scanned and eventually found a terrific male Zarudny's (or Asian Desert) Sparrow sitting not too far away on top of a small tree. The scope views were very much appreciated and all too soon this rarely-seen splendour flew off. Nearby we found a couple of begging fledgling Zarudny's Sparrows in a dense Saxaul bush, but the parents had obviously fed them well as they were left to themselves for at least another hour. As the temperature was really rising dramatically, we left the area with a big grin on our faces. We had scored on the main bird of the pre-trip! There had been rumours that Zarudny's Sparrow had not been seen at Repetek since 2007, but we felt fairly confident we would be able to find this highly-desired species, as we used to see them regularly on our 1990 tours to the area and the habitat hasn't really changed. In those days it was still treated as a race of the widespread Desert Sparrow, which is quite easy to see in Morocco. We drove to a nearby dune slack where a drinking station for sheep and cattle provided some bird activity. Attractive Desert Finches and clean-looking 'bactrianus' House Sparrows were regular visitors and we also



*The eastern forms of Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin are much greyer than the western race; The Pander's Ground Jay is a delightful species full of character (Mark Van Beirs)*

observed smart-looking Saxaul Sparrows and a Grey-headed ('thunbergi') Wagtail. On the return drive through the reserve we picked up goodies like Shikra, a cracking European Roller, a male Red-backed Shrike, several gorgeous Pander's Ground Jays and a lovely Rosy Starling. During the hot hours we relaxed



at the little oasis surrounding the park's headquarters where Eurasian Hoopoes were active around their nesthole and three colourful male Eurasian Golden Orioles were playing hide and seek in the canopy of the poplars. The surrounding bushes produced Greenish, Blyth's Reed and Eastern Olivaceous Warblers, Common Whitethroat, a posing and displaying Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin, lots of Spotted Flycatchers, a female Bluethroat and a beautiful, exhausted male Ortolan Bunting. In late afternoon we did a bit more exploring of the Saxaul woodland, where Tolai Hare and Common Cuckoo were the only prizes.



*This exhausted male Ortolan Bunting had just crossed the eastern Kara Kum desert (Mark Van Beirs)*

In the morning we returned to the Turkmenistan/Uzbekistan border, braved the mind-numbing formalities again and drove to Bukhara where we met up with the other participants of the main part of the tour. After a tasty lunch and a bit of a break we enjoyed a guided city tour, on which we admired the famous Kalyan minaret and the many great madrasas and mosques of this ancient Silk Road city. While wandering around the narrow streets we sniffed the unique atmosphere of the holiest city of Central Asia.

To reach the distinctive Saxaul-dominated desert habitat of the much-wanted Pander's Ground Jay, we had to leave Bukhara in the middle of the night. Just after dawn we were already admiring the subtle colours of this magnificent species through the scope as it was posing on top of a shrub. In the course of the morning we found several more Ground Jays as they were gliding from bush to bush or running swiftly across the open sand. Our walks through the Saxaul bushes also gave us Oriental Turtle Dove, Steppe Grey Shrike, some humble Sykes's Warblers, a fleeting Asian Desert Warbler, females of Black and Common Redstarts, several Isabelline Wheatears and a couple of digging Long-clawed Ground Squirrels. Reptiles were well represented as we identified Horsfield's Tortoise, an impressive Desert Monitor Lizard, Sacred and Liechtenstein's Toad-headed Agamas and Reticulated Racerunner. In mid-morning we stopped for a coffee at a roadside café and in the well-watered, oasis-like garden we found Eurasian Hoopoe, Long-tailed Shrike, Common (Siberian) Chiffchaff, Clamorous and Blyth's Reed Warblers, Spotted Flycatchers and a female Common Rosefinch. The nearby rubbish dump held a flock of immaculate Rosy Starlings and we scoped a





*The Eurasian Hoopoe is a truly unique species; This impressive Desert Monitor Lizard was enjoying the early sun (Mark Van Beirs)*

trio of smart Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters. We had lunch overlooking a lake where Kentish and Greater Sand Plovers, Ruff, Little Stint, Red-necked Phalarope, Common and Green Sandpipers and Common Greenshank were feeding along the muddy shore. A good selection of wagtails was also present here, as Grey-headed, Citrine, Grey, White and Masked Wagtails all showed well. We also noted Gadwall, Grey Heron, Great Cormorant, Western Marsh Harrier, Eurasian Coot, Collared Pratincole, Caspian Gull and Little Tern. In the nearby desert we located Little Owl, Oriental Skylark, Sand Martin, a female Bluethroat and Desert Finches. On the return journey we visited some reedy lakes where White-tailed Lapwing was the highlight. Two gorgeous drakes Red-crested Pochard flew over and Purple Heron, Glossy Ibis and Black-winged Stilt also made their way to the list.



*The attractive Masked Wagtail is one of the better looking races of White Wagtail; The widespread Purple Heron always attracts attention (Mark Van Beirs)*

We spent the early part of the next morning in an area of Saxaul scrub not far from Bukhara. The best bird here was without a doubt the dainty Streaked Scrub Warbler, a party of which we saw hopping about in the undergrowth. This localized species has recently been placed in its own family, so it has become a really important bird. We also found Ruddy Shelduck and Red-tailed Shrike, while we regularly heard the characteristic calls of Common Pheasant. A nearby saline lake held several smart Pied Avocets next to already encountered waders and not much further we explored a reed-lined freshwater lake. The highlight here was a pair of rarely-observed Marbled Duck, while several splendid White-tailed Lapwings gave quite a show. We also noted Gadwall, Eurasian Teal, Black-tailed Godwit, Curlew Sandpipers in exquisite breeding plumage, Wood Sandpipers, displaying Common Terns, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin and a Common Sand Boa. A tamarisk grove gave us European and Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, Great Tit (of the Turkistan variety), a furtive male Menetries's Warbler and a posing Common Nightingale. In late morning we boarded our faithful, spacious bus and drove northeast to the famous city of Samarkand. The drive took us through fertile fields and orchards along the base of the Zeravshan range. In late afternoon we



visited the famous landmarks of Samarkand: the well-known Registan Square and the mausoleum of Timur. Flocks of screaming Alpine Swifts added to our enjoyment of the unique ambiance of this jewel of the Silk Road.



*The White-tailed Lapwing has a fairly small range in southwestern Asia (Mark Van Beirs)*

To the south of Samarkand rises the Zeravshan Mountain Range, which forms part of the Tien Shan Mountains, the westernmost outliers of the Himalayas. Our terrific day started in bushy meadows at higher altitudes, where we encountered several acrobatic Eastern Rock Nuthatches, some bashful White-throated Robins (*Iranias*) and very showy, magnificent Red-headed Buntings. Red-tailed and Lesser Grey Shrikes were regularly seen and a humble Hume's Short-toed Lark was displaying high overhead. We admired posing Eastern Orphean Warblers and Hume's Whitethroats were singing from every other bush. We also added Himalayan and Griffon Vultures, Eurasian Crag Martin, Mistle Thrush, Common Rock and Blue Rock Thrushes, Northern and Pied Wheatears, Tawny Pipit and angry-looking Turkistan Rock Agamas to the tally. A scrubby valley eventually gave us a sneaky Upcher's Warbler together with a good selection of birds of prey as Egyptian Vulture, Short-toed Snake Eagle and Booted Eagle flew overhead. We also flushed a



rather large Sheltopusik (Pallas's Glass Lizard). Around noon we descended the mountain and explored a wooded valley where we soon encountered a pair of Indian Paradise Flycatchers. We enjoyed a tasty sit-down lunch in a shady bit of Walnut and Black Locust (False Acacia) woodland. It was great to be interrupted by splendours like White-winged Woodpecker, Eurasian Hobby and fabulous Yellow-breasted (Azure) Tits. A leisurely walk produced a nice Cetti's Warbler, several showy Common Nightingales and a two cracking male White-capped Buntings. On the return drive to Samarkand we walked about in a boulder-strewn hill range where the delightful Finsch's Wheatear gave an excellent performance. We also scoped both rufous and grey morphs of Common Cuckoo here.



