

## Birding Georgia and Armenia independently

**Apr 26 - May 6 2022**

There are a good number of reports out there but here is a bit of up to date information, particularly for **Caspian Snowcock at Mt Gndasar** and the **Armash Fishponds**, both in Armenia.

I had a bit of time free and was looking for a plan, which I quickly found, joining 2 friends for 5 days in Kazbegi aka Qazbegi / specifically the town of Stepantsminda, in Georgia. I tacked on two days of solo birding beforehand in Georgia and a few days in Armenia after.

### Part 1 - Georgia

We arranged a car rental in Georgia via localrent.com. It worked mostly quite well, with two annoying but ultimately unimportant little things. The car we got was a 4x4 Mitsubishi Pajero, high mileage but reliable, so perfect. However we received it quite dirty, returned it only a bit dirtier, and got charged a cleaning fee that wasn't in the contract. The contact who received the car from us was quite unfriendly and we gave up with him yelling at us and just let him charge us the (modest) fee. The other issue was non-functioning A/C but not too big a deal given mostly moderate temperatures.

When I first arrived, I went to **Jandari Lake**. I am sure the site can be productive but the habitat is pretty wrecked (overgrazed / trashed everywhere) and there was not a tremendous amount of access to the lakefront, just a few decent spots to scan from. I found no Cranes (my objective), saw some **Armenian Gulls**, and left within about 2 hours. I would not really recommend this site for general birding, everywhere else I went in both countries was more scenic and better birding.

I then drove to the **Chachuna Managed Reserve** (sometimes called Chacuna Managed Reserve or National Park). Access is via the town of **Dedoplis Tskaro**. I stayed in Savanna Guest House which was clean, inexpensive, friendly, and had terrific food with no problem getting an early breakfast. Highly recommended. Birding the actual reserve, you just drive the dirt road about 40m - 1h S of Dedoplis Tskaro towards the reserve and Dalis Mta Reservoir and then start exploring dirt tracks and birding. Take water and food, there is none of either out there. It would be trivial and safe to wild camp wherever you like, a gorgeous area of steppe with very few inhabitants that were invariably very friendly. Birdwise I turned up **Black Francolin, Euro Turtle-Dove, Egyptian and Griffon Vultures, E Imperial Eagle** (I bumped into two rangers and asked them and they kindly drove me to a nest that was observable from a sensible distance without disturbing, but I won't publish the GPS of the nest here), **Roller, Greater and Turkestan Short-toed Larks, Menetrie's Warbler, Isabelline Wheatear** among others. It's a gorgeous area and delightful to bird. I would have happily stayed longer but hadn't brought quite enough food and water to camp in the car, and had seen enough to not want to repeat the drive the next day.

My next destination was **David Gareji Monastery** which was in a beautiful, scenic area with great birding. The monastery itself is also scenic and makes for a nice visit. I birded around the Monastery, a short trail up behind it (from a little hut / parking garage, fairly obvious), and the road for 300-400m before the monastery. Good birds included **Green Warbler, Red-breasted Flycatcher, E Orphean Warbler** (probably JUST arrived), **E Black-eared Wheater, Finsch's Wheatear, Rock Sparrow, Black-headed Bunting**. With the exception of the E Orphean

Warbler and the Rock Sparrows most of these birds would be common in various places later on the trip but they were still nice to see.

I had a touch of time in the afternoon and went to **Lake Lisi** looking for **Krüper's Nuthatch**. I walked about 8kms over 3 hours all over the site and through most of the trails in the surrounding hills/woods and struck out on the Nuthatch. Nice place to have a beer by the lake though!

The following morning my friends arrived early, I picked them up at the airport and we drove towards Stepantsminda. We stopped just S of the town of **Ananuri** (parking near the Coffee To Go cafe) both on our way to and from Stepantsminda. We explored the trails and forest quite a bit looking for **Semicollared Flycatcher** but struck out in an hour stop on the way and a few hours on the way back. We did see stacks of **Red-breasted Flycatchers**, **Green Warblers** and other migrants and forest birds here.

