Birding Georgia
19 - 27 April 2019

By Julia WITTMANN, Andreas EBERT and Christoph MONING
Introduction

Our main reason to travel to Georgia was to see the avian specialties of the Caucasus. Caucasian Snowcock, Caucasian Grouse, Güldenstädt’s Redstart and Great Rosefinch are the big four of the mountains. But when we were there we found out that there is a lot more to see.

While planning a trip to Georgia it is well worthwhile to include Armenia into a birding itinerary. Birds like White-throated Robin and Radde’s Accentor can be found there.

We stayed in Stepantsminda (formerly called Kazbegi) for five nights. Afterwards we stayed in Tbilisi and Udabno for the birds of the steppe.

We ended up with a total of 170 bird species and the impressions of an amazing landscape.

We travelled around by a rented car (Hertz) which worked very well, although driving habits in Georgia are well more chaotic compared to central European conditions. A high clearance vehicle was important in the steppe areas. A four wheel drive was not essential for the itinerary that we travelled.

STEPANZMINDA: SURROUNDED BY MOUNTAINS - BIRDING AT HIGH ALTITUDE

We stayed at Homestay Lela and Mari, which supported clean and comfortable accommodation as well as excellent food. There were many Ring Ouzels at their Sorbus trees which was a show.

Strategy: Visiting the Stepantsminda area in April gives you an excellent chance to see Caucasian Snowcock, Caucasian Grouse, Güldenstädt’s Redstart as well as Great Rosefinches in the surroundings of the town. At this time of the year you don’t have to hike far to see these species. These species can be much harder to get from May onwards. A good trade off strategy might be to come between 20 April and 10 May, so you would have a fair chance to see migrating species like Common Rock Thrush, Mountain Chiffchaff or Green Warbler more likely.

Normally birdwatchers stay for three nights in Stepantsminda (Kazbegi). We recommend to stay at least three to four nights, because if the weather is bad you might not see the Grouse. The Grouse and the Snowcock are not available at close distance. You can only observe them at distance with a scope. If the weather is cloudy and foggy you won’t see anything.

We only had three mornings out of six, in which it
was possible to see the birds. There are two places where you can observe Caucasian Snowcock as well as Caucasian Grouse displaying: **42.658030, 44.661776** and **42.652077, 44.655535**. Early morning is good but the activity goes on until 9:00 or 10:00 o’clock. We even observed displaying grouse in the evening before it was getting dark. Bad weather conditions will give you a good chance to see Great Rosefinches as well as Gülkenstädt’s Redstarts down in the valley. But bring warm clothes!

In the Caucasus it can still be very cold in mid April and you have to expect an onset of winter at the end of April. Two days before we arrived in Tbilisi, heavy snowfall was reported in Stepanzinda and the road was closed. Luckily, the road was open again when we passed. We heard from other birders that they had to wait for one day, before they could drive to Stepanzinda. As the weather was still bad the next days and there were deep clouds over the mountains, some birdwatchers could only hear the snowcocks and they even missed the Caucasian Grouse which display silently.

We found the following birding places to be especially recommendable:

**Sea buckthorn thickets east of Stepanzinda:**
This place is a good place to start at early morning. Park [here](#) and walk the track to the south until you reach the end of the track after approximately 200m at the button of a gravel field. Scan the slopes above and mainly to your right. Caucasian Grouse were displaying on the grassy parts of the slope and you stay a fair chance of at least hearing Caucasian Snowcocks. The sea buckhorn thickets had Ring Ouzels and a few Gülkenstädt’s Redstarts. Because of the heavy snowfall all the birds were back in the valley and there was a huge flock of Great Rosefinches with 60 birds.

**Mount Kuro Slopes:**
East of Stepanzinda a road leads to a small chapel named Ioane Natlismcemeli. You can park [there](#) and walk 100 m up the slope until you have great view of the western slopes of Mount Kuro and on clear days towards Mount Kasbek too. By scanning the slopes with a scope you stay an excellent chance of seeing Caucasian Snowcocks as well as Caucasian Grouse. You certainly will hear the snowcocks.

**Terek valley:**
Early arriving Ring Ouzels were concentrated around the Sorbus trees in Stepanzinda.

From [here](#) you want to scan the upper slopes east of Stepanzinda. Caucasian Grouse were displaying in the area within the red circle.

Great Rosefinches love the sea buckthorn thickets around Stepanzinda.

Watching a male Great Rosefinch is a show.
This proofed to be one of our favourite spots. You could easily spend half a day or more in the area. To get there park [here](#) or at a [recently constructed dam](#) (you cannot see it on Google Maps as the satellite images are old). Here you can cross the river. When you cross the dam, you should check the walls for Wallcreepers. We counted seven of them there and sometimes you can get very close to them. Migrating wagtails as well as displaying Common Sandpipers showed up here as well. 