*Every birdwatcher loves buntings and the fabulous Red-headed Bunting is one of the fancier ones (Mark Van Beirs)*

At dawn we left Samarkand and started driving towards Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. A short stop at a rocky hill range gave us Chukar Partridge, two swirling flocks of Rosy Starlings and several cute Yellow Ground Squirrels, but best of all was a pair of perched Bearded Vultures (Lammergeiers). Although they were quite distant, the scope allowed us to admire their wispy 'beards' and white irises. A pair of rare, dashing Saker Falcons paraded several times in the sky over the Bearded Vultures. We searched the surroundings for Variable Wheatear, but only found Pied Wheatears, sadly. Further along, we made a stop at a splendid White Stork colony situated in a row of pylons. Some of these held up to four nests and most nests contained hungry, begging young. At a marshy area Black-crowned Night Heron and Black Kite were noted. We enjoyed an excellent lunch in Tashkent and later drove into the nearby Chatkal Range to a very nice alpine resort. In the late afternoon we explored the nearby mixed forest where Yellow-breasted (Azure) Tits were pleasingly common. A White-crowned Penduline Tit showed well and a male Rock Bunting allowed close views. The walk also yielded Common Wood Pigeon, Oriental Turtle Dove, Common House Martin, Mistle Thrush, Blue Whistling Thrush and European Greenfinch. After dinner, while doing the daily log, our local bird guide warned us about a Tawny Owl that was sitting on the veranda of our hotel. We quickly got our binoculars and cameras and had perfect looks at close range at this terrific species.



*Pied and Finsch's Wheatears occur in the same habitat and look superficially alike (Mark Van Beirs)*

The morning chorus in the surroundings of the hotel consisted primarily of the marvellous song of Common Nightingales and the more subdued strophes of Hume's Whitethroats. We were lucky enough to bump into a pair of Hawfinches and obtained good scope views of this usually rather shy species. We observed good numbers of lovely Yellow-breasted (Azure) and Great (Turkestan) Tits, but the Rufous-naped Tit was the tit we really wanted to see here. Eventually we heard their distinctive notes in the distance and after a bit of scanning we got this restricted range species in front of our binoculars as it was acrobatically foraging in a flowering tree. A couple of Oriental Turtle Doves allowed close approach, but a pair of Indian Golden Orioles remained high up in the canopy of the tall poplars. A dainty White-crowned Penduline Tit was feeding its young in the fluffy, hanging nest. Other interesting species included Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Red-rumped Swallow, Hume's Leaf Warbler, some very obliging Mistle Thrushes and Common Rosefinch. After a delicious breakfast we drove to Tashkent airport, where we said goodbye to our friendly Uzbek hosts. The flight to Nur Sultan (the new name for Astana), the capital of Kazakhstan went smoothly and after effortless immigration (for most), we drove into this fast-developing city, admiring its amazing and sometimes mind-boggling architecture.





*Displaying male Ruff offered quite a spectacle (Mark Van Beirs)*

We experienced a fantastic day in the endless steppes, lakes and marshes to the southwest of the capital Nur Sultan. Our very capable local guide took us from one hotspot to the next and we soon amassed a terrific selection of specialities. The severely endangered Sociable Lapwing was one of the targets, as this much-wanted and rarely seen species is doing so very badly, even here in one of its core breeding areas. We were lucky enough to be able to witness some display and obtained cracking scope views of this elegant wader in its steppe habitat. Waders were definitely a feature of the day as we also had excellent looks at large groups of displaying male Ruff. The sheer variety of their splendid finery has to be seen to be believed and their amazing sparring behaviour was quite a sight! Another wader that took our breath away was the graceful Red-necked Phalarope. One of the lakes we visited was covered in pirouetting birds in exquisite breeding attire and we estimated c11,000 birds to be present! Smart, localized White-winged Larks were regularly flushed in the steppe and unusual-looking Black Larks were everywhere. Their rowing display flight



*Thousands of breeding-plumaged Red-necked Phalaropes decorated one of the steppe lakes (Mark Van Beirs)*





*This cracking male Red-footed Falcon was bringing a vole to his brooding lady (Mark Van Beirs)*

and their moonwalk dance were very much appreciated. We had terrific views of small numbers of well-performing, dashing Red-footed Falcons. A couple of enormous Dalmatian Pelicans flew low over our heads as we were admiring a colony of nimble Black-winged Pratincoles. Just a few sophisticated Demoiselle Cranes were noted and graceful male Pallid Harriers regularly showed at close range. New waders for the tally included Northern Lapwing, Grey Plover (in immaculate breeding dress), Common and Little Ringed Plovers, Black-tailed Godwit, Curlew Sandpiper, Temminck's Stint, smart Dunlin, Common Redshank and Marsh Sandpiper. We saw a good selection of ducks, including Greylag Goose, Mute Swan (real ones!), Whooper Swan, Common Shelduck, lovely Garganey, Northern Shoveler, Mallard, Northern Pintail, Common Pochard and Tufted Duck. Red-necked, Great Crested and Black-necked Grebes showed off in their breeding plumages and Greater Flamingoes were more common and allowed much better views than usual. We also scoped a nice colony of impressive Pallas's Gulls. Great Egret, Long-legged and Common



Buzzards, Slender-billed, Black-headed, Mew and Steppe Gulls, Caspian, Gull-billed, Black and superbly attractive White-winged Terns, Short-eared Owl, Hooded Crow, Eurasian Skylark, Booted Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat, Fieldfare, gorgeous Bluethroats, Siberian Stonechat, Northern Wheatear, Sykes's Wagtail (the *beema* subspecies of Western Yellow Wagtail) and Twite (of the subspecies *kirghizhorum*) were other noteworthy species of this bird-filled day.



*Male Pallid Harriers were regularly encountered in the steppes of northern Kazakhstan (Mark Van Beirs)*

A gloomy, windy morning in an Astana city park produced nice looks at an endearing Azure Tit. A male Great Spotted Woodpecker posed beautifully and several Fieldfares showed well. We also found Great Tit, a singing Siberian Chiffchaff and a sunbathing Blyth's Reed Warbler. Later we birded an area of reed-edged lakes to the south of the city, but the uncomfortably strong wind kept the small birds in hiding. We used our bus as a hide and next to many species we already saw the day before, we found Greylag Geese with downy young, Eurasian Oystercatcher, a couple of frantically feeding Terek Sandpipers, a sneaky Paddyfield Warbler and a fat Bobak Marmot. A couple of Dalmatian Pelicans gave very nice looks at close range allowing us to discern their silly tuft and eye colour. In early afternoon we returned to Astana for lunch and later took a flight south to Almaty, the economic capital of Kazakhstan.



*Demoiselle Cranes are superbly elegant inhabitants of the steppes and semi deserts (Mark Van Beirs)*

After a scrumptious breakfast we drove out of town and slowly made our way up into the Tien Shan mountains. A couple of stops in the (Schrenk's) Spruce zone gave us a posing Blue Whistling Thrush and two very well-behaved Brown Dippers. We found the first of many Hume's Leaf Warblers and heard a Eurasian Wren. In late morning we walked to the famous Great Almaty reservoir and had a great time birding the different habitats surrounding it. Patches of tall spruce were surrounded by grassy slopes partly covered in dwarf juniper and dotted with large boulders and rocky outcrops. We scanned the streams crossing the bare pebble flats and eventually found our much-wanted target: the magnificent, well-camouflaged Ibisbill.



