

Kyrgyzstan, July – August 2019

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This report outlines a short but reasonably wide-ranging visit to Kyrgyzstan, a spectacular and bird-rich country but

one that is somewhat under-represented in terms of birding trip reports. We had a stopover here en-route back from Mongolia and found Kyrgyzstan to be even more impressive scenically than Mongolia, with an excellent range of top Central Asian montane and wetland birds. We also appreciated being able to rent a car and charge around on our own, stopping wherever we felt like and planning the route and locations ourselves, something that is not nearly so readily done in Mongolia, nor in neighbouring Kazakhstan. I have been lucky enough to visit both Uzbekistan and Kaz in recent years, including at nearly peak season for breeding birds (June and early July) but still found late summer birding in Kyrgyzstan to be exhilarating, to say the least.

Basic route We had 8 ½ days in total; having a spent a day in Bishkek visiting the city on the outbound journey, we didn't bother spending time there on the way back. Instead, the overall route was:

1 Ala Archa (half day) **2** Suusamir Valley **3** Song-Kul lake (two nights) **4** Tong, along the south side of Issyk-Kul, **5** Jyrgalan (2 nights) and finally **6** Balychky (north west edge of Issyk-Kul) before one night back in **7** Bishkek before taking a flight out early next morning. On the road, this was a neat loop of almost exactly 1000 miles.



Accommodation With one exception, all our accommodation was booked in advance via www.booking.com. July and August is high summer in Kyrgyzstan and, acting on local advice, we made sure to book this (and the rental car) well in advance. All places outlined below are marked on the navigation app Maps.me.

- **Jashylkent, between Bishkek and Ala Archa National Park** (see [here](#)). Very nice guesthouse, c30min drive out of Bishkek and within 15mins of the entrance gate to Ala Archa. The guesthouse is on the east side of the valley, surrounded by arable farmland and with a small dam and the river nearby. It is quite new (opened April 2019) but features on Maps.me, although note that the pin there is about 100m out (too far south) and on the wrong side of the track.
- **Sous Lodge** (see [here](#)). In the **Suusamir Valley**, c30mins drive below **Too Ashuu pass**. Basic ski lodge just off the main road; **rosefinches**, **Turkestan Shrikes** and **calcarata Citrine Wagtails** in the garden!
- **Nomad's Dream, Song-Kul** Unlike all other accommodation here, this site is not on www.booking.com but see [here](#) for some information. A friend in Bishkek booked this fantastic yurt camp, beautifully situated at 3000m on the south east corner of spectacular Song-Kul. Whilst there are several other places to stay in this area, this one is really well worth stopping at if you can get it booked. This is about as luxurious as yurt camping gets and, whilst not cheap, the food, friendly staff and comforts were as good as the location. Great lakeside birding within a few km or so.
- **Bel-Tam, Tong, south east side of Issyk-Kul** (see [here](#)) Friendly, low key yurt camp in arid badlands on south edge of Issyk-Kul. Some nice birding a short walk away and handy for Fairy Tale Canyon and, to a lesser extent, Salty Lake.
- **Alakol-Jyrgalan Guest House, Jyrgalan** (see [here](#)) About one hour east of Karakol, the last 12km on a gravel track and just on the edge of the attractive, rustic village of Jyrgalan, where the road essentially ends. A really comfy, friendly place with great food and even better walking starting right on the porch.
- **Tian-shan Guest House, Balykchy, north west side of Issyk-Kul** (see [here](#)) Small friendly guest house on the outskirts (east edge) of Balykchy and less than 100m from the shore of Issyk-Kul. We stopped here mainly to break the journey up between Jyrgalan and Bishkek, which was essential. A lot of the north side of Issyk-Kul is nothing too special but this was as good a place to stay as anywhere. Some nice birds in the lakeside trees and rather different, lakeside grassland habitat on the far west corner of the lake (about 14km away by road).