At Stepantsminda we stayed at the **Hotel UP** (self catering) which is new, clean, comfortable, inexpensive, and very much recommended, though there are many options in town that are probably equally nice / affordable. Hotel UP is near the top of town and you can scan from the balcony for chickens and mammals with your morning coffee / tea.

There are sort of three main places to look for the key birds. I will refer to them by their eBird Hotspot names in order to try to avoid confusion. First, you can park just above town at roughly 42.6529, 44.6553 near an old metal rail car / trailer and walk a short path through some scrub to a scree field, scanning from the bottom or wherever you like in the vicinity. This is called Stephantsminda--eastern subalpine slopes in eBird. Second, you can continue a bit further, passing just around a ridge, and parking at about 42.6575, 44.6596 then walking 100-200-300m up the grassy hill to wherever you like in order to scan the valley above. This spot is called Mt Kuro slopes in eBird. Third, you can scan from the vicinity of Gergeti Trinity Church on the opposite side of the valley, parking at roughly 42.6632, 44.6197 or a bit before in a second lot. This is, not surprisingly, called Gergeti Trinity Church in eBird. There are also some trails above the lower parking lot at Gergeti Trinity Church that could be explored and/or used to get to higher elevation.

On our visit (Apr 28-May 2) the snow level was already really high, much higher than most trip reports we saw for this time of year. We spent time in all three spots, but less time up at Gergeti Trinity Church as the eastern subalpine slopes and Mt Kuro slopes both proved productive. We ultimately saw a good number of both **Caucasian Snowcock** and **Caucasian Grouse** from both of these two sites. They were never particularly close but we eventually got nice scope views of both. We only found **Great Rosefinch** one morning, when there was a pair feeding on the grass just near where we parked at the metal railcar for the eastern subalpine slopes, then a couple birds flying overhead while we were a few hundred meters up the slopes. This was the morning after some rain, so perhaps the birds had been pushed down. We only found **Güldenstat's Redstart** on the same day, and it appeared to us that these birds were also likely pushed down by overnight rain. We found 1-2 males and at least 3 females that were a bit distant but provided good scope views as they were working their way up one of the ridges above the scree field that is at the base of the eastern subalpine slopes. Let's say the birds were probably around 42.6520, 44.6616 and we saw them mid morning as they all worked their way uphill. We also saw stacks of **Eastern Tur** while scanning, quite nice! We found **Fire-fronted Serin** at pretty much every site we visited in the area, including the three main sites to scan from.

We found no Redstarts in the Sea Buckthorn in the river bottoms (presumably all would have moved well up slope with the snow melting). The area we liked birding the best for migrants / passerines was the mixed Sea Buckthorn and scrub in the Chkheri River Valley - just to the right of the road immediately after you turn left to go up to the Gergeti Trinity Church. Park at 42.6644, 44.6403 or 42.6697, 44.6265. If parking at the latter, you can walk a dirt road quite a ways up the valley with good birding the whole way. Lots of **Mountain Chiffchaff** here, as well as **Dunnock** and **Fire-fronted Serin**.

We also did some scanning and birding from roughly 42.5355, 44.4757, where we again saw both **Caucasian Snowcock** and **Caucasian Grouse** as well as lots of **Twite**. Twite were seemingly all a good bit higher up due to snow melt. We didn't find any more Redstarts or Rosefinches there, though.

**Jvari Pass** and the area around the **Russian-Georgian Friendship Monument** (erected before Russia fomented independence in and arguably occupied South Ossetia and Abkhazia!) were birds with lots of Twite again, and were excellent for raptor migration, but we didn't find any more of the target birds, nor Snowfinch or Alpine Accentor, at least on our visit.

I parted ways with my friends and caught a minivan from Tbilisi to Yerevan. I pre-booked online but it did not seem necessary. In the morning the vans go as they fill up. They leave from near the Avlabari Metro Station (precisely 41.692456, 44.814516). Quoted time is 6 hours, we arrived in 4,5 with a bit a traffic and one protest blocking the road. My driver drove like a bat out of hell but was good about not passing blind or into oncoming traffic, just aggressive and fast. I left about 08:45 and was in Yerevan around 13:15.

