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A trip map



Locations

Day 1 | 05.04.2019 – Way to the Greater Caucasus Day 2 | 06.04.2019 – Birding Around Kazbegi Day 3 | 07.04.2019 – Birding on the way to Tbilisi Day 4 | 08.04.2019 – Birding around David Gareji Mon Day 5 | 09.04.2019 – Departure

TRIP REPORT

Early Spring Voyage

Four day birding the uplands and steppes of **Georgia**.

5th - 9th April 2019

Completed by Alexander Rukhaia

Participants

Mike Kempton, UK Christian Jenkins, UK

Local Guide

Alexander Rukhaia, Georgia

Summary

The idea to make this short trip comes from last year, when guiding a longer journey through Georgia at the end of May 2018. On this particular trip a few photographers from the group have missed capturing a Güldenstädt's Redstart (*Phoenicurus erythrogastrus*) and a Great Rosefinch (*Carpodacus rubicilla*). We saw both birds up at almost 3000 meters, but the distance wouldn't allow making proper images and also there was no option to walk further to the breeding site due to a deep snow, so sadly, at the end of the day we returned back to hotel without single footage of these elusive birds.

A few months later after this trip i have received an email from Paul Bowden and Mike Kempton, who wanted to discuss an opportunities for coming back shortly in 2019, but rather at the early spring, when birds would still hang around the village.

Without keeping waiting long, we have set up the dates, made all necessary arrangements and we were almost there, when on March 29th received quite an unfortunate email from Paul Bowden; just a week before the journey to Georgia he was birding in rocky mountains of Spain, where fell and hardly damaged his leg, bruised the ribs and also banged the arms. Due to a serious medical treatment he couldn't make it anymore and had to cancel on a last minute. Although being in such a situation, Paul felt responsibility for the entire program and tried to encourage his friend instead.



This is how we got a very nice man, Christian Jenkins in the team. Now it was a matter of swift re-arrangements before the commencement date and fortunately everything went well.

So, we would like to dedicate this journey and all our observations to Paul, a man, who has initiated this nice trip, but sadly couldn't make it happen himself.

Day 1

5th April 2019

Mike and Christian have landed to Tbilisi at 03:00 o'clock. Meeting at the exit gate, we loaded our luggage to the vehicle and headed straight to the Greater Caucasus. It was still dark. The way from the airport up to the Pasanauri village was fine, while later we felt the road was slightly frozen and we had to continue driving more carefully. We also made a few short stops along the drive, with some of the common species only; Black Bird, Coal, Great and Blue Tits, Robin, Song Thrush and Northern Goshawk flushed from the ground. It was about 07:00 o'clock when we reached the Gudauri Ski Station and here we came across the long traffic que along the road. Asking people around, we found out that it was heavily

snowing all night long and police has closed the road. I tried to find out more and spoke to a policeman, who said that the technique will soon start cleaning works and we will have to wait a few hours... probably until the early afternoon. With no chance to escape we picked our optics, locked the car and started exploring around.

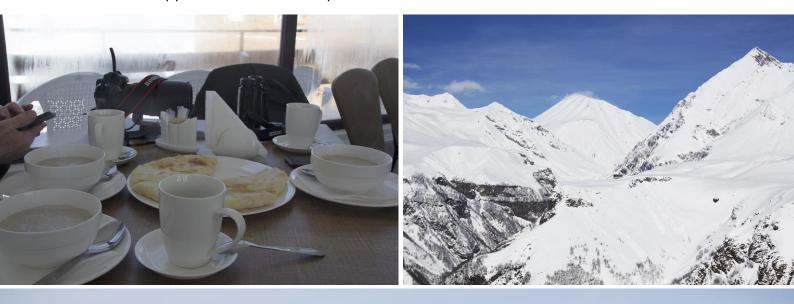
The first birds we encountered were several flocks of quite numerous Red-billed and **Yellow-billed** (**Alpine**) **Choughs**. Amongst passerines it was really nice to see Bramblings, Goldfinches, Long-tailed Tits and a few Black Redstarts busy building nests under roofs, but it was a bit surprising to see a Hoopoe in the tree.