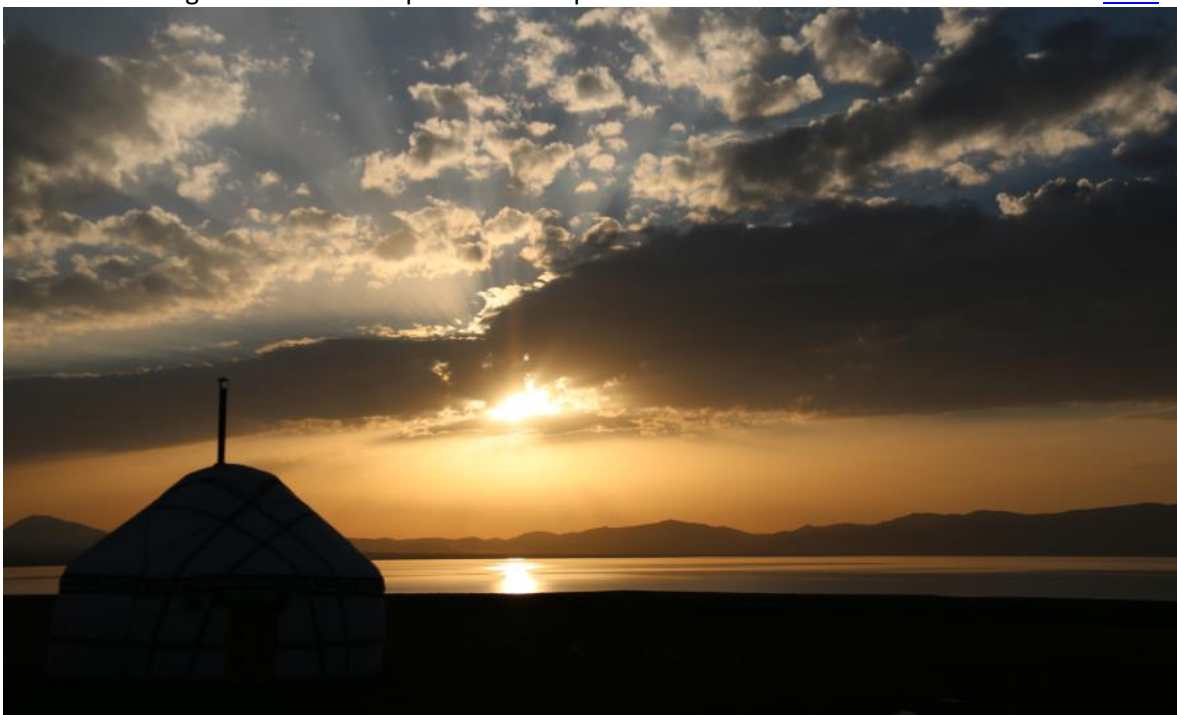
Getting around We rented a car from Travel Land Kyrgyzstan (see www.trvlland.com). This was easy and they do airport pick-ups, with a garage in nearby Bishkek. The company was friendly and well-organized, responding promptly to all emails. All that was necessary to rent was an International Driving License that I scanned and sent through in advance. The car was a well-maintained (but fairly high mileage) Nissan Pathfinder. Whilst not the cheapest car I have ever rented (560 USD for 9 days), there seemed to be very little market for renting smaller cars and, whilst a small car would have been ok on most of the roads we used, having something sturdier and high-clearance definitely made a lot of driving on gravel tracks to and from Song-Kul a lot more comfortable. Getting to Jyrgalan and Salty Lake, Issyk-Kul also necessitated much shorter sections (c12-15km each) on moderately rough gravel. The company only blotted their copybook on return of the car by deducting a small amount (c20 USD) for a few scratches we allegedly obtained on the road; given their prior presence (or otherwise) being debatable, this seemed somewhat petty. Once well away from Bishkek and into the hills, roads were quiet and navigation easy. Surprisingly, given that stopping traffic appears to be their main job, we had no run-ins with the police but did then find we had picked up a couple of tickets when the paperwork came through.

Weather and equipment We were very lucky to have excellent weather for pretty much the entire trip, with brilliant blue skies, strong sun and flower-rich meadows humming with bugs the norm. Even Song-Kul, which is abandoned early October to late May and is notorious for wild weather at any time of the year, was bathed in beautiful sunshine throughout. We had cloud and some showers on two afternoons but nothing substantial. Too-Ashuu and Song-Kul were cold at night and dawn; otherwise temperatures were very reasonable. Photography opportunities were quite good, and a small lens on a second body was a good idea to cope with scenery as well as birds. A telescope was vital for scanning Song-Kul, but probably optional elsewhere. I had a few calls and songs downloaded on my phone but these were hardly used; relatively little was singing (bar **Greenish Warblers**) although passerine activity was still fairly high – with many clueless juveniles – at sites such as Jyrgalan.

eBird checklists & sound recordings All observations were logged on eBird and links to the checklists made, some of which are illustrated with images taken, are tabulated below. Two short checklists from Bishkek, not listed below are viewable [here](#) and [here](#).