We observed it for a while as it was feeding in a stream and resting so incredibly unobtrusively amongst like-coloured pebbles. Magic moments! The Ibisbill is so very different from other waders that it is placed in its own family, the Ibisbillidae. A pair of gorgeous Eversmann's Redstarts was scoped, as was a male Blue-capped Redstart. A humble Black-throated Accentor was singing its simple strophe from the top of a sapling and a colourful Red-fronted Serin allowed all too brief looks. Several Ruddy Shelduck were honking about and adorable, portly Altai Marmots sat in front of their burrows. Our agents had provided a marvellous, very varied and very tasty sit-down lunch amidst the magnificent mountain scenery. In the afternoon, after a bit of rain, we explored some juniper-covered slopes at higher altitude where we obtained superb scope views of an enchanting male Himalayan Rubythroat, as it was singing away from the top of a dwarf juniper. Nearby we also located Sulphur-bellied Warbler, a male White-winged Grosbeak and a couple of Plain Mountain Finches.



*The humble Black-throated Accentor and the cuddly Altai Marmot occupy the forest edge zone of the Tien Shan mountains (Mark Van Beirs)*

The following morning we drove up to the breath-taking altitude of 3,300m to the bizarre Sovjet era, research village of Kosmostantsiya. The weather was glorious, so we could appreciate and admire the amazing mountain scenery all around us. A couple of Siberian Roe Deer vanished into the forest and a short stop on the way gave us scope views of a rather distant Himalayan Snowcock, while an immature Golden Eagle sailed past. We explored the snowy surroundings and came away with splendid scope views of a foraging Himalayan Snowcock, allowing us to discern the intricate details of its finery. A Brown Accentor was singing away from a rooftop and a couple of magnificent male Güldenstädt's Redstarts were playfully chasing each other. Red-billed and Alpine Choughs enlivened the scene, and a Wallcreeper flew over in its distinctive butterfly-like flight. Water Pipits were displaying and several Plain Mountain Finches showed well. Around midday we drove down to lower slopes where we enjoyed yet another excellent sit-down lunch with an impressive Bearded Vulture overhead. We spent a lovely afternoon birding the dwarf juniper slopes and the edge of the spruce forest. A male Eurasian Sparrowhawk flew past, we scoped three glorious singing Himalayan Rubythroats and admired a male Red-mantled Rosefinch through the scope. Several Black-throated Accentors showed off from the tops of the bushes and Tree Pipits performed their parachute display. In late afternoon we returned to the hubbub of Almaty.



*The Tien Shan offers some breath-taking scenery (Mark Van Beirs)*

The post tour extension first took us to a string of lakes to the northwest of Almaty. Short stops at a number of reed-edged freshwater lakes and more saline stretches of water gave us a terrific variety of waterbirds, most of which we had encountered before on the tour. But, here we managed to observe several new, much-wanted, quality species at close range. Three male and four female White-headed Duck allowed excellent scope studies as they were unconcernedly displaying and showing off. Several parties of endangered Ferruginous Duck also showed well. We were taken to an impressive tree eyrie of a White-tailed Eagle that held two large chicks, while an imposing adult bird was on guard nearby. On the reedy lakes, dozens and dozens of attractive Black-necked Grebes were carrying downy young. The most common duck here was Red-crested Pochard and we also added Common Pheasant, Great White Pelican, Montagu's Harrier, Common Moorhen, Calandra Lark, Pale Martin and a heard only Eurasian Reed Warbler to the list. In the afternoon we continued further into the steppe and the semi desert driving along fields covered in red poppies or blue flax. A stop at a grassy puddle in the steppe gave us a lovely, totally unexpected Common Kingfisher and nice Grey-necked Bunting. In late afternoon we arrived at our well-appointed camp in the middle of the Taukum desert. After settling in, we had a look around and identified Bimaculated, Greater Short-toed and Lesser Short-toed Larks, while the nearby muddy overflow of a well held migrant Little and Temminck's Stints. And then the skies opened, an obviously unusual phenomenon in the desert. The rain stopped while we were having our dinner and a couple of fabulous rainbows decorated the evening sky.





*White-headed Duck and Saxaul Sparrow were some of the highlights of our visit to the Taukum desert (Mark Van Beirs)*

The following morning we travelled to the open Turanga (poplar) woodlands and reedy dune slacks near the Ili river, situated to the north of our camp site. We were rather unlucky with the weather as high winds were disrupting our efforts to try to get to grips with several reed-inhabiting passerines. Wandering through the park-like habitat gave us a few rather shy Yellow-eyed Pigeons, which posed all too briefly on the top of the gnarled trees. Through the scope we could discern the distinctive yellow iris of this Central Asian breeding endemic. Nearby we found several ever so attractive Saxaul Sparrows, living in a human made construction. This very smart-looking member of the genus *Passer* only lives in areas where the hardy, little Saxaul trees and bushes occur. An eyrie of a Long-legged Buzzard holding chicks was also inhabited by Spanish Sparrows and by House Sparrows (*bactrianus*). Overhead we noted a squadron of Great White Pelicans and in the semi desert we located a grey-looking Red-tailed Shrike (of the so called *karelini* form) and Desert Whitethroat. At a river crossing Azure Tit and the striking Black-headed Wagtail (race *feldegg* of Western Yellow Wagtail) were seen and our local guide was lucky enough to spot a Golden Jackal. In the afternoon we explored the steppe and semi-desert near our camp. Using the minibus as a hide we had several nice



*The charming Azure Tit is always a delight to observe; Bright Greater Sand Plovers were easily found in the Taukum desert (Mark Van Beirs)*



encounters with Greater Sand Plovers in their beautiful, rather variable breeding dress. We had good looks at a Black-bellied Sandgrouse on the deck and also observed Brown-necked Raven, lots of Calandra and Greater Short-toed Larks and a shy Goitered Gazelle. After a delicious dinner, as the sun was setting in a riot of colours, we sat at the snug camp fire, enjoying a fiery Kazakh brandy, while listening to our local guide's stories and songs.



*Black-bellied Sandgrouse were commonly encountered while exploring the Taukum desert (Mark Van Beirs)*

On the final day of the trip we returned to the semi desert as there were still two important birds we really wanted to see. Just after dawn we were already scanning the surroundings for the elusive shape of the rare and diminishing Macqueen's Bustard and, indeed, after a couple of hours of concerted effort a ghostly male could be observed as it was guarding a bushy dune valley. Approach was out of the question, so we scoped this endangered species from quite a distance. Not much later we finally found the much-wanted Caspian Plover, after having looked at dozens of Greater Sand Plovers. A dainty female was behaving suspiciously and eventually sat down on her nest. We had a good, but quick look and soon left her in peace. We birded the semi desert for several more hours, but, sadly, couldn't locate a male. Good numbers of Black-bellied Sandgrouse were about and we also spotted a female Common Rock Thrush and a couple of Goitered Gazelle. After a filling lunch, we packed up and returned to distant Almaty. On the journey we had great looks at an active Rosy Starling colony in some roadside rubble. The final bird of this exciting tour, brimming with many different experiences, was a smart Black Stork circling overhead at a river crossing.