Follow the track downwards towards the valley. Walk along the astern side of the valley until you find an [area of sea buckthorn bushes](#) adjacent to pastures. In the bushes further on there was a huge flock of Güldenstädt’s Redstarts, we counted about 40 (!!) birds. Great Rosefinches were also present. There were huge flocks of Alpine Choughs and Red-billed Choughs as well. You can walk a few kilometres down the valley till the end of the road and find Twites, Horned Larks and flocks of Red-fronted Serins here. This place and all of the Stepantsminda area is an excellent spot to watch raptor migration. **On one day** we saw over 20 species of raptors including 1100 Steppe Buzzards migrating north, together with Western Marsh, Pallid and nearly 100 Montagu’s Harriers, a Levant Sparrowhawk, many Eurasian Sparrowhawks, a few Northern Goshawks, 120 Black Kites, a White-tailed Eagle, a Red-footed Falcon, a few Peregrine Falcons, Lesser Spotted, Stepe and a Booted Eagle. Bearded, Black and Griffon Vultures as well as a Golden Eagle were soaring along the slopes. A nice surprise was a migrating flock of about 70 Demoiselle Cranes.

**Chkheri River Valley:**
Watch out for migrating song birds all over the valley. For example you can check the bushes and rocks for migrating species along [this road](#): 42.665187, 44.637421. We found Ortolan Bunting, Woodlark, Wagtails, Swallows and Swifts.

**Gergeti Trinity Church:**
This famous [church](#) is a good birding spot maybe later in the year. We did not find much, except quiet a few migrating raptors. But this spot is a starting point to walk further up later in the year when the typical target species are moving at higher altitudes. The road to the church is basically well maintained, however there is one small stretch that is only passable by a four wheel drive vehicle. This stretch is left over in a rough condition probably in order to maintain the local business of taxi transportation. Thus it is recommended to park [below](#) this stretch. Turning at
the stretch is very tight. Later in the year the woods around are a good spot for Green Warbler and Mountain Chiffchaff.

Southeast of Stepanzminda:
There is an electric substation at the southern margin of Stepanzminda and east of there are pastures and more sea buckthorn bushes. It is supposedly a good area for migrating birds and Great Rosefinches at bad weather conditions. At the bottom of the pastures opposite the main road there are some overgrown ponds. We found a Purple Heron and a lot of Black Kites roosting in the trees as there is a garbage dump next to the river.

Between Ashkoti and Sno:
Between these villages is a nice stretch of sea buckthorn bushes, pastures and a river. Coming from the north enter here and exit here. We found Twite, Horned Larks and Common Redstarts here. Bearded Vulture was soaring above.

Arsha:
There is a small rubbish dump at Arsha that, in case of carcasses being dumped, attracts a lot of vultures, mainly Griffon Vultures but also Bearded Vultures and a few eagles. You can enter a track behind the recommendable restaurant Tsanareti.

Russo-Georgian Friendship Monument:
On the way up or down between Stepanzminda and Tbilisi you can stop at the Russo-Georgian Friendship Monument. Here alpine species like Twites, Horned Larks, Red-billed Choughs and Alpine Accentors can get very close. Watch out for migrating raptors there as well.

View Point at Sakuriani:
Above the serpentines leading to Sakuriani you will pass a viewpoint. This was good for migrating raptors.

Ananuri Fortress:
We stopped at Ananuri Fortress. It is a well known stop-over spot for migrating birds. We found Mountain Chiffchaffs and the cuacasian race of Black Redstart, next to Common Redstarts and Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers.
A few kilometres further towards Tbilisi around some cafés there is a known breeding location for Semi-collared Flycatchers in the old beech trees around. However the birds had unfortunately not returned from there wintering grounds yet.

TBILISI - BIRDING IN THE CITY - A MIGRA-
The Terek river valley was one of our favourite birding spots.

A confiding Alpine Accentor at the Russo-Georgian Friendship Monument.

Huge Chough flocks are a typical feature of the Stepanzminda area.

A Twite of the brevirostris subspecies.

Bearded Vultures are a regular sighting in the Stepanzminda area.
The sentinel Gergeti Trinity Church has been built high above Stepanzminda.

Northern Wheatears started to occupy their territories.

A proud male Black Redstart of the ochruros subspecies.

This female Bluethroat showed its mouse-like habits several days at the Terek river valley.

Raven are common around Stepanzminda.

We regularly found small flocks of Red-fronted Serins.

This immature Steppe Eagle was one of many that we saw.

Northern Wheatears started to occupy their territories.
The mighty Kasbek rising 5047 m into the early morning sky, dwarfing the Gergeti Trinity Church below.

Horned Larks of the penicillata subspecies moved around in flocks.

Water Pipits of the coutelli subspecies are very common around Stepanzminda.

Large concentrations of Güldenstädt’s Redstarts are a feature of bad weather conditions in early spring around Stepanzminda, like here at the Terek river valley.
Lush forest scenery at the Ananuri Fortress.

Variable Toads (Bufoates variabilis) where displaying during daylight north of Sno.

Common Redstarts of the samamiscus subspecies feature a very different song compared to their central European congeners.

Mistle Thrushes joined the other thrushes at the Sorbus trees in Stepanzminda.

Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers showed nicely at Ananuri Fortress.

michalowskii is the subspecies of the Coal Tit in Georgia.

Mountain Chiffchaffs did not arrive at their breeding grounds yet but hung around at lower altitudes.