25th July	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jashylkent Guest House 	https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S58461191
26th July	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jashylkent Guest House Ala Archa NP M41 highway to Too Ashuu pass Suus Lodge 	https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S58461156 https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S58461172 https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S58461237 https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S58462493
27th July	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Too Ashuu pass Suus Lodge Journey from Suus Lodge to Song-Kul, via Suusamir valley / Kobuk Canyon / Kara Keche Nomad's Dream Yurt Camp, Song-Kul 	https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S58566830 https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S58566815 https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S58566888 and https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S58566958 https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S58566983
28th July	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Song-Kul (SW corner and surrounding areas) Hike into corrie south of Nomad's Dream 	https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S58566993 and https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S58567013 https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S58567059
29th July	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Song-Kul (SW corner and surrounding areas) Roadside pools on SW corner of Song-Kul Song-Kul to Kok-Jarti Canyon and on to E125/A365 A365 Reservoir viewpoint Salty Lake, Issyk-Kul 	https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S58567080 and https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S58567086 https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S58567107 https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S58567210 https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S58567229 https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S58567247
30th July	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bel-Tam Yurt Camp environs, Issyk-Kul Fairy Canyon Skazka Chong Jargilak river mouth, Issyk-Kul Jeti-Oguz valley 	https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S58567265 https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S58567298 https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S58567324 https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S58567362
31st July	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jyrgalan – hill above cemetery Jyrgalan – Turnaly-Kul hike Jyrgalan viewpoint 	https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S58582249 https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S58586671 https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S58590905
1st August	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Valley upstream from Jyrgalan Ochistika Lake (Karakol) Przhevalsky Museum (Karakol) Cholpon-Ata Petroglyphs 	https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S58607138 https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S58615051 https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S58615077 https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S58615130
2nd August	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Balykchy Lakeside Konorchek Canyon 	https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S58686274 and https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S58686341 https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S58686589

A series of sound recordings made on this trip have been uploaded to Xeno-canto and can be accessed [here](#).



Birding Sites

1. **Bishkek** Actually, this wasn't really a birding site. In common with most central Asian cities in my experience, at least in summer, Bishkek combined a nice climate with leafy parks, over-the-top Soviet buildings in faux grandeur above masses of otherwise very ugly concrete and very few birds. Having said that, **Alpine Swift** were abundant and easy to see (very scarce everywhere else) and we noted **Shikra** over the café we tried at dusk on the last evening. We had a nice enough walk to and around Osh Bazaar but why bother with much of this when even from downtown you can see the summoning glaciers of the Tien Shan through the haze?
2. **Ala Archa National Park** This great site would be an easy 45min drive or so from downtown Bishkek. Having the afternoon / evening drive to the Suusamir valley ahead, we settled for Ala Archa lite, with 6hrs on the central valley trail. It was soon pretty hot and, being late summer, birds were not numerous, although the habitat, flowery meadows and, especially, the views, were sublime. The whole place had a very similar feel to (the relatively nearby) Ile-Alatau above Almaty, although getting to the highest altitudes would have required a lot more time and hard graft. Birding was about quality, not quantity. We found two **Ibisbills** on the river, not long after the shingle starts. They were very wary and tucked away, so it was necessary to wade – cautiously – across the fast flowing stream onto the boulders to search. Quite a bird for the first morning, and bird of the trip, up until the last morning at Jyrgalan... The other main find at Ala Archa was **Rufous-naped Tit** (also not seen elsewhere); three were singing and showing well in the tall, shady forests not far after the entrance. **Greenish Warblers** (abundant in any Kyrgyz forests) were singing strongly, as they continued to do all week. **Blue Whistling-Thrush** proved easy along the river and, despite being in heavy moult and hence extremely reticent, **Black-throated Accentors** reached two.

Prior to visiting Ala Archa we spent the previous late afternoon at Jashylkent, no more than 15mins from the gate. The hot, dry fields and scrub were weren't too productive in the evening, although **Roller** was abundant, groups of Grey-headed Goldfinch were about and I found **Red-rumped Swallow** and two **Azure Tits** (even, very faint yellowish hue on the underside seemingly making them *tianshanicus* rather than true *flavipectus*). Early next morning I eked out **Nightingale** and **Red-headed Bunting**.