*Gorgeous Rosy Starlings were regularly seen in swirling flocks, but we also observed them at a bustling colony (Mark Van Beirs)*

## **SYSTEMATIC LIST OF SPECIES RECORDED DURING THE TOUR**

The species names and taxonomy used in the report mostly follows Gill, F & D Donsker (Eds). **IOC World Bird Names**. This list is updated several times annually and is available at <http://www.worldbirdnames.org>.

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

Species which were only recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (LO).

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



Species marked with the diamond symbol (◊) are either endemic to the country or local region or considered 'special' birds for some other reason (e.g. it is only seen on one or two Birdquest tours; it is difficult to see across all or most of its range; the local form is endemic or restricted-range and may in future be treated as a full species).



*Greylag Geese (Mark Van Beirs)*



*Whooper Swan (Mark Van Beirs)*

**Greylag Goose** *Anser anser* Regular sightings of the race *rubrirostris* in Kazakhstan.



**Mute Swan** *Cygnus olor* Several really wild ones in Kazakhstan.

**Whooper Swan** *Cygnus cygnus* Fairly common in the Nur Sultan (Astana) steppes.

**Common Shelduck** *Tadorna tadorna* Regular in Kazakhstan.



Ruddy Shelduck; a drake Garganey (Mark Van Beirs)

**Ruddy Shelduck** *Tadorna ferruginea* Small numbers in drier areas of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

**Garganey** *Spatula querquedula* Delightfully regular on the Kazakhstan lakes.

**Northern Shoveler** *Spatula clypeata* Fairly common in Kazakhstan.

**Gadwall** *Mareca strepera* Small numbers in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

**Mallard** *Anas platyrhynchos* A handful of observations in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

**Northern Pintail** *Anas acuta* Two males were noted in Kazakhstan.

**Eurasian Teal** *Anas crecca* We saw a pair on a lake near Bukhara (Uzbekistan).

**Marbled Duck** ♦ (M Teal) *Marmaronetta angustirostris* Good looks at a pair in flight near Bukhara

**Red-crested Pochard** *Netta rufina* Especially common in southern Kazakhstan.

**Common Pochard** *Aythya ferina* Regular in Kazakhstan.

**Ferruginous Duck** *Aythya nyroca* This rare species showed well in southern Kazakhstan.

**Tufted Duck** *Aythya fuligula* Just a few observations in Kazakhstan.

**White-headed Duck** ♦ *Oxyura leucocephala* Great looks at displaying birds in southern Kazakhstan.



Greater Flamingo; White Stork (Mark Van Beirs)

**Himalayan Snowcock** ♦ *Tetraogallus himalayensis* Perfect scope studies of one in the Tien Shan. See Note.

**Chukar Partridge** *Alectoris chukar* One or two in dry country in Uzbekistan.



**Common Quail** *Coturnix coturnix* (H) We heard the distinctive song near Bukhara (Uzbekistan).  
**Common Pheasant** *Phasianus colchicus* A single sighting for some and regularly heard.  
**Red-necked Grebe** *Podiceps grisegena* A single bird on a steppe lake near Nur Sultan.  
**Great Crested Grebe** *Podiceps cristatus* Common. Great looks at parents with chicks on their backs.  
**Black-necked Grebe (Eared G)** *Podiceps nigricollis* Regular. Birds with chicks near Almaty.  
**Greater Flamingo** *Phoenicopterus roseus* 500+ on steppe lakes near Nur Sultan. Terrific looks.  
**Black Stork** *Ciconia nigra* A circling bird on the final day of the tour.  
**White Stork** *Ciconia ciconia* Many occupied nests near the Syr Darya in Uzbekistan (race *asiatica*). See Note.  
**Glossy Ibis** *Plegadis falcinellus* Small numbers were noted in Uzbekistan.  
**Black-crowned Night Heron** *Nycticorax nycticorax* A few sightings in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.  
**Grey Heron** *Ardea cinerea* Regular.  
**Purple Heron** *Ardea purpurea* Just two at a pond near Bukhara.  
**Great Egret (G White E)** *Ardea alba* Small numbers in Kazakhstan.  
**Great White Pelican** *Pelecanus onocrotalus* A circling party of 12 birds in southern Kazakhstan.



*Dalmatian Pelican (Mark Van Beirs)*

**Dalmatian Pelican** ♦ *Pelecanus crispus* Splendid observations of this rare species in Kazakhstan.  
**Great Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax carbo* Regular in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.  
**Bearded Vulture (Lammergeier)** *Gypaetus barbatus* Scope views of two near Bukhara; one in the Tien Shan.  
**Egyptian Vulture** *Neophron percnopterus* Excellent looks at adult and immature birds near Samarkand.  
**Himalayan Vulture (H Griffon V)** *Gyps himalayensis* Good looks near Samarkand.  
**Short-toed Snake Eagle (S-t Eagle)** *Circaetus gallicus* A single showed well near Samarkand.  
**Booted Eagle** *Hieraetus pennatus* Perfect views of a pair near Samarkand. Also seen mating!  
**Golden Eagle** *Aquila chrysaetos* An immature bird showed nicely in the Tien Shan.



**Shikra** *Accipiter badius* Several observations in Turkmenistan and a single in Uzbekistan.  
**Eurasian Sparrowhawk** *Accipiter nisus* Several nice sightings in Kazakhstan.  
**Western Marsh Harrier** *Circus aeruginosus* Regular observations in all three countries visited.  
**Pallid Harrier** *Circus macrourus* Many excellent sightings in the Nur Sultan steppes.  
**Montagu's Harrier** *Circus pygargus* A single observation only in southern Kazakhstan.



*Black Kite; Black-winged Stilt (Mark Van Beirs)*

**Black Kite (Black-eared K)** *Milvus [migrans] lineatus* One in Uzbekistan and common in Kazakhstan.  
**White-tailed Eagle** *Haliaeetus albicilla* Two young on an eyrie together with a nearby adult near Almaty.  
**Long-legged Buzzard** *Buteo rufinus* Regular encounters along the whole itinerary.  
**Common Buzzard** *Buteo buteo* A few observations of the race *vulpinus*.  
**Macqueen's Bustard** ♦ *Chlamydotis macqueenii* A single bird in the distance in the Taukum desert. See Note.  
**Common Moorhen** *Gallinula chloropus* Just a few in southern Kazakhstan.  
**Eurasian Coot (Common C)** *Fulica atra* Common.  
**Demoiselle Crane** ♦ *Grus virgo* Small numbers in the Kazakhstan steppes.  
**Eurasian Oystercatcher** *Haematopus ostralegus* A single bird near Nur Sultan.  
**Ibisbill** ♦ *Ibidorhyncha struthersii* THE BIRD OF THE TRIP. Excellent views in the Tien Shan.  
**Black-winged Stilt** *Himantopus himantopus* Common and vociferous.  
**Pied Avocet** *Recurvirostra avosetta* Regular encounters.  
**Northern Lapwing** *Vanellus vanellus* Fairly common.  
**Sociable Lapwing** ♦ (S Plover) *Vanellus gregarius* Splendid looks at 20 birds in the Nur Sultan steppe. See Note.



*White-tailed Lapwing (Mark Van Beirs)*



*Kentish Plover; Temminck's Stint (Mark Van Beirs)*





*Black-tailed Godwit (Mark Van Beirs)*

**White-tailed Lapwing ♦ (W-t Plover) *Vanellus leucurus*** Close up looks in the Bukhara marshes.  
**Grey Plover (Black-bellied P) *Pluvialis squatarola*** A few in breeding plumage at the Nur Sultan lakes.  
**Common Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*** A few sightings of the migratory race *tundrius*.  
**Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*** Regular observations. Yellow orbital ring!  
**Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus*** Small numbers at saline lakes in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.  
**Greater Sand Plover *Charadrius leschenaultii*** A few in Uzbekistan and regular in the Taukum desert.  
**Caspian Plover ♦ *Charadrius asiaticus*** We found a female on her nest in the Taukum desert.