A nice morning birding and we heard drivers shouting; café is open, café is open! It was cold, we felt a bit hungry too, so obviously we took a chance to seat down with a cup of hot tea, and of-course our breakfast would not be a proper breakfast without "*Khachapuri*" a traditional Georgian dish of cheese-filled bread. Some people also call it Georgian Pizza and there is no chance you miss it, while visiting Georgia.

It was quite nice... besides *Khachapuri* we had some other dishes too, and we had some very nice mountain views from the café's balcony, which was just opposite site to the gorge, so it was a combination of leisurely breakfast and birding.

It became already reasonably warm, the sky was fully clean and we saw a few raptors gliding towards us; it was migrating Black Kites. Then we saw a few more and then more again and at some point we ended up observing huge migration of raptors just passing overhead. On that morning we have seen 18 species of raptors, with most numerous Black Kites. We had all four Harriers; Hen, Marsh, Montagu's and amazingly beautiful, snowy white Pallid Harriers... Steppe Buzzards, Levant Sparrowhawks, a few Northern Goshawks, etc.





It seemed the migration was about to peak, so we quickly paid the bill and headed out to find the better spot, with less people around. A bit further we found a nice place with good views and migration was already intense. Mike and Christian were happy experiencing their first raptor migration in Georgia and Mike's camera was on full mode duty.



All in all we have spent here a few exciting hours, before it was announced that the road was open again and it was time move on.

Despite of intense traffic, it took us less than 40 minutes to reach Stepantsminda. We didn't go to the hotel first, but decided to continue birding and went to the small patch, with buckthorn bushes, where the target birds were most likely expected. Upon arrival to the spot it looked very quiet with no single movement, unless some Ring Ouzels, Choughs flying above the cliffs and yet ongoing raptor migration. We took a short walk deeper to the gorge, with a hope to spot something. While scanning around, we saw one Güldenstädt's Redstart popped on the top of the bush for a second. We stepped a bit closer and in a few minutes it showed up again, while in a few more minutes we saw some more. Soon birds

became less shy and we had really nice prolonged views, with good photographic opportunities as well. Mike has made a few nice pictures, while Christian was busy practicing with his new toys - Digiscoping equipment, which he bought no long before this trip.



While enjoying Güldenstädt's Redstarts, a few Great Rosefinches flew into the bushes, with two males among, so we have spent here a while, before having a late lunch at the restaurant in the village center. After lunch we went to our hotel, quickly checked in, unloaded our luggage and immediately went back to the valley. This time we have taken a short walk along the Terek River, with bushes and rocky slopes, where a Wallcreeper gave us very nice views. At the river shore we saw a White-throated Dipper few times (same or maybe different individuals), Water Pipits, White and Grey Wagtails and some other common stuff, but it was really surprising to see a Citrine Wagtail (single male).



We were about to leave and started our walk back to the car when saw something big flying very low, but it was against the sun. It continued deeper to the valley, then made a smooth turn and glided back towards us; it was another target of the trip, an adult Bearded Vulture (Lammergeyer). We had it roughly for 3 minutes, before disappearing behind the gorge. What an impressive ending of the day... A nice dinner was served for us at the hotel and we haven't missed a chance to raise a glass of beer to celebrate our achievements.



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Day 2 6th April 2019

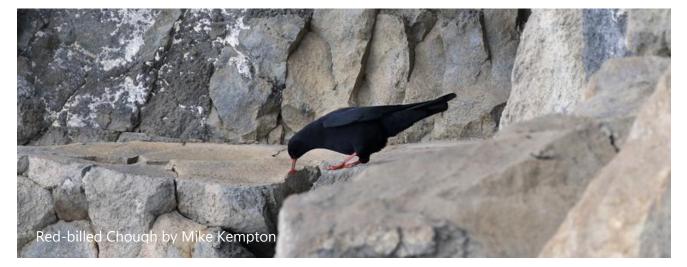
We left early morning, when it was still dark. The first spot we have visited today was a rocky gorge close to the village, a 15 minutes away from hotel. Once we have stepped out from the car we could hear Snowcocks calling. Taking a short walk up, we came to a place, from where we would likely have the best views on entire gorge. We spent not so long scanning, when spotted two Caucasian Snowcocks seating together... later feeding around. They were quite low, so we had really nice views. It would be ofcourse difficult range for Mike's 100-400 lens, but I and Christian made some videos using digiscopes.