3. **Too-Ashuu Pass** Driving the west from Bishkek, the main 'road', if that is what you'd call it, was grim with plenty of aggressive truck drivers, limited tar and loads of dust. It was a real relief to turn south just before Kalininskoye and finally break free from mayhem for the next eight days. Too Ashuu pass towers above the Suusamir valley at c3300m and, after a short evening stop, I reckoned it looked good enough for a return at dawn next morning, looking in the canyon by the north side of the tunnel. This was ok, but not perhaps as good as it looked. The most notable species were **Hill Pigeon**, a family of **Altai Accentors** and plenty of **Plain Mountain-Finches**. Actually more memorable was a short stop in some lush juniper-*Delphinium* (?) meadows on the descent back to Suus Lodge which proved full of breeding **Common Rosefinches** and **Citrine Wagtails**. It was the sort of place I have seen Himalayan Ruby throat in Kaz and Tibet but the only chat I kicked up turned out to be, unexpectedly, a **Bluethroat**.
4. **Suusamir Valley and journey to Song-Kul via Kobuk Canyon and Kara Keche** We spent most of one day getting to Song-Kul from Suus Lodge; it was a drive of 9 hours in all, but that included many, many stops. The landscape was superb, and very varied – lush, grassy upland meadows of the Suusamir valley falling into the spectacular and very fast-flowing Kokomen river which has carved out an amazing gorge. After some welcome tar between Kyzyl-Oi and Chaek, it was back onto gravel to, eventually, pass Kara Keche coal mines and then climb up onto the plateau that led to the south-west of Song-Kul. The gravel roads were pretty good and, whilst a 4WD with high clearance was handy, it would have been possible, if uncomfortable, to do this in a normal saloon car. The route, suggested to me by a friend and fairly obvious on a map I had, was also pinpointed without difficulty by Maps.me. Birding was fairly incidental along the way but included a few good species. In the Suusamir valley and into Kokomen we had scattered **Rosy Starling** flocks, **Roller**, **European Bee-eaters**, **Lesser Grey** and **Turkestan**

Shrikes and **Citrine Wagtails** (latter two species also very obvious in the garden of Suus Lodge), a **Blue Whistling-Thrush** and a few **Pale Martins**, with a roadside colony on a low, dry cliff apparently this species. The run to Kara Keche gave repeated sightings of **Golden Eagle**, including an adult feeding two juveniles just short of the mines and the ascent soon afterwards yielded **Plain Mountain-Finch** and my only Kyrgyz **Brown Accentor**. After that, the rolling upland grasslands of the Song-Kul area began, with **Black Vulture** and **Lammergeier** soon appearing and large flocks of corvids including 150 **Red-billed Chough**.

5. **Song-Kul** This vast, eerie high altitude (3000m) lake has a decidedly Mongolian feel, with endless grasslands all around, dotted grazing mammals and yurt camps, and distant corries and ridges. It is also great for wetland birds, with much (perhaps all) of the lake shore undoubtedly worth a look. However, much is relatively inaccessible without a very long walk, and no guarantee of being able to get anywhere near the true shoreline, due to interminable wet pools and flushes. At least compared to anywhere we passed along the south shore, the far south-west corner has the advantage of the gravel tracks skirting pretty close to the lakeside and a short walk, and a bit of dodging small pools got me to the true shoreline in several places. Over two mornings, I covered the area up to c6-7km west and northwest of Nomad's Dream yurt camp, finding a very nice range of species. These included 9 species of wildfowl, including many **Garganey** and a few **Red-crested Pochard** with young, and three species of **grebe**, several pairs of **Slavonian** with chicks being the main surprise. 13 species of wader included over 60 **Temminck's Stints** and two **Terek Sandpipers**; only **Redshank** were still obvious as breeders but I finally found eight **Lesser Sandplover**, including an agitated male and fledged juveniles, on the second morning. Other species included **Black Vulture**, **Long-legged Buzzard** and **Demoiselle Cranes**. The only big gulls evident were distant **Caspians**; there was no sign of **Pallas's**. Passerines were also scarce but a 5 hour afternoon walk up to the corrie directly south of Nomad's Dream eventually produced **Black Redstarts**, **Altai Accentor** and even a young male **Güldenstädt's Redstart**, right amongst the scree field and residual ice patches. Views of **Lammergeiers** up here were quite sensational, as were the flowery slopes liberally littered in orange fritillaries.