## Part 2 - Armenia

I rented a "Small SUV" quite inexpensively from Budget, with pickup / drop-off at Ani Plaza Hotel in downtown Yerevan. It worked out very well, they gave me a fairly new 4WD Renault Duster that was perfect.

I first drove to Mt Aragats, staying in Seva Guesthouse in Byurakan. It was serviceable but nothing special - I'd stay there again but if I had time to plan I might spend more time looking at reviews. I ate dinner at the Amberd Tavern on my way down the mountain after birding. Touristy, slightly pricey relative to other places but still quite inexpensive in the grand scheme of things. Food and wine were very good and the bread was fresh baked!

I drove up Mt Aragats to the shrubby area mid height that people tend to bird to look for Radde's Accentor. I started birding around where the eBird Hotspot is - Mt Aragats (Արագած) Summit Road and quickly found **White-throated Robin**. It didn't take too long (about an hour) and I found a pair of **Radde's Accentor** at 40.3994, 44.2513. Having seen those two species, I birded all the way to the end of the road, still up to 1m of snow at the top with the road having been recently cleared. I found no Snowfinch or Crimson-winged Finch but did have a ton of **Horned Larks**, a few **Twite**, and a pair of **Alpine Accentor** near the very top.

The following morning I birded a rocky gorge just above Byurakan (40.3576, 44.2641) briefly before driving. I found two **Western Rock Nuthatch** several hundred meters up the gorge, and two more on the rocky ruins above the gorge at about 40.3604, 44.2652. I also turned up **E Black-eared Wheater**, **Finsch's Wheatear**, **Ortolan Bunting**, and **Tawny Pipit**.

The afternoon was spent with a visit to the gorges above **Vedi**. There are two gorges, drive to 39.9389, 44.7077 and take either fork, though I found both **Eastern Rock Nuthatch** (nesting at 39.9476, 44.7069) and **Gray-necked Bunting** (39.9537, 44.7072) in the right hand fork.

Next destination was the town of **Areni** in preparation for **Mt Gndasar** to try to see Caspian Snowcock. First, though, I had a bit of time remaining so I went to **Noravank Monastery** which was incredibly scenic and pretty good birding. I had more **Eastern Rock Nuthatch** and, with patience, **Persian Wheater** against and on the rock cliffs above the monastery. **Fire-fronted Serin** were around in huge numbers as well.

To arrange a visit to Mt Gndasar, contact **Arpa Protected Landscape** via Facebook. They responded quickly in English, thankfully. I was able to arrange a 4WD to take me up to scan for the Snowcock (my rented Renault Duster would NOT have made it up) for 35000 AMD (about US \$75). Two rangers / Arpa employees picked me up from my guesthouse (Areni Wine Cellar - nice place, got an early breakfast, recommended) at 5:45 and we set off for about 1:15 of driving. Eventually we arrived to nearly 39.8396, 45.1689 before the 4WD truck could not get up the last 100-200m of grassy slopes to crest the last hill, so we walked the last 400-500m to a good grassy ridge to scan the rocky peak in front from. We heard Snowcock all morning but it took three of us scanning for hours to find a single extremely distant **Caspian Snowcock** (2+ km but ok looks all things considered with a decent scope and the cold / still morning air). We never could find birds that were clearly calling from closer, frustratingly. While scanning though I saw stacks of **Bezoar Ibex** including some terrific males, but much more exciting was multiple sightings of at least four **Brown Bears** including a mother with two mostly grown cubs. A few raptors passed over, a few **Fire-fronted Serin** were flying about, we were serenaded by Wood Lark all the while, but the birding around the area were were scanning from was not terribly exciting beyond the Snowcock and mammals.

I next went to **Oorts Gorge** and **Gorge east of Surenevan** (as called in eBird). In Oorts Gorge I had a migrant **E Olivaceous Warbler** and a **Short-toed Snake Eagle** but struck out on Bimaculated Lark in both locations and was certainly too early for Pale Rock Sparrow. I did have **Blue-cheeked Bee-eater** with other Bee-eaters hawking and perching on power lines just at the edge of town at about 39.7696, 44.8106 which was nice as I never found perched birds in Armash the next day.