Later we have tried to look for a Caucasian Grouse, but spending quite some time, we were still not successful. In addition it was too cold after standing so long at a same place, the fog was also bothering views quite often, so we gave up for this species this morning and decided to come back later or next morning again. While walking back to the car we were passing a section with bushes; usually nice birding area, so we made a few nice observations, including Mistle Thrush, Ring Ouzel, both Alpine and Red-billed Choughs, Whinchat, Bullfinch, Dunnock and newly arrived Caucasian (Mountain) Chiffchaff... already calling. It was really cool to see Great Rosefinch male just maybe five meters away; not at all shy, but very relaxed - roosting on a branch for long enough that I and Christian managed to capture a few 2/3 minute videos, while Mike's shutter sound went crazy. So, we were still happy of our morning results, when returning back to hotel for breakfast.



After breakfast we visited a small valley to the south and entering the area we saw a few Red-billed Choughs flying close to their nesting cliffs, a pair of a Black Redstart at surrounding ruined structures and a small mixed flock of Chaffinches and Bramblings in the tree. Diving further, we heard Red-fronted Serins and then we've seen a flock of about ten individuals, where spend some time watching these beautiful birds. In addition the raptor migration was picking up again, with mostly Black Kites, but that wasn't the only sight in the sky. We also had two Bearded Vultures and later two Golden Eagles soaring above the valley. Soon our stomachs gave a sign, it was a lunch o'clock and we went back to the village.



This friendly dog was welcoming us every day at the restaurant entry ©



After lunch we took a way northwards to the Russian border, where the surroundings of a newly re-constructed cathedral provides some of the nice birding opportunities, especially during raptor migration period. The area also hosts wealthy population of a Griffon and Bearded Vultures and we have seen both very well; three of each species. Apart from that we still had a few previously seen species, including a Caucasian (Mountain) Chiffchaff, but there was a new thing we haven't seen yet - East Caucasian Tur *Capra caucasica cylindricornis...* a nice looking semi adult male grazing on a rocky slope.



We stayed here until early evening and then relocated back to the village, but before going back to hotel we have visited another birding area, a small pine wood, with both pair of Goldcrest and Firecrest, Twites, Siskins, Coal Tit, quite numerous Song Thrushes, very nicely seen Red Crossbill and a Eurasian Red Squirrel. Another great day indeed!

Day 3

7th April 2019

This morning we've given another try for a Caucasian Grouse and were successful. The day was a lot better than yesterday, with clean blue sky and we've spotted 3 male Grouses on the snow covered slope. Snowcocks were calling, but we didn't really focus on this particular species today, we had them very well yesterday. While Christian and Mike were watching Grouses I've took a few minutes to scan other parts of the gorge, with a hope to find more Grouses or anything interesting and found a flock of East Caucasian Turs (or Eastern Goats)... about 30 individuals; mainly females' with juveniles.

Soon we started back and passing by the same bushy patch we had a few Ring Ouzels again, Black Birds, four Great Rosefinches and one single male Güldenstädt's Redstart. We haven't stayed long, but rather made a drive up to the Gergeti Trinity Church for mainly landscape views and photography. It was really nice driving up through the newly paved asphalt road, although about 50 meters of a last section was covered by frozen snow, so we didn't risk, but rather decided to park the car at the roadside and walk the rest. Usually crowded viewpoint was almost empty with only a few tourists around and a few local 4x4 drivers. We would wish meeting one to make our small group picture and suddenly one guy showed up and walked up towards us. He was also British by the way, so obviously we had a short conversation, but not about football this time ©

From a bird perspective, here we saw not so much, but one Griffon Vulture and little flocks of Red-billed and Alpine Choughs. Soon we've returned back to hotel, checked out and starter towards Tbilisi. *In Kazbegi we stayed in a small, but very nice hotel in the village center. It is run by local family; very kind people, wealthy table with super delicious food and as far as I remember we were the only guests at that time.* On the way to Tbilisi we made another short visit; this time to the southern valleys along the way to Kazbegi National Park. We had some nice birding here, with great landscape views and some of the new species for the list, including Wren, Rock Buntings and Tawny Pipits. A lunch today we had in one of many restaurants at the Gudauri Ski Station. After lunch we headed straight to Tbilisi, with a plan to visit one more birding site close to the capital. This is a pine forest eastwards from the city, which harbours the easternmost resident Kruper's Nuthatch. Unfortunately we were a bit late, due to a busy traffic arrived when it was already getting dark, so although a motivated search we only heard it, but missed seeing it.