**Black-tailed Godwit** *Limosa limosa* Regular observations of this marvelous wader.

**Ruff** *Calidris pugnax* We loved the magnificent spectacle of dozens of displaying males near Nur Sultan.

**Curlew Sandpiper** *Calidris ferruginea* A few in breeding plumage at steppe lakes.

**Temminck's Stint** *Calidris temminckii* Regular at steppe lakes and ponds.

**Dunlin** *Calidris alpina* Small numbers in breeding plumage at the Nur Sultan lakes.

**Little Stint** *Calidris minuta* A regular migrant of the steppe lakes in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

**Terek Sandpiper** *Xenus cinereus* Three nice sightings of this splendid wader in Kazakhstan.



*Red-necked Phalaropes (Mark Van Beirs)*

**Red-necked Phalarope** *Phalaropus lobatus* Thousands in breeding attire on the Nur Sultan lakes.

**Common Sandpiper** *Actitis hypoleucos* A handful of observations in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

**Green Sandpiper** *Tringa ochropus* A single sighting near Bukhara (Uzbekistan).



*Pallas's Gull (Mark Van Beirs)*

**Common Redshank** *Tringa totanus* Regular at the Kazakhstan steppe lakes.



**Marsh Sandpiper** *Tringa stagnatilis* A few at the Kazakhstan lakes.

**Wood Sandpiper** *Tringa glareola* A regularly encountered migrant in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

**Common Greenshank** *Tringa nebularia* Just two sightings in Uzbekistan.

**Collared Pratincole** *Glareola pratincola* Regular in Uzbekistan and a couple in southern Kazakhstan.

**Black-winged Pratincole** ♦ *Glareola nordmanni* Great looks at the Kazakhstan steppe lakes. See Note.

**Slender-billed Gull** *Chroicocephalus genei* Good numbers at saline steppe lakes.

**Black-headed Gull** *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* Fairly common at Kazakhstan steppe lakes.

**Pallas's Gull** ♦ (Great Black-headed G) *Ichthyaeetus ichthyaeetus* A large colony near Nur Sultan.

**Mew Gull** (Common G) *Larus canus* A few were noted near Nur Sultan.

**Caspian Gull** ♦ *Larus cachinnans* Small numbers in Uzbekistan and southern Kazakhstan.

**Lesser Black-backed Gull** ♦ (Steppe G) *Larus [fuscus] barabensis* Common in northern Kazakhstan.

**Gull-billed Tern** *Gelochelidon nilotica* Small numbers at the Kazakhstan steppe lakes.

**Caspian Tern** *Hydroprogne caspia* Half a dozen in northern Kazakhstan.

**Little Tern** *Sternula albifrons* Regular at Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan lakes.

**Common Tern** *Sterna hirundo* A common inhabitant of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan lakes.

**White-winged Tern** (W-w Black T) *Chlidonias leucopterus* Common and delightful over steppe lakes.

**Black Tern** *Chlidonias niger* Small numbers in northern Kazakhstan.

**Black-bellied Sandgrouse** *Pterocles orientalis* Best sightings were in the Taukum desert.

**Rock Dove** *Columba livia*

**Yellow-eyed Pigeon** ♦ *Columba eversmanni* Scope views of perched birds in southern Kazakhstan.

**Common Wood Pigeon** *Columba palumbus* Small numbers in northern Kazakhstan.

**Oriental Turtle Dove** (Rufous T D) *Streptopelia orientalis* Regular along our route.

**Eurasian Collared Dove** *Streptopelia decaocto* Common.



Laughing Dove (Mark Van Beirs)

**Laughing Dove** (Palm D) *Spilopelia senegalensis* Many in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

**Common Cuckoo** *Cuculus canorus* Small numbers all along our route. Also a rufous morph.

**Tawny Owl** *Strix aluco* Terrific looks at our Chatkal hotel in Uzbekistan.

**Little Owl** *Athene noctua* A single bird showed well near Bukhara.

**Short-eared Owl** *Asio flammeus* Three performed nicely in the northern Kazakhstan steppes.





*Tawny Owl; Short-eared Owl (Mark Van Beirs)*

**Alpine Swift** *Tachymarptis melba* Splendid at the Samarkand mosques.

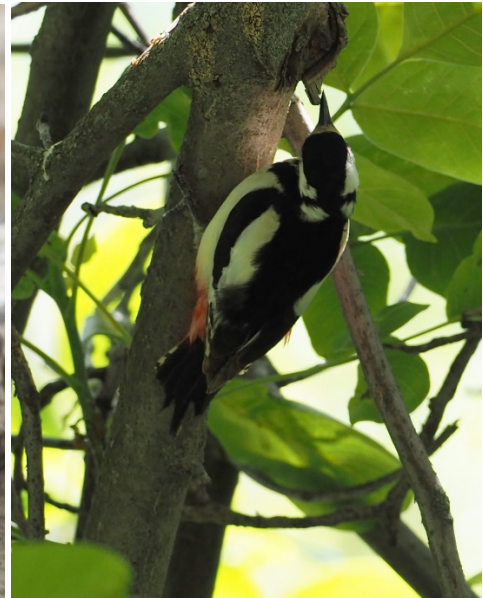
**Common Swift** *Apus apus* Common.

**European Roller** *Coracias garrulus* Regular all along our route. Many excellent encounters.

**Common Kingfisher** *Alcedo atthis* A totally unexpected bird at a puddle in the Taukum desert.

**Blue-cheeked Bee-eater** *Merops persicus* Great sightings in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

**European Bee-eater** *Merops apiaster* Small numbers in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.



*Eurasian Hoopoe; White-winged Woodpecker (Mark Van Beirs)*

**Eurasian Hoopoe (Common H)** *Upupa epops* Fairly common along our route. A cracking species.

**White-winged Woodpecker** ♦ *Dendrocopos leucopterus* A handful of sightings in all three countries.

**Great Spotted Woodpecker** *Dendrocopos major* A male showed well in a Nur Sultan park.





*Red-footed Falcon (female); Indian Golden Oriole (Mark Van Beirs)*

**Common Kestrel** *Falco tinnunculus* Common.

**Red-footed Falcon** *Falco vespertinus* Some excellent encounters in the Nur Sultan steppes. Delightful.

**Eurasian Hobby** *Falco subbuteo* Eight observations in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

**Saker Falcon** ♦ (Saker) *Falco cherrug* A pair performed at the Bearded Vulture outcrop near Bukhara.

**Red-backed Shrike** *Lanius collurio* Three observations of this widespread species.

**Red-tailed Shrike (Rufous-t S, Turkestan S)** *Lanius phoenicuroides* A few in the semi desert.

**Long-tailed Shrike** *Lanius schach* A single bird was noted near Bukhara.

**Lesser Grey Shrike** *Lanius minor* A few sightings only in Uzbekistan and southern Kazakhstan.

**Steppe Grey Shrike** ♦ *Lanius pallidirostris* Good looks in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

**Eurasian Golden Oriole** *Oriolus oriolus* Good looks at this migrant in Turkmenistan.

**Indian Golden Oriole** *Oriolus kundoo* Regular in Uzbekistan and southern Kazakhstan.

**Indian Paradise Flycatcher** *Terpsiphone paradisi* Good looks at two in the Zeravshan Range (Uz).

**Eurasian Magpie** *Pica pica* Common.



*Pander's Ground Jay; White-winged Lark (Mark Van Beirs)*

**Pander's Ground Jay** ♦ *Podoces panderi* Great encounters in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. See Note.

