

Astana area, northern Kazakhstan 6th–11th July 2022

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This short trip report covers an independently organized birding trip to Astana (= Nursultan), Kazakhstan, in July 2022. The main objective was, of course, a visit to the Korgalzhyn area, c125km east of Astana, which was predictably fantastic, but we also visited the Burabay area c220 km north of Astana as well. This was also well worthwhile, despite our time there being curtailed by a late change in flight schedule (see below).

Logistics

Getting there and away The former was easy, as we had a flight into Astana from Dubai on FlyDubai, arriving early morning 6th July. The latter proved a lot more problematic as we intended to fly via Almaty to Bishkek, (Kyrgyzstan) on Air Astana on the morning of 12th July. We struggled to book a flight on the airline's website and in the end had to get the travel company we were using for car rental in Bishkek (Nomad's Yurt; <https://nomads-yurt.com/>; highly recommended) to make the booking. This worked but in the two weeks prior to travel Air Astana changed the flight time and / or date three times for the Astana to Almaty leg, seemingly not realizing that they were completely messing up our connection from Almaty to Bishkek, despite the fact that it was all on one ticket. Given that they informed us of the most recent change on 5th July, this was still not resolved when we departed Dubai for Astana that night and we had to go to the airline desk at Astana airport on arrival to try to sort the mess out. This we managed eventually, and, rather surprisingly, the booking we switched to over the counter at the airport did not change. However, we ended up having to take an awkward middle-of-the-night flight a day early, so losing one day at Burabay. This was not a disaster bird-wise but was a total nuisance to re-arrange accommodation. Basically, avoid Air Astana if you possibly can, but you probably can't...

Visa and Covid stuff This was easy; Kazakhstan was now returned to visa-on-arrival for many nationalities and we simply arrived and got a passport stamp. As far as we could see, nobody knew or cared about Covid anywhere and there were no restrictions in place or, at least, if they were, they weren't being enforced.

Car hire We initially thought this would be the trickiest bit of the trip, but Air Astana put paid to that. In the end, albeit after a fair amount of research and sending of speculative emails, car rental worked out fine. Seemingly all international car rental franchises in Astana folded during Covid and, at least at the time of the trip, none were operational, at least not in the sense that they took online bookings or responded to emails. I emailed any local tour agent or car rental company I could find on the internet, but most seemed to be Russian-only and I only got

two responses. However, one of these, Astana Guide Tours (<https://astanatours.kz/>) were brilliantly accommodating and helpful, in particular Olgred (email astanatours@gmail.com) who had perfect English and went to a lot of trouble on our behalf. Plan B was the possibility of renting a car and driver but this was going to be extremely expensive and very inconvenient for early starts etc. so they managed to sort Plan A, i.e. arrange self-drive car rental with a local company, with Astana Guide Tours helping to set up the arrangements, sort out the insurance, fill in the paperwork in Russian etc. This all worked very well and we met a representative of Astana Guide Tours at our hotel as scheduled, who then took us to the car company, explained the forms and was available on the phone the next day when we needed to change the drop-off arrangements and check a few things. A UAE driving license, scanned and sent in advance, was perfectly adequate and there was no need for an international driving permit. This was not a cheap way to rent a car (total costs were overall similar to Kyrgyzstan, and not much more, if at all, than renting a similar standard of car in the UK). Olgred had advised getting a car with a bit of higher clearance but he (and us) deemed 4WD not necessary and this proved correct. The car we got was new and very modern and there was rather less messing around at the start or end than is usual for car rental. So to summarize, car rental worked well, thanks to Olgred and co. We'd have no hesitation recommending Astana Guide Tours for anything.

Driving around One we had the car, driving outside of Astana was fine as roads are quiet and we had no problem with speeding limits or police, corrupt or otherwise, at all. Driving inside Astana was a lot less pleasant, not so much due to traffic, but as several key roads were closed due to roadworks; this produced complicated diversions that had to be worked out on the spot. Authorities in Astana would do well to spend a bit less time and money on putting up pretentious marble buildings and a bit more on basic infrastructure, including road signs and bridges over level crossings. Road surfaces were mostly ok, even around Korgalzhyn, but the 'new' road leaving the village at the radio mast and running east, before looping back north onto the main Astana road was very badly potholed north of Arkyty so we had a tedious 10-15km there; otherwise potholes were a lot fewer than expected.



Accommodation

Two places were reserved using www.booking.com:

- **A hotel in Astana – [Absolute Hotel](#).** This was great, easy to find and a few km from the main centre with very helpful staff who helped arrange taxis, adjust our Burabay accommodation when we had to bring our flight forward etc.
- **A hotel in the Burabay area – [Park House](#).** Rooms a bit small but otherwise fine, and in a very nice location, surrounded by nice pine forest and a short walk to the large lake with some nice lakeside scrub. The hotel was busy and there was a lot of noise from the swimming pool etc. but it had all calmed down by 2200 or so. Note that the hotel is in the small village (resort town?) of Schuchinskiy, not Burabay itself which is a lot larger and more built up – we drove through latter on the way back to Astana. It doesn't come recommended – it was very busy (at least on a warm summer Sunday in July) with big but seemingly bird-free beaches on the edge of the lake and far less easy to access nice forest and scrubby edges.

Korgalzhyn area - There is nothing linked to www.booking.com for this area. However, there are a few B&Bs / local homestays and we stayed at one of these – booking this might well have been tricky but a friend currently living in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, who has contacts in Korgalzhyn, booked it for us over the phone. This worked very well; it was a great location in the middle of the village (just across the road from the national park visitor centre (which seemed to be permanently closed when we were there)). The landlady was extremely friendly, the food plentiful and the Wi-Fi not bad at all. It might be possible to book directly – see [this link](#) for their website.

Weather and gear brought

Weather was pleasant overall; certainly never too hot (which we feared). Conditions were very pleasant in Astana and the Burabay areas, being sunny and mild to warm with little or no wind. Korgalzhyn was rather more dramatic; we endured very several very heavy rain showers on two days (although only prolonged on one), and some overnight rain, clearing soon after dawn. It was quite breezy and cloud conditions were variable. It was, however, never oppressively hot (instead, in fact, it was pretty cold at dawn).

A telescope is absolutely essential at Korgalzhyn as there is a lot of scanning of distant waterbodies; photo opportunities were pretty good both here and, to a lesser extent, at Burabay. Due to the wind, sound-recording opportunities were limited at Korgalzhyn but very good at Burabay. The standard regional field guide, *Birds of Central Asia* (2012) is great and the only book necessary to bring. To navigate we found, as usual, the app maps.me very good, including for gravel tracks etc. in the Korgalzhyn areas. It does not require internet access, as long as you download the required map(s) beforehand. As usual, we didn't bother with phone data; decent Wi-Fi was available everywhere we stayed, including Korgalzhyn.

Other resources

There are a relatively small number of independent trip reports for the Astana area on [Cloudbirders](#) and all concentrate on the Korgalzhyn area (and, usually, Almaty); none of them included Burabay. A particularly useful, indeed probably vital, report for Korgalzhyn is [this one](#), produced by a couple of Black Lark researchers and including maps and detailed notes to many sites in the area – despite being produced in 2013, this wonderfully detailed and thorough report was still very useful in 2022. There are enough sites at Korgalzhyn to keep one busy for four or even more days if the emphasis is on exploring, finding your own birds, getting good views, taking photographs etc. and most of the places to visit are covered, with text and maps, in this report.

All records from our trip are summarized in an eBird trip report, available at <https://ebird.org/tripreport/68386>. This includes a checklist for all species and individual checklists for each site visited, listed chronologically. Lots of photographs are included, a few of which are replicated in this report. All sound-recordings made are accessible by [this link](#) (although note that this includes recordings made during a 2017 visit to the Almaty area too).



Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Olfred and staff at Astana Guide Tours and Absolute Hotel, Astana, as per above. However, particular thanks are due to both Maxim Koshkin for help in booking the accommodation in Korgalzhyn and general advice on the area and to Rob Sheldon, who provided loads of very, very up-to-date information, both via Zoom and email, on where to concentrate on finding birds in the Korgalzhyn area.

Birding notes

1 Astana area

We had one day here, after an overnight flight but that was just about right to have a reasonable look around. It was pleasant enough ambling around the main, very modern drag but there are only so many vanity projects, marble edifices and long boulevards one can be bothered with. After this, we walked back (north) along the river on the raised footpath, eventually reaching Central Park, from which the hotel was another 1-2km. By far the most notable species was a family group of **Azure Tits**, easily found in the park and seen very well despite the park being very crowded indeed. Other species included a few migrant **Common Sandpipers**, **Common Terns** and plenty of **Fieldfares** (a common breeder locally). A **Masked Wagtail** was, with hindsight, perhaps a bit out of range; all those seen elsewhere were *alba*.

2 Korgalzhyn area

This is a terrifically bird-rich, prolific area, with loads to see. Almost two full days, plus a half day on the return journey were enough to properly sample it but not at all sufficient to really explore it. It is a great area to just drive around and explore the myriad of tracks and minor roads. Despite very heavy thunderstorms the afternoon we arrived all the main (gravel / graded) tracks were fine although the car was soon very grubby. We didn't have time, nor the inclination, to risk the really minor tracks and to go far off-piste into the best steppe; tackling that would require dryer conditions, a proper 4WD and, I guess, some proper local knowledge. Although early July is not regarded as prime time locally for birding, there was lots to see, with plenty of breeding bird activity, including many fledged juveniles but also some species still singing whilst gulls and waterfowl were gathering in large post-breeding flocks and return wader passage was clearly well-underway. Almost all of the key species looked for were found easily, the only exception being the very interesting, pale 'Steppe' Merlin (seemingly very scarce). Sociable Lapwing (which by July is in very localized post-breeding flocks) was also missed, which was a shame, but this species was not a critical as it occurs annually in the UAE.

As noted above, see [this trip report](#) for far more details on site, including maps, than can possibly be given here. Very brief details about particular sites we found worth visiting are as follows; all the places named below can be found on maps.me.

- A. **North (and north west) of Korgalzhyn** – Overall a really great area; over 2.5 days we tried the areas of **Zhanteke village** (nice small lake, including **Red-necked Grebes**; easily reached on the road from Astana and the obvious place to start; getting to here from downtown Astana took about 90 mins), and the two tracks north of the river bridge on the main road – these go to (and beyond) **Maishukar** and **Zumai** respectively through superb, dramatic open steppe with **Black Larks** and **Booted Warblers** easily found and vast, birdy lakes at both **Maishukar** (large **Pallas's Gull** colony; also lots of **Common Gulls**, **White-headed Ducks**, loads of returning waders) and **Zumai** (lake even bigger and harder to get close too but fly-by **Dalmatian Pelicans**, lots of **Greater Flamingoes** (otherwise only a few distant flyover groups), breeding **Mute Swans**, singing **Paddyfield Warblers** etc.).
- B. **South of Korgalzhyn** – **Balyksol** is right by (sometimes overflowing onto) the road and very birdy, with very close waders, **Gull-billed Terns** presumably