We reached our hotel no long before dinner time. *Hotel itself is small, but quite fancy in the old town part.* There are many restaurants on offer nearby and we took one of the most popular place providing experimental variations of a Georgian kitchen, so dinner was excellent, with some of the best Georgian wine.



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Day 4 8th April 2019

Our last day took us further south to the place called David Gareji monastery. This is a country's one of the most remarkable hotspots along the border with Azerbaijan. The barren landscapes here got just incredible views, hosting some of the rich birdlife. The way to the monastery took us through the town Rustavi, with some of the common species seen on a drive, such as Barn Swallows, Collared Doves, Common Starlings, etc. We were keeping on driving when Mike and Christian spotted a flock of large wings in the sky. We stopped immediately... right in the middle of the road, looked up and saw the flock of 81 Demoiselle Cranes heavily flapping wings above our heads. Incredible luck!



Moving on further, soon we have left the civilized places behind and entered barren landscapes. Some of our first species in this habitat composed Hoopoe, Calandra, Shorttoed and Lesser Short-toed Larks, Whinchat, Stonechat and many more. One of the first raptors we've spotted here were two Black (or Cinereous) Vultures seating on the ground. Little further we've made another short stop at a place with many scrubs, where a Menetries's Warblers gave us superb views. Witnessing high bird activity we've made a lot of stops before reaching the monastery site and every time we would peak up something new and interesting, including one single Pine Bunting. Exploring the monastery and the surroundings we've encountered all three Black-eared, Finsch's and Isabelline Wheatears, Blue Rock Thrush at its usual place, Eastern Orphean Warbler in the right hand side bushes of the monastery, Chukars – walking relaxed and then running away, and many other usual sights. Amongst raptors; Eastern Imperial Eagle in a nice prolonged flight above the border ridge, Booted and Short-toed Eagles, numerous Griffon and Black Vultures, as well as four Egyptian Vultures... later one seen fighting with Imperial Eagle.

Surprisingly we haven't seen a Western Rock Nuthatch at its usual place in the monastery yard. Later, when we were already on our way back to Tbilisi we have again saw a Chukar walking along the road. Mike wanted to photograph it and we stopped, but it has again disappeared beyond the ridge. We took some time to wait, with a hope that bird would show up again, when suddenly some small bird flew towards us, and let's say among so many proper for this species places it has landed on a lonely standing dead tree branch, just a few meters away from us... guess what it was - Western Rock Nuthatch! Then it took a short flight and relocated to the bush... with green leafs ^(C) well, not every day you see a Rock Nuthatch behaving like a warbler, so it was a surprise, fun and delight at the same time.



The task was completed and we could spend the rest of the time exploring next available birding. A drive of about one hour and we came by the lake southeast of Tbilisi. Despite the fact it was already midday and warm, a representative local fauna looked a lot interesting, with various gulls, including Armenian Gull, numerous Pygmy Cormorants, three Ferruginous Ducks, Kentish Plover and a lot more. Amongst passerines one was real delight to see the flock of a few hundred Spanish Sparrows murmuring around, while a few tens of freely grazing cows were surrounded by numerous Yellow Wagtails.



We have finished our day visiting an interesting forest patch not so far from the lake, with very nice selection of species on offer, including Hawfinch, Lesser Spotted, Middle Spotted, Great Spotted and Green Woodpeckers, while a Black Woodpecker was only heard, as well as the Scops Owl. So, now were ready for our farewell Georgian dinner and wine to celebrate a short, but rewarding birding days in Georgia.

Day 5

9th April 2019

In the morning Mike and Chirstian made an own migration back home.

As Mike says; three amigos!

Mike Kempton on the left, Christian Jenkins in the middle, Alex Rukhaia on the right and Mountain Kazbegi on the background



Thank to Mike and Christian for provided bird and landscape pictures used in this report!