**Red-billed Chough** *Pyrrhonorax pyrrhonorax* A few in the Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan mountains.

**Alpine Chough (Yellow-billed C)** *Pyrrhonorax graculus* Only seen high in the Tien Shan.

**Western Jackdaw** *Coloeus monedula* Common.

**Rook** *Corvus frugilegus* Very common.



**Carrion Crow (Oriental C) *Corvus [corone] orientalis*** This isolated race was fairly common.

**Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix*** Regular in northern Kazakhstan.

**Brown-necked Raven *Corvus ruficollis*** Just a few in the Taukum desert (Kazakhstan).

**Northern Raven *Corvus corax* (H)** We heard the croak in the Chatkal Range (Uzbekistan).

**Rufous-naped Tit ♦ *Periparus rufonuchalis*** Excellent looks in the Chatkal Range (Uzbekistan).

**Coal Tit *Periparus ater* (H)** We heard it in the spruce forests of the Tien Shan.

**Azure Tit ♦ *Cyanistes cyanus*** Perfect encounters at two venues in Kazakhstan.

**Azure Tit ♦ (Yellow-breasted T) *Cyanistes [cyanus] flavipectus*** Marvelous in the Tashkent area.

**Great Tit *Parus major*** A few in northern Kazakhstan.

**Great Tit ♦ (Turkestan T) *Parus [major] bokharensis*** Common in Uzbekistan and southern Kazakhstan. See Note.

**White-crowned Penduline Tit ♦ *Remiz coronatus*** Very nice at a nest in the Chatkal Range (Uz).

**White-winged Lark ♦ *Alauda leucoptera*** Regular and attractive in the Sultan Nur steppes.



*Oriental Skylark; Greater Short-toed Lark (Mark Van Beirs)*

**Oriental Skylark *Alauda gulgula*** A single sighting near Bukhara.

**Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis*** Common in the northern Kazakhstan steppes.

**Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*** Regular along roads and tracks in all three countries.

**Hume's Short-toed Lark ♦ *Calandrella acutirostris*** A single showed all too briefly above Samarkand.

**Greater Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla*** Many in the Taukum desert (Kazakhstan).

**Bimaculated Lark *Melanocorypha bimaculata*** Several excellent encounters in the Taukum desert.

**Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra*** Delightfully common in the Taukum desert (Kazakhstan).

**Black Lark ♦ *Melanocorypha yeltoniensis*** Many in the Sultan Nur steppes. An unusual-looking lark! See Note.

**Lesser Short-toed Lark *Aldadala rufescens*** A few in the Taukum desert (Kazakhstan). See Note.



*Barn Swallow; Blyth's Reed Warbler (Mark Van Beirs)*

**Sand Martin (Bank Swallow) *Riparia riparia*** Regular in small numbers.



**Pale Martin** ◇ *Riparia diluta* Good looks at a colony near Almaty (Kazakhstan).  
**Barn Swallow** *Hirundo rustica* Common.  
**Eurasian Crag Martin** *Ptyonoprogne rupestris* A few in the Chatkal Range (Uzbekistan).  
**Common House Martin** *Delichon urbicum* Regular near Tashkent and a few in southern Kazakhstan.  
**Red-rumped Swallow** *Cecropis daurica* Nice near the nest in the Chatkal Range (Uzbekistan).  
**Cetti's Warbler** *Cettia cetti* Good looks near Samarkand. Regularly heard in Kazakhstan.  
**Streaked Scrub Warbler** *Scotocerca inquieta* Great looks near Bukhara. In its own family!  
**Hume's Leaf Warbler** *Phylloscopus humei* Common in the Tien Shan.  
**Sulphur-bellied Warbler** ◇ *Phylloscopus griseolus* A few encounters in the Tien Shan.  
**Common Chiffchaff (Siberian C)** *Phylloscopus [collybita] tristis* A few on migration. Song!  
**Greenish Warbler** *Phylloscopus trochiloides* Small numbers along our route.  
**Great Reed Warbler** *Acrocephalus arundinaceus* (H) Heard at the Sultan Nur steppe lakes.  
**Clamorous Reed Warbler (Indian R W)** *Acrocephalus [stentoreus] brunescens* A few in Uzbekistan.  
**Paddyfield Warbler** ◇ *Acrocephalus agricola* Sightings in the northern steppes. The wind didn't help.  
**Blyth's Reed Warbler** *Acrocephalus dumetorum* Common all along our route.  
**Eurasian Reed Warbler** ◇ (Caspian R W) *Acrocephalus [scirpaceus] fuscus* (H) Heard near Almaty.  
**Booted Warbler** ◇ *Iduna caligata* Excellent looks in low scrub in the Nur Sultan steppes.  
**Sykes's Warbler** ◇ *Iduna rama* Regular in Uzbekistan semi desert.  
**Eastern Olivaceous Warbler** *Iduna pallida* A few encounters near Bukhara.  
**Upcher's Warbler** ◇ *Hippolais languida* Excellent looks in the Chatkal Range (Uzbekistan).  
**Common Grasshopper Warbler** *Locustella naevia* (H) Heard in the Sultan Nur steppes.



Lesser Whitethroat; Hume's Whitethroat (Mark Van Beirs)

**Lesser Whitethroat** *Sylvia curruca* A few sightings.  
**Desert Whitethroat** ◇ *Sylvia minula* Nice looks in the Taukum desert.  
**Hume's Whitethroat** ◇ *Sylvia althaea* Common in the Chatkal Range (Uzbekistan).  
**Eastern Orphean Warbler** ◇ *Sylvia crassirostris* Splendid in the Chatkal Range (Uzbekistan).  
**Asian Desert Warbler** ◇ *Sylvia nana* Nice looks in the Kyzyl Kum desert near Bukhara.  
**Common Whitethroat** *Sylvia communis* A couple of records of this migrant.  
**Menetries's Warbler** ◇ *Sylvia mystacea* All too brief looks near Bukhara (Uzbekistan).  
**Eurasian Wren** *Troglodytes troglodytes* (H) We heard one in the Tien Shan.  
**Eastern Rock Nuthatch (Great R N)** *Sitta tephronota* Regular and noisy near Samarkand.  
**Wallcreeper** *Tichodroma muraria* A single in flight high up in the Tien Shan.  
**Common Myna** *Acridotheres tristis* Common in the southern part of our itinerary.  
**Rosy Starling** ◇ (Rose-coloured S) *Pastor roseus* Amazing flocks in southern Kazakhstan!





*Eastern Orphee Warbler; Eastern Rock Nuthatch (Mark Van Beirs)*

**Common Starling** *Sturnus vulgaris* Regular.

**Common Blackbird** *Turdus merula* Regular.



*Fieldfare (Mark Van Beirs)*

**Fieldfare** *Turdus pilaris* Great looks at several in a park in Nur Sultan.

**Mistle Thrush** *Turdus viscivorus* Common in the foothills and the Tien Shan.





Mistle Thrush; Bluethroat (Mark Van Beirs)

**Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin (R Bushchat) *Cercotrichas galactotes*** Several showed well in the south.

**Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*** Common.

**Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica*** A few on migration and several singing at the Sultan Nur steppe lakes.