Common Redstarts of the samamiscus subspecies feature a very different song compared to their central European congeners.
TION STOPOVER FOR NICE BIRDS

In Tbilisi we visited the Botanical Garden for Semi-collared Flycatchers, as a few had been reported some days ago. We had no luck though. However we found Red-breasted Flycatchers here. White-throated Dippers were feeding their fledglings, which was very nice to observe. Lake Lisi and Green Zone to the north-west of Tbilisi is said to be another good spot for Semi-collared Flycatchers.

We tried to find the Krüper’s Nuthatch in Tbilisi as well, but had no luck as well. After our trip we found out that the place to look for the nuthatch is in the pine forest near Kiketi.

UDABNO AND DAVID GAREJI MONASTERY COMPLEX - BIRDING IN THE STEPPE

**Strategy:** As we concentrated on the area around Stepantsminda we had just a few days to spend in the steppe areas that stretch out in the south and the east of Georgia. Better steppe areas can be found at the Chacuna Managed Reserve in the east where an extra permit is needed and also three days or more are needed to do the area justice. Basically there are three key sites south of Tbilisi that can easily be covered in one very long or better two days. These are Jandari Lake and David Gareji Monastery both directly at the border to Azerbaijan, and Kapataze and Jikurebi (Sakhare) Lakes to the north-west of Udabno. Udabno offers the only accommodation opportunities and restaurants in the area. If you decide to travel from Jandari Lake to David Gareji Monastery you will need at least a high clearance vehicle as there are some rough stretches involved.

Coming from Tbilisi we crossed the Kura river at Rustawi, where we checked the river banks for birds as this is said to be a good spot for birds like Pygmy Cormorant which we did not see. We then moved on to Jandari Lake and parked at the lake shore. At the lake we saw some Armenian Gulls, Slender-billed Gulls, Gull-billed Terns, Whiskered and Black Terns and some nice waders and ducks. On our way there we found some Common Cranes here. Demoiselle Crane is regular in the area too, at least on migration.
We checked the areas further to the west and had great views of a Lesser Spotted Eagle and Imperial Eagles here.

After that we drove towards David Gareja monastery via this dirt road. The road is not in the best condition but only few cars use this road and you can stop whenever you like and watch birds or the beautiful landscape. Highlights here included displaying Isabelline Wheatears, pairs of Black-eared Wheatears, singing Eastern Orphean Warblers here, Tawny Pipits and Calandra Larks. Greater Short-toed Larks, Eurasian Hoopoes and Little Owls were common.

We reached David Gareja monastery and parked here. On a nearby electrical substation Rock Sparrows were singing. The monastery itself had more Rock Sparrows, Black-eared Wheatears and nests of Western Rock Nuthatches. We then walked through the woody area above the monastery by following the path behind the monastery all the way up the hill to the border to Azerbaijan (approximately 1-2 km). In the bushes on the way Green Warblers were singing and we found a lot of roosting Red-breasted Flycatchers. Ortolan Buntings and Eastern Orphean Warblers were singing. A Blue Rock Thrush perched on some nearby rocks. At the border to Azerbaijan we saw Western Rock Nuthatches, Blue Rock Thrushes, Pied Wheatears and Chukars.

From here we drove to our accommodation in Udabno and on the way we saw some Western Yellow Wagtails, a Woodchat Shrike, close-up views of Corn Buntings, Rock Sparrows and a Pied Wheatear.
Early morning we found Little Owls and a lot of Chukars along the road.

On our way back to Tbilisi we stopped at the Jikurebi Lake, where we found some nice waders and on the cow pasture next to the lake a nice flock of Western Yellow Wagtails of different subspecies. A male of the *lutea* subspecies showed up in full breeding plumage next to a Red-throated Pipit also in breeding plumage. While checking the bushes and trees along the road for roosting birds we found a Merlin, over 40 Red-breasted Flycatchers some Green Warblers and a flock of 36 Ortolan Buntings. Most of them were in the long and broad hedgerow the north-west of the lake.

Green Warblers just arrived by end of April.

Black-eared Wheatears are common in southern Georgia.

A female Black-eared Wheatear.

A singing Rock Sparrow showing its yellow throat patch.

Red-throated Flycatchers were amazingly numerous.

Corn Buntings are very common in the steppe landscapes.

Long-legged Buzzards showed up from time to time.
..as are Greater Short-toed Larks.

Calandra Larks are common in the steppes.

This male Western Yellow Wagtail of the subspecies lutea was a nice find.

We found Tawny Pipits regularly in the steppes of southern Georgia.

Isabelline Wheatears were showing their display flight.

A migrating Lesser Spotted Eagle.

The rocky ridge near the David Gareji Monastery at the border to Azerbaijan. Western Rock Nuthatches were singing here.
Eurasian Hoopoes showed up regularly.

Chukars were most active during early morning.

We found Ortolan Buntings singing and roosting.

Attractive as always - A male Barn Swallow

Crested Larks are common in the steppes.

A Common Starling in breeding temper.

The vast steppes around Udabno.
A female Wreathed Hornbill at Khao Yai

Mount Kasbek and the Gergeti Trinity Church