My last destination was **Armash Fish Ponds**. To arrange a visit, contact **Karen Aghababyan** (note that Karen is a man's name in Armenia) on +374 95 544405. He doesn't use WhatsApp so you'll need to call or text but he speaks good English and was very responsive and helpful, I really appreciated his assistance. He will coordinate your visit. You will need to get a photocopy of your passport(s) to give to the gate guards upon arrival, then you will need to somehow pay Karen 5000AMD (about \$10-11 USD) per person. I tried to cross paths with him in Yerevan on my way back to town / the airport but he was stuck in traffic so I left it for him at a hotel reception, I hope he got it without any problems. I stayed at B&B Sunrise House Aygavan in the town of Ararat. It was dusty, smelled of cigarette smoke (the hosts smoked inside while I was there, unfortunately), the bed not terribly comfortable, and the dinner was really salty and mediocre. Breakfast was better but basic. For all this it was the most expensive guesthouse / meals I had in either Georgia or Armenia, so I would very strongly recommend against this guesthouse. There aren't many places to stay down there but an extra 20 minutes drive in the morning for a decent place to stay would be a good tradeoff!

To bird Armash Ponds, the entrance is at 39.7847, 44.7617. You'll mention Karen's name (they'll be anticipating you) and ask for a copy of your passport(s) then let you in to explore.

The couple of ponds before the gate can be birded and are productive. Just after entering the main gate / at the gatekeepers hut, turn left and **White-tailed Lapwings** seem to be most reliably found on the grassy area to your right. Follow the main track in, good birding all over the place. I birded from the entrance to 39.7615, 44.7513 and then to 39.7422, 44.7796 where a fence prohibits accessing the last ponds closest to the Azerbaijani border. I explored other tracks around the area, some better than others, some closed, but would recommend as most productive the main track into 39.7615, 44.7513 then turning left at that junction to go down the middle of the main ponds until the fence. **Paddyfield, Savi's, Moustached, European Reed, Great Reed, Sedge Warblers, Bearded Reedling** were in the reeds everywhere. Tons of waterfowl, including **Ferruginous Ducks** on some of the ponds further back in. I found no **White-headed Duck** or **Marbled Teal** on my visit but wasn't killing myself looking at ducks. **Flamingos** and **Spoonbills** on a drying pond quite a ways in. I had a couple **Roller** and two flyby only **Blue-cheeked Bee-eater**, was happy to have seen one so well the day before so I didn't focus on finding more of them. **White-winged Terns** were everywhere in alternate plumage, really a great spectacle. I conservatively estimated 800 birds, it could have been 2000-3000 or more? Thousands upon thousands of **Barn Swallow** and **Sand Martin** were everywhere. I spent a lot of time scanning and enjoying the waders, there must have been 10-20,000 total birds present on two drying ponds I spent a lot of time at. Huge numbers of **Ruff, Little Stint, Common Ringed Plover, Black-tailed Godwit, Spotted Redshank, Black-winged Stilt**. I also picked out **Temminck's Stint, Little Ringed Plover, Green Sandpiper, Pied Avocet, Kentish Plover, Gray (Black-bellied) Plover, Northern Lapwing, Eurasian Curlew, Common Redshank**, many **Red-necked Phalarope**, many **Wood Sandpiper**. Add in some **Gull-billed** and **Little Terns, Slender-billed Gulls** and it was just a great half day and incredibly birdy any direction you turned. Looking at an eBird list from just a few days before my visit and the composition of waders and migrants had turned over quite a bit so it could well be worth multiple visits during migration if timing / logistics allow.

All in all a great trip that was quite inexpensive and easy to organize last minute. Thanks to Duncan and Phil for inviting me along in Georgia, many thanks to Rob Hutchinson for some gen on Western Rock Nuthatch and Persian Wheatear in Armenia, thanks to Vasil Ananian <vasil.ananian@gmail.com> for putting me in touch with Arpa Protected Landscape and Karen Aghababayan, and thanks to Arpa and Karen for their help there.

Apologies for any errors / typos / things that don't make sense, this was written quickly. Any questions feel free to track me down and contact me. Cheers!