**Common Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos*** Common and showy in the Uzbekistan hills. See Note.



Female White-throated Robin; Blue Whistling Thrush (Mark Van Beirs)

**White-throated Robin ♦ (Iranian) *Irania gutturalis*** Scope views in the Chatkal Range (Uzbekistan).

**Himalayan Rubythroat ♦ (White-tailed R) *Calliope pectoralis*** Endearing in the Tien Shan junipers.

**Blue Whistling Thrush *Myophonus caeruleus*** Nice in the Chatkal Range and in the Tien Shan.

**Eversmann's Redstart ♦ (Rufous-backed R) *Phoenicurus erythronotus*** Gorgeous in the Tien Shan. See Note.

**Blue-capped Redstart ♦ (Blue-headed R) *Phoenicurus coeruleocephala*** Terrific in the Tien Shan.

**Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*** A migrant female in the Kyzyl Kum desert (Uzbekistan).

**Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*** A handful of migrants were noted.

**Güldenstädt's Redstart ♦ *Phoenicurus erythrogaster*** Scope views of this beauty in the Tien Shan. See Note.

**Common Rock Thrush (Rufous-tailed R T) *Monticola saxatilis*** A handful of sightings.

**Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius*** A pair showed nicely above Samarkand (Uzbekistan).

**Siberian Stonechat *Saxicola maurus*** Regular in the Sultan Nur steppes.

**Pied Bush Chat (P Stonechat, P Chat) *Saxicola caprata*** Regular in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

**Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*** Fairly common in the Sultan Nur steppes.





Male and female Common Rock Thrush (Mark Van Beirs)

**Isabelline Wheatear** *Oenanthe isabellina* Regular in the Kyzyl Kum and Taukum deserts.

**Pied Wheatear** *Oenanthe pleschanka* Regular in the Samarkand hills (Uzbekistan).

**Finsch's Wheatear** ♦ *Oenanthe finschii* A male showed very well near Samarkand (Uzbekistan). See Note.



Brown Dipper; Saxaul Sparrow (Mark Van Beirs)

**Brown Dipper** *Cinclus pallasii* Perfect looks at two in the Tien Shan (Kazakhstan). See Note.

**Saxaul Sparrow** ♦ *Passer ammodendri* Seen well at Repetek (Turkmenistan) and in the Taukum desert. See Note.

**House Sparrow** ♦ *Passer domesticus* The race *bactrianus* was fairly commonly seen.

**Spanish Sparrow** *Passer hispaniolensis* A few near Bukhara and also in the Taukum desert.

**Zarudny's Sparrow** ♦ *Passer zarudnyi* The rarest bird of the tour! Great at Repetek (Turkmenistan).





*A fledgling Zarudny's Sparrow (Mark Van Beirs)*

**Eurasian Tree Sparrow** *Passer montanus* Regular.

**Rock Sparrow (R Petronia)** *Petronia petronia* A few in the Zeravshan range (Uzbekistan).

**Brown Accentor** ♦ *Prunella fulvescens* A singing bird showed well high in the Tien Shan.

**Black-throated Accentor** ♦ *Prunella atrogularis* Regular in the Tien Shan junipers.

**Western Yellow Wagtail** ♦ (Sykes's W) *Motacilla [flava] beema* Common in the northern steppes.

**Western Yellow Wagtail (Black-headed W)** *Motacilla [flava] feldegg* A few in the south.

**Western Yellow Wagtail (Grey-headed W)** *Motacilla [flava] thunbergi* Several of these migrants.

**Citrine Wagtail** *Motacilla citreola* A few in the Bukhara area (calcarata).

**Grey Wagtail** *Motacilla cinerea* Several nice observations of this widespread species.

**White Wagtail** *Motacilla [alba] alba* Regular in the north.

**White Wagtail** ♦ (Masked W) *Motacilla [alba] personata* Fairly common in the southern part of our trip.

**Tawny Pipit** *Anthus campestris* A few observations of this unobtrusive species.

**Tree Pipit** *Anthus trivialis* Regular in the higher reaches of the Tien Shan. Parachute display.

**Water Pipit** *Anthus spinoletta* Regular in the higher reaches of the Tien Shan.

**White-winged Grosbeak** *Mycerobas carnipes* Several nice observations in the high Tien Shan.

**Hawfinch** *Coccothraustes coccothraustes* Scope views of this cracker in the Chatkal Range.





*Plain Mountain Finch (Mark Van Beirs)*



*Rock Bunting (Mark Van Beirs)*



**Plain Mountain Finch** *Leucosticte nemoricola* Close up views in the higher reaches of the Tien Shan.

**Common Rosefinch (Scarlet R)** *Carpodacus erythrinus* Regular.

**Red-mantled Rosefinch** ♦ *Carpodacus rhodochlamys* A male posed nicely in the higher Tien Shan.

**European Greenfinch** *Chloris chloris* Common in the Chatkal Range (Uzbekistan).

**Desert Finch** ♦ *Rhodospiza obsoleta* Seen at Repetek (Turkmenistan) and near Bukhara (Uzbekistan).

**Twite** *Linaria flavirostris* A few of the race *kirghizorum* in the Nur Sultan steppes.

**Red-fronted Serin** ♦ (Fire-f S) *Serinus pusillus* Small numbers in the Tien Shan.

**Corn Bunting** *Emberiza calandra* (H) We heard the distinctive song above Samarkand (Uzbekistan).

**Rock Bunting** *Emberiza cia* Perfect looks at a male in the Chatkal range (Uzbekistan).

**White-capped Bunting** ♦ *Emberiza stewarti* Scope looks at a male in the Chatkal range (Uzbekistan).

**Grey-necked Bunting** ♦ *Emberiza buchanani* A male showed well in the Taukum desert (Kazakhstan).

**Ortolan Bunting** *Emberiza hortulana* An exhausted male allowed eye-ball to eye-ball looks at Repetek.

**Red-headed Bunting** ♦ *Emberiza bruniceps* Delightfully common in Uzbekistan and in the Taukum.



Yellow Ground Squirrel; Picnic lunch in the Tien Shan (Mark Van Beirs)