The final list of observations

- > More than
- < Less than
- **N** Numerous uncounted
- H Heard
- **S** Seen

Birds			
Ν	Common name	Scientific name	Status
1	Gadwall	Mareca strepera	S/> 10
2	Eurasian Teal	Anas crecca	S/> 4
3	Garganey	Anas querquedula	S/> 4
4	Ferruginous Duck	Aythya nyroca	S/3
5	Caucasian Black Grouse	Tetrao mlokosiewiczi	S/3
6	Caucasian Snowcock	Tetraogallus caucasicus	S/2, H/> 6
7	Chukar	Alectoris chukar	S/1, H/N
8	Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis	S/2
9	Pygmy Cormorant	Microcarbo pygmeus	S/N
10	Cattle Egret	Bubulcus ibis	S/1
11	Little Egret	Egretta garzetta	S/> 6
12	Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea	S/1
13	Bearded Vulture	Gypaetus barbatus	S/> 3
14	Griffon Vulture	Gyps fulvus	S/N
15	Black Vulture	Coragyps atratus	S/3
16	Egyptian Vulture	Neophron percnopterus	S/> 5
17	Golden Eagle	Aquila chrysaetos	S/2
18	Eastern Imperial Eagle	Aquila heliacal	S/1
19	Short-toed Eagle	Circaetus gallicus	S/2
20	Booted Eagle	Hieraaetus pennatus	S/2
21	Black Kite	Milvus migrans	S/> 1000
22	Western Marsh Harrier	Circus aeruginosus	S/N
23	Hen Harrier	Circus cyaneus	S/N
24	Montagu's Harrier	Circus pygargus	S/1
25	Pallid Harrier	Circus macrourus	S/N
26	Steppe Buzzard	Buteo buteo vulpinus	S/N
27	Common Buzzard	Buteo Buteo	S/N
28	Rough-legged Buzzard	Buteo lagopus	S/1
29	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	Accipiter nisus	S/N
30	Northern Goshawk	Accipiter gentilis	S/3
31	Levan't Sparrowhawk	Accipiter brevipes	S/> 3
32	Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus	S/N
33	Eurasian Coot	Fulica atra	S/N
34	Demoiselle Crane	Grus virgo	S/81
35	Kentish Plover	Charadrius alexandrines	S/1

36	Common Sandpiper	Actitis hypoleucos	S/2
37	Spotted Redshank	Tringa erythropus	S/2
38	Black-tailed Godwit	Limosa limosa	S/1
39	Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus	S/N
40	Slender-billed Gull	Chroicocephalus genei	S/4
41	Armenian Gull	Larus armenicus	S/N
42	Caspian Gull	Larus cachinnans	S/N
43	Little Gull	Hydrocoloeus minutus	S/N
44	Rock Dove	Columba livia	S/N
45	Feral Pigeon	Columba livia domestica	S/N
46	Stock Dove	Columba oenus	S/N
47	Common Wood Pigeon	Columba palumbus	S/N
48	Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto	S/3
49	Little Owl	Athene noctua	S/1
50	Eurasian Scops Owl	Otus scops	H/1
51	Eurasian Hoopoe	Upupa epops	S/N
52	Common Kingfisher	Alcedon atthis	S/1
53	Black Woodpecker	Dryocopus martius	H/> 1
54	European Green Woodpecker	Picus viridis	S/1
55	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocopos major	S/> 3
56	Middle Spotted Woodpecker	Leiopicus medius	S/N
57	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	Dryobates minor	S/N
58	Common Skylark	Alauda arvensis	H/N
59	Crested Lark	Galerida cristata	S/N
60	Greater Short-toed Lark	Calandrella brachydactyla	S/N
61	Lesser Short-toed Lark	Calandrella rufescens	S/N
62	Calandra Lark	Melanocorypha calandra	S/N
63	Common Swift	Apus apus	S/N
64	Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica	S/N
65	House Martin	Delichon urbicum	S/N
66	Tawny Pipit	Anthus campestris	S/> 6
67	Water Pipit	Anthus spinoletta	S/N
68	White Wagtail	Motacilla alba	S/N
69	Yellow Wagtail (various Sub SP)	Motacilla flava	S/N
70	Citrine Wagtail	Motacilla citreola	S/1
71	Grey Wagtail	Motacilla cinerea	S/3
72	White-throated Dipper	Cinclus cinclus	S/1
73	Dunnock	Prunella modularis	S/2
74	Alpine Accentor	Prunella collaris	S/2
75	European Robin	Erithacus rubecula	S/3
76	Thrush Nightingale	Luscinia luscinia	H/1
78	Common Redstart	Phoenicurus phoenicurus	S/N
79	Black Redstart	Phoenicurus ochruros	S/N
80	Güldenstädt's Redstart	Phoenicurus erythrogastrus	S/N
81	Northern Wheatear	Oenanthe oenanthe	S/N