6. **Journey from Song-Kul to E125/A365** If the journey to Song-Kul was from the west was pretty damn good, the first half of the journey eastwards leaving the lake was nothing less than totally epic. After travelling along the south shore, we picked up the Song-Kul river, flowing south-southeast and followed it, first over rocky hills and then up to, and eventually down, an amazing series of switch-backs before finally dropping to the river. After c10km following this we reached Kok-Jarti canyon, which would give Yosemite itself a run for its money (but seemed nothing out of the ordinary in Kyrgyzstan). Having spent way too long on this part of the journey, we then had to pick up the pace, travelling over (relatively) boring arid hills and dry grasslands before finally hitting the north / south tarred and turning north towards Kochkor. Again, the unpaved road was bearable and Maps.me made navigation easy. **White-winged Snowfinch** were suddenly obvious not long after we turned away from the lake, as was **Common Rock Thrush**. Things got better still once we reached the switchbacks; scanning from the top here looked plausible for Himalayan Snowcock. Not this time however, but **Sulphur-bellied Warbler** in the ruts on the roadside verge by the first bend was very good indeed, and was soon followed by the likes **Siberian Stonechat**, a family of **Twite** and then **Red-fronted Serin** and **Red-mantled Rosefinch** on the way down. Kok-Jarti, on a short walk, produced a group of **Himalayan Griffons** and a few **Blue Whistling-Thrush** and would definitely have further rewarded rather more time than we had.

7. **Issyk-Kul, southern shore – Salty Lake, Bel Tam & Fairy Tale Canyon** The vast lake of Issyk-Kul is surrounded by surprisingly arid, rocky badlands with tall trees limited to incoming watercourses. This area produced a rather



different selection of species than seen elsewhere in Kyrgyzstan. We first had a late afternoon look at the rather smelly and touristy Salty Lake, some 12km along a bumpy track off the highway. There was a handful of close migrant **waders** in the less disturbed corners of the lake, including both **Terek Sandpiper** and **Temminck's Stint**, with recently fledged **Turkestan Shrikes** (soon to become common everywhere in the environs of Issyk-Kul). Best on the track down were **Rufous Turtle-Dove**, many **Pied Wheatears**, **Common Rock Thrush** and **White-crowned Penduline-Tits** with briefly seen juvenile **buntings** being probably **Grey-necked**. Habitat along the valley down was lush and green, and rather more interesting than that round the actual Salty Lake; it would surely produce the goods early morning.

Walking out of Bel-Tam Yurt Camp early next morning was, eventually, very productive. A small garden and orchard yielded **Indian Golden Oriole** (probably common but very hard to see well enough to confirm from Eurasian), a family of **Pied Wheatears**, several **Sykes's Warblers** and a trio of apparent **Hume's Whitethroats**, which were sort of convincing to the eye... Also interesting was both **Citrine Wagtail** and **Greenish Warbler**, clearly migrants, or at least birds undergoing post-fledging dispersal.

Further on at Fairy Tale Canyon, the rock formations were (much) better than the birds, although I finally saw a few **Grey-necked Buntings** and **Turkestan Shrike** families were blatant. Heading east, Chong-Jargilak river mouth was worth a stop with, for example, **Green Sandpiper** and at least three **Common Cuckoos** in the flooded poplars.

8. **Jeti-Oguz** We spent a rather damp afternoon here, en-route between Issyk-Kul and Jyrgalan. This well-known site is a pretty fast, tarred run south from the highway. The scenery is quite fantastic and, whilst not obvious at first, there is a gravel track running just before the sanatorium and behind the grubby shops towards Valley of the Flowers. The sanatorium garden was a bit limited but the gravel track rapidly became a superb walk along a fast flowing stream lined by coniferous forests, eventually opening up to what I presume was Valley of the Flowers. **Greenish Warbler** were abundant here, and we found a **whistling-thrush** nest. The main event was a nice male **Blue-capped Redstart**.

9. **Jyrgalan** We spent two nights in Jyrgalan, in a friendly guest house on the edge of the village with plenty of great birds a stone's throw away up the low hill alongside. Early morning on the tracks up the slope and the following morning yomping up the main river valley produced plenty of birds, despite it clearly being in the middle of late summer blues. Notables included both **Eversmann's** and **Blue-capped Redstarts** fairly obvious (and with juveniles), a **Black-throated Accentor** giving more than acceptable views, **White-winged Grosbeaks** (in the berry bushes), **Plain Mountain-Finch** and groups of **Red-fronted Serin**. All of this was well and truly aced on the last morning, however, when I finally found a pair of **Himalayan Rubythroats** on the slope above the main river some way upstream of the village. The birds were feeding young, possibly a second brood, and, as such gave sensational views for well over 30mins as they openly perched on juniper snags. Having checked quite a lot of juniper patches, I'd pretty much given up on rubythroats before finding them much lower down than expected. Finally, **leucogaster White-throated Dipper**, including juveniles, were obvious on the river near the village.