## MAMMALS

**European Hare** *Lepus europaeus* (NL) One was seen in the Nur Sultan steppe (Kazakhstan).

**Tolai Hare** *Lepus tolai* Regular in the Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan deserts.

**Muskrat (introduced)** *Ondatra zibethicus* (NL) A single was noted near Nur Sultan.

**Altai Marmot** *Marmota baibacina* Common and cuddly in the Tien Shan.

**Bobak Marmot** *Marmota bobak* A single in undisturbed steppe near Nur Sultan (Kazakhstan).

**Long-clawed Ground Squirrel** *Spermophilopsis leptodactylus* Several in the southern deserts.

**Yellow Ground Squirrel** *Spermophilus fulvus* A few near Tashkent and in southern Kazakhstan.

**Golden Jackal (Common J)** *Canis aureus* One was seen in the Taukum desert.

**Red Fox** *Vulpes vulpes* Three sightings of this well-known species.

**Siberian Roe Deer** *Capreolus pygargus* Two were observed in the spruce forest of the Tien Shan.

**Goitered Gazelle** *Gazella subgutturosa* A few in the Taukum desert (Kazakhstan).





*Secret Toad-headed Agama (Mark Van Beirs)*

## REPTILES

**Sheltopusik (Pallas's Glass Lizard) *Pseudopus apodus*** A single showed in the Zeravshan Range.

**Desert Monitor Lizard *Varanus griseus*** Great looks at a large specimen in the Kyzyl Kum desert.

**Secret Toad-headed Agama *Phrynocephalus mystaceus*** Three were found in the Kyzyl Kum desert.

**Lichtenstein's Toad-headed Agama *Phrynocephalus interscapularis*** A few in the Kyzyl Kum desert.

**Steppe Agama *Trapelus sanguinolentus*** Several showed well at the Repetek reserve (Turkmenistan).

**Turkestan Rock Agama *Paralaudakia lehmanni*** Quite common in the Zeravshan Range (Uzbekistan).

**Reticulated Racerunner *Eremias grammica*** A single showed in the Kyzyl Kum desert (Uzbekistan).

**Common (Desert) Sand Boa *Eryx miliaris*** Great looks at one near Bukhara (Uzbekistan).

**Horsfield's Tortoise *Testudo horsfieldi*** Regular encounters in Uzbekistan and southern Kazakhstan.



*Steppe Agama; Turkestan Rock Agama (Mark Van Beirs)*





*Common Sand Boa (Mark Van Beirs)*

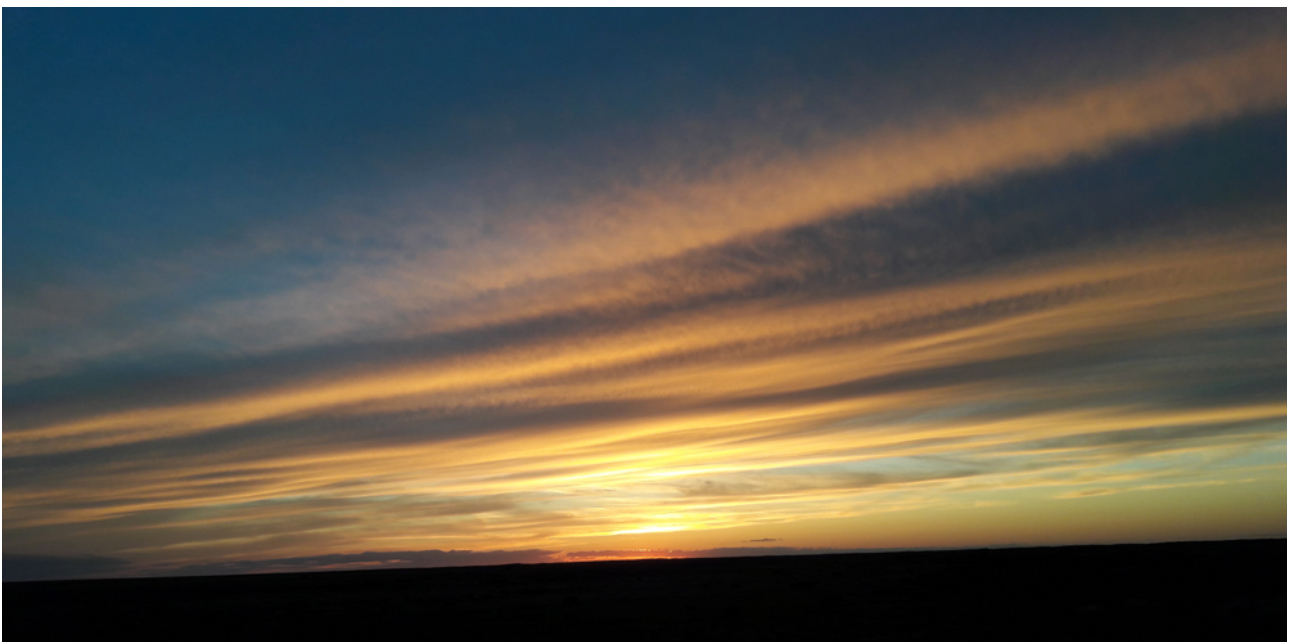


*Horsfield's Tortoise (Mark Van Beirs)*





*Poppy fields in southern Kazakhstan (Mark Van Beirs)*



*Steppe Agama; Turkestan Rock Agama (Mark Van Beirs)*





*The group in Samarkand (Mark Van Beirs)*

### **BIRDS OF THE TOUR**

1) Ibisbill	10 points
2) Himalayan Snowcock	9
3) Yellow-breasted (Azure) Tit	8
4) Bearded Vulture	6
Pander's Ground Jay	6
White-headed Duck	6





*Our camp in the Taukum desert (Mark Van Beirs)*

## NOTES TO THE SYSTEMATIC LIST

### **Himalayan Snowcock** *Tetraogallus himalayensis*

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!

### **White Stork** *Ciconia ciconia*

c50 of the race *asiatica* were seen along the road from Samarkand to Tashkent, their colony of nests scattered along the roadside pylons near the Syr Darya River (the Jaxartes of the ancients). These birds used to winter in Iran and India, but now mainly remain near the breeding areas.

### **Macqueen's Bustard** *Chlamydotis macqueenii*

In previous years we have seen many more, and the sad truth is that the 'Houbara'-hunting Arab falconers are active in 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 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!





*Primulas in the Tien Shan (Mark Van Beirs)*

**Sociable Lapwing (Sociable Plover) *Vanellus gregarius***

This species is treated as CRITICALLY ENDANGERED by BirdLife International. The total population stands at 16,000-17,000 birds and most of the birds breed in Kazakhstan, with just a handful in nearby Russia. Sudan is the main wintering ground, but several hundred birds migrate to northwest India!

**Black-winged Pratincole *Glareola nordmanni***

The scientific epithet refers to Alexander Von Nordmann (1803-1866), a Finnish/Russian naturalist and explorer.

**Pander's Ground Jay *Podoces panderi***

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. The four species of ground jay (genera *Podoces*) are all enigmatic species of remote, hard to reach places that appeal very much to Palearctic birding fanatics.

**Turkestan Tit (Turkestan Great Tit) *Parus bokharensis***

The scientific epithet obviously refers to the city of Bukhara. The International Ornithological Congress (IOC) considers it as a subspecies of Great Tit *Parus major*.

**Black Lark *Melanocorypha yeltoniensis***

One of the spectacular highlights of this tour, with many seen on the Kurgalzhin steppes. Many males were seen along the roadside, taking to the air in their unusual 'air-rowing' displays. A truly exquisite species! *Yeltoniensis* refers to Lake Yelton, situated near Volgograd (ex Stalingrad) on the Volga.

**Lesser Short-toed Lark *Calandrella rufescens***



The race involved, *heinei*, is sometimes placed with Asian Short-toed Lark *Calandrella cheleensis*.

**Common Nightingale** *Luscinia megarhynchos*

Plentiful and noisy at Beldersay, where we scoped a couple. 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.

**Eversmann's Redstart (Rufous-backed Redstart)** *Phoenicurus erythronota*

This spectacular species is named after Eduard Friedrich Eversmann (1794-1860), German naturalist, author and collector in Kirghizia and Siberia.

**Güldenstädt's Redstart (White-winged Redstart)** *Phoenicurus erythrogaster*

Great looks at Cosmostantsia in the Tien Shan. Johann Anton Güldenstädt (1745–1781) was a Baltic German naturalist and explorer in Russian service.

**Finsch's Wheatear** *Oenanthe finschii*

The bird is named after Friedrich Hermann Otto Finsch (1839-1917) German diplomat, administrator, ornithologist, collector and author.

**Brown Dipper (Pallas's Dipper)** *Cinclus pallasii*

Peter Simon Pallas (1741-1811) was a German author and naturalist in Russian service, who travelled widely in Siberia and Kirghizia.

**Saxaul Sparrow** *Passer ammodendri*

Some wonderful looks in the Ili River area. 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.





*Camp fire in the Taukum desert (Mark Van Beirs)*



*Steppe scenery at the edge of the Taukum desert (Mark Van Beirs)*