82	Isabelline Wheatear	Oenanthe isabellina	S/N
83	Black-eared Wheatear	Oenanthe hispanica	S/2
84	Finsch's Wheatear	Oenanthe finschii	S/2
85	Whinchat	Saxicola rubetra	S/N
86	Common Stonechat	Saxicola torquatus	S/N
87	Common Stonechat (Eastern race)	Saxicola torquatus maurus	S/2
88	Song Thrush	Turdus philomelos	S/N
89	Mistle Thrush	Turdus viscivorus	S/N
90	Common Blackbird	Turdus merula	S/N
91	Ring Ouzel	Turdus torquatus	S/N
92	Blue Rock Thrush	Monticola solitaries	S/2
93	Blackcap	Sylvia articapilla	H/N
94	Common Whitethroat	Sylvia communis	S/1
95	Eastern Orphean Warbler	Sylvia crassirostris	S/1
96	Menetries's Warbler	Sylvia mystacea	S/2
97	Caucasian Chiffchaff	Bergzilpzalp lorenzii	S/ 3
98	Goldcrest	Regulus regulus	S/2
99	Firecrest	Regulus ignicapilla	S/1
100	Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes	S/1
101	Great Tit	Parus major	S/N
102	Coal Tit	Periparus ater	S/N
103	Eurasian Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus	S/2
104	Long-tailed Tit	Aegithalos caudatus	S/N
105	Eurasian Nuthatch	Sitta europaea	S/1
106	Krüper's Nuthatch	Sitta krueperi	H/1
107	Western Rock Nuthatch	Sitta neumayer	S/1
108	Wallcreeper	Tichodroma muraria	S/1
109	Common Magpie	Pica pica	S/N
110	Eurasian Jay	Garrulus glandarius	S/N
111	Red-billed Chough	Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax	S/N
112	Alpine Chough	Pyrrhocorax graculus	S/N
113	Hooded Crow	Corvus cornix	S/N
114	Common Raven	Corvus corax	S/N
115	Common Starling	Sturnus vulgaris	S/N
116	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	S/N
117	Spanish Sparrow	Passer hispaniolensis	S/N
118	Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs	S/N
119	Brambling	Fringilla montifringilla	S/N
120	Common Linnet	Linaria cannabina	S/N
121	Twite	Linaria flavirostris	S/N
122	European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis	S/N
123	European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris	H/1
124	Eurasian Siskin	Spinus spinus	S/N
125	Red-fronted Serin	Serinus pusillus	S/N
126	Eurasian Bullfinch	Pyrrhula pyrrhula	S/1

Hawfinch	Coccothraustes coccothraustes	S/1
Common Crossbill	Loxia curvirostra	S/1
Great Rosefinch	Carpodacus rubicilla	S/N
Ortolan Bunting	Emberiza hortulana	H/N
Pine Bunting	Emberiza leucocephalos	S/1
Corn Bunting	Emberiza calandra	S/N
Rock Bunting	Emberiza cia	S/3
	Common Crossbill Great Rosefinch Ortolan Bunting Pine Bunting Corn Bunting	Common CrossbillLoxia curvirostraGreat RosefinchCarpodacus rubicillaOrtolan BuntingEmberiza hortulanaPine BuntingEmberiza leucocephalosCorn BuntingEmberiza calandra

Other wildlife

1	Eastern Goat or East Caucasian Tur	Capra caucasica cylindricornis	S/>30
1	Eurasian Red Squirrel	Sciurus vulgaris	S/1
1 2	Greek Tortoise Caspian Turtle	Testudo graeca Mauremys caspica	S/1 S/1

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