We spent most of our full day in Jyrgalan hiking the loop up to and round Turnaly-Kul, reaching nearly 3000m over 17km and getting into a fair bit of treeline juniper. Most other well-marked hiking routes are much further and, in a day, would involve retracing one's outward steps. Species included multiple **Nutcrackers**, more **Eversmann's Redstarts**, several very close **Songar Tits** by the lake and a couple of **Red-mantled Rosefinch** males showing very well. A

reasonable kick through the juniper patches failed to produce a rubythroat or tit-warbler but, at least in certain patches, breeding **Turkestan Shrikes**, in very different habitat to those around Issyk-Kul, were common. A family of tricky *Buteo* overhead matched **Steppe Buzzard** rather more closely than Long-legged.



10. Karakol area (Ochistika Lake) We merely skirted round the edge of Karakol but, thanks to (what turned out to be – we were cursing them at the time) some lucky roadworks on the highway heading north out of town we had to take the long way round and ended navigating along the bumpy and dusty lanes to the west of the highway. This took us pretty close past some tidy small lakes and, eventually, by Ochistika Lake which was half drained and, consequently full of waterbirds. These included, amongst many dabblers, single **Bar-headed** and **Greylag Geese** (origin of former – at least – somewhat uncertain) and **Ferruginous Duck**. **Black-necked Grebe** was also present and **waders** amongst many **Lapwings** included 12 **Green Sandpipers**. Three **Long-legged Buzzards** were a nice comparison to the **Steppes** seen the day before and I also had **Rufous Turtle-Doves** and a couple of **Cetti's Warblers**. Nearby is the Prezhevsky Museum which, much to our surprise, was really rather good and well worth a stop. His lieutenants, Messers Kozlov and Roborovski feature as well, and having seen their mega namesake birds in eastern Tibet, this added to the general interest.

11. Balykchy area Balykchy is a bit of long, although fairly easy, slog all along the north side of Issyk-Kul and we spent most of afternoon completing it. The road on this side generally runs rather more distantly from the lake compared to the south shore and the landscape, whilst not bad at all, is not quite so impressive. We had a stop at Cholpon-Ata Petroglyphs which was interesting enough before moving onto Balykchy. Our guesthouse on the east edge of town was right by the lake, handy for a swim next morning and the lakeshore had plenty of **Indian Golden Oriole**, **Turkestan Shrikes** and a **Barred Warbler**. I also made a short visit to the grasslands at the far west end of the lake, reached by driving through Balykchy and turning south. It was not possible to get easily to the marshy lakeshore from here but a track through the dry fields produced a few different species. A **Grasshopper Warbler**, popping out on top of a bush was a nice surprise; there were also several **Marsh Harriers** and a few tricky **pipits** that, somewhat unexpectedly, more resembled **Richard's** than Tawny. Images [here](#) and comments welcome.

12. Konorchek Canyon This was the final stop of our Kyrgyzstan trip, fitting in a few hours en-route to Bishkek going down the valley from Issyk-Kul. There were very few other places to easily stop along the busy road, but turning off here and crossing the railway line soon got us into a spectacularly steep-sided dry valley that was well worth a walk. The canyon got narrower and narrower and, although birds weren't common, a few interesting species were present. These included **Chukar**, **Blue Rock Thrush** and **Rock Bunting**, all trip firsts, but also single **Greenish** and **Blyth's Reed Warblers**, both clearly migrants. Best of all were several close and (surprisingly) convincing **Hume's Whitethroats**, clearly still on their breeding grounds. I also suspected Eastern Rock Nuthatch on call not far in from the railway line, but couldn't locate it on the massive cliffs. Still, I could live with that...



Acknowledgements

Many thanks to our good friend Maxim Koshkin who first got us thinking about a visit to Kyrgyzstan in autumn 2018 and then helped out with logistics and bookings for the trip. He also joined us for the morning in Ala Archa, so making Ibisbill significantly more straightforward!