



TRIP REPORT

Summer Voyage to Georgia

A private birdwatching tour
From 26th of August to 2nd of September 2023



Eurasian Scops Owl by Alejandro

Report completed by Alexander Rukhaia

INTRODUCTION

This report is not compiled in a traditional style like the others. Usually my reports contain a description of each day separately and a checklist of birds and other wildlife attached at the end of the document, but this time I will limit myself to a short story and an overview of the overall picture with the main events and observations, as well as a photo collage... saving time for both readers and me 😊

This tour was organized literally in only one week based on a last-minute inquiry. According to the program, the tour was supposed to start on the morning of August 25th, but my guests arrive in Tbilisi 24 hours late. The fact is that their plane delayed departure due to non-flying weather in Madrid, and then due to strong winds and turbulence, it was not possible to land in Munich, where they would dock with the next flight to Tbilisi, and the plane was sent to Vienna. After a grueling day, including all the chaotic nature of this situation, at night of the same day, my Spanish guests are put on a flight to Warsaw, and from there to Tbilisi. In short, a complete kick-ass.

Fortunately, there were no such complications on the way back, except for the situation when their airline, which is no one else but famous Lufthansa, deleted return tickets from the system without prior warning. We had to solve the issue by phone during the tour, which took my guests almost half a day. As a result, everything was sorted out, and the tickets were restored on the system, but the very fact that such an incident took place inspires to some extent distrust of the future.

Because of the above situation, of course, we had to adjust the itinerary, but fortunately this did not entail significant changes in the overall results. Instead of the planned three, we spent two nights in Stepantsminda, and since the weather conditions were good, this was quite enough for the planned activities and even more. The rest of the program remained unchanged.



Alejandro and Kazbegi glacier by Lucia

SUMMARY

At 5 am on August 26th, my guests (Alejandro and Lucia) land in Tbilisi. At the meeting, it was obvious that they were very tired, so we cut out from the program a visit to the pine forest almost along the way of our route not far from the capital, where we were supposed to see Krüper's Nuthatches, and from the airport we head straight towards the Greater Caucasus. As it turned out later, my guests already had the honor to get acquainted with nuthatches on the island of Lesbos, so without much sympathy - the loss is not great.

The next two days we spent exploring the Kazbegi. Basically, the surroundings of the alpine town of Stepantsminda with all the adjacent valleys and gorges in the neighborhood. The weather conditions were excellent. It was quite hot during the day, so there was a complete calm for a while, but in the mornings and evenings it was quite cool, as if the mountains reminded us where we were.

In the morning, before breakfast, we traditionally spent a couple of hours scanning the neighboring slopes in the hope of spotting the famous mountain chickens, meaning Caucasian Grouse and Caucasian Snowcock, and then at least a couple more hours in the evening. It's hard to say exactly how many hours we spent processing these rocky slopes and gorges, but of course it became our main occupation. On the first morning, after hard work, we managed to find only three **Caucasian Grouse**, but it was unrealistically high and distant, and there was not even the slightest vocal sign from Caucasian Snowcocks. We came to the conclusion that they were not where we were looking for. During these days and hours, we have stumbled upon same flocks of **East Caucasian Tur**s probably already hundreds of times, but **Golden Eagle** on the contrary was seen only once from afar, while Bearded Vulture has not been seen at all these days. Maybe they are in the neighboring region, to the south of here, where tens of thousands of sheep graze on summer mountain pastures.

From the point of view of passerine birds, compared to the spring season, but also in view of the fact this is the migration period, it was quite scarce - not a single Mountain Chiffchaff, Dunnock, or any others around the town, but on the other hand, **Green Warblers**, **Red-fronted Serins** and other common species were abundant or easy to find. From time to time **Ring Ouzels** and **Black Redstarts** were also shown, and **White-throated Dippers** were awesome at the river reservoir near the village of Sno. We did not observe the migration of birds of prey as such these days, but **European Bee-eaters** were flying high above us constantly, almost non-stop. Of other migratory birds, **Red-breasted Flycatchers** can also be noted. There were a lot of them in almost all woodland zones, very active, but mostly it was sonographic, rather than visual observation.

On the last evening, after another unsuccessful quest for Caucasian Snowcocks, we had the idea to make a morning hike up towards the Kazbegi glacier. It was the only chance, but the chances were really good to see the birds. The only obstacle was that in the morning we had to go to eastern Georgia, so this hike greatly changed the logistics, but the Snowcocks are worth such an adventure. Early in the morning, at about 5 am we left the hotel. At about 5:30 am we were already overcoming the first slope, and at about 10:30 am, after several breaks along the way, we were already comfortably sitting on boulders at an altitude of 3000 meters and enjoying the beautiful views of **Caucasian Snowcocks**. We started to hear them while having reached about 2500 meters, but say for the completeness of satisfaction we had to reach 3000, and this diligent hike was definitely worth it.

On the way up, we were accompanied by a local four-legged friend. At some point he managed to flush a pair of **Caucasian Grouse** from the rhododendrons, and at the very beginning of the journey, several **Mountain Chiffchaffs** and **Green Warblers** were frolicking in the forest patch. The boulder fields along the way, especially on the higher slopes, were dotted with **Black Redstarts**, **Northern Wheatears** and **Water Pipits**. Even a few **Griffon Vultures**, were also here, maneuvering over the gorge. We can say that the morning turned out to be very productive, not to mention the mountain landscapes and of course the mountain tan through all the sewn creams. Without this excursion, our tour would definitely not be complete.

In short, after tasting our chic, pre-prepared sandwiches for breakfast surrounded by divine views, we begin descending back to the Gergeti Trinity Church where our car is parked. At noon we are already at our hotel in Stepantsminda, and after a couple of cups of coffee and a light snack, we

load into the car and set off on our way to eastern Georgia - a classic continuation of most of the ornithological itineraries in the so-called steppes of the Kakheti wine region.

The journey seemed long and tiring after the morning birding in the mountains. We arrive at Dedoplistskaro, our cozy base for the next four nights, quite late, around 10 pm, and even so, the hostess of our house waited for us with a set table so that we could eat hot dishes. Isn't that wonderful? And so every day, since we were returning home quite late.



Glacier surroundings by Lucia

The following days we are exploring all the famous protected areas of the region. We dedicate the first day to the Chachuna Reserve. The morning is cloudy. Many of the wrinkled passerine birds sheltering in the bushes along the way have not yet completely dried out from the night rain. **Shrikes** with wet feathers look different at first glance, but they are just ordinary **Red-backed**. Further along the way we meet, as expected, **European Rollers**, several **Eurasian Hoopoes**, **European Bee-eaters**, a couple of **Lesser Grey Shrikes**, small flocks of **Calandra Larks**, **Rock Sparrows**, **Isabelline Wheatears** and much more, but the diversity is still limited compared to spring or with a full-fledged migration seasons.

Not all **Eastern Imperial Eagles** leave Georgia during migration, so on this day we managed to enjoy good views of these outstanding raptors a few times. There were other charismatic birds of prey on this day, too, including **Cinereous Vultures**.

In the depths of the reserve we found a couple of **Black Francolins**, but not without good search and walks through corn plantations. They're pretty passive at this time of year, and generally very shy. At noon, while walking through one of the many dry gorges near mud volcanoes, we find a couple of **Western Rock Nuthatches** and at least three **Finsch's Wheatears** at the nesting site.

We kill the rest of the day with a belated lunch, coffee drinking, and then again with ornithological activities, in mix with odonatology, and botany in addition, and so we meet the endless steppe sunset under the attack of mosquitoes ☺ The idea was that the return trip to the hotel would

take place in the dark. We wanted to try our luck to see some of the nocturnal fauna and some other wildlife. We started right after sunset. The trip turned out to be quite exciting with several **European Nightjars**, as well as **Red Foxes**, **European Hares**, and possibly one **European Wildcat**, but the hit of the trip was still a **Little Owl** eating a mouse right on the road.



Chachuna Nature Reserve after sunset by Alexander Rukhaia

On the second day, as heavy rain was announced, we decided to pay a visit to the ancient, primeval forest of Lagodekhi National Park at the foot of the Caucasus mountains, and all for good reason - we found a rare *lilfordi* subspecies of a **White-backed Woodpecker** here.

By evening we were at the Eagles Gorge and enjoyed the magnificent soaring of **Griffon Vultures** and **Eastern Imperial Eagles**. Have you ever seen these two species of raptors resting on the same tree or on the same cliff face side by side? We saw it that day. An impressive sight.

On the third day, although the ground was not completely dry from yesterday's rain, we still ventured to pay a visit to Vashlovani National Park, but everything went fine, with the exception of a torn wheel arch that accidentally got stuck behind a bump or ledge of soil, which we quickly attached back with the help of metal wire found at abandoned farm.

Along the farm fields on the way to the park, similar to yesterday morning, it is difficult even to estimate the number of **Long-legged Buzzards**, and a good number of dark morph individuals too - much more than was observed in the spring. A lot of **Common** ones, but, on the contrary, a couple of **Lesser Kestrels**, by the way.

Further along the way, the scenery becomes even more beautiful, which indicates the approach to the park. The selection of birds here is basically the same as in the Chachuna Reserve, plus several flocks of **Chukar Partridges**, **Greater Short-toed Larks**, **Ortolan Buntings**, etc.

At noon, especially down in the canyons, it was quite hot and without much movement, so we arrange a much-needed siesta. We took a nap for a while, then had lunch and even fed **Agamas** with mealworms, then enjoyed our signature coffee according to tradition and moved on.

Before getting to Samukhi Plains, where Goitered Gazelles are found, just in case, we install a camera trap in front of a small watering hole, enriching the place with various bird feed, but alas - after checking the footage later, everything was eaten by **Eurasian Magpies** ☺

We spent the rest of the day in the Samukhi Plains, mainly watching the graceful movements of **Goitered Gazelles** while waiting for darkness at the same time. Another beautiful sunset and we go on another night trip home. **European Nightjars** are almost at every step... one per square meter ☺, quite a few **Red Foxes** again, a couple of **Short-eared Owls** in flight, plus perfect... dream views of one curious **Eurasian Scops Owl**, just two meters from the car.

Unfortunately, Jerboas could not be seen. Probably we should have stayed longer, but on the other hand, it was inconvenient to be back at midnight for dinner again.



Wild Pomegranate by Lucia



So-called Rolling Steppes by Lucia



Caucasian Agama by Lucia



Eurasian Hoopoe by Lucia



European Rollers by Lucia



Samukhi Plains by Lucia



Try to spot Gazelles :) Samukhi Plains by Lucia



Eastern Imperial Eagle by Lucia



Swallowtail by Lucia

On the last day we were traveling to Tbilisi through the monastery of David Gareji, where there were a lot of people and few birds as a consequence, but we had enough time for a good walk in the Ponichala Forestpark close to the capital. True, by this time the weather had changed and it was raining periodically, but this couldn't prevent us from seeing **Middle Spotted** and **Syrian Woodpeckers**, along with **Eurasian Golden Orioles** and other forest birds, plus a couple of **Eurasian Hobbies** and one **Levant Sparrowhawk** fleetingly.

We finish the tour with dinner on the terrace overlooking the river and the old town.



David Gareji Monastery by Lucia

That's it ☺

Thanks for reading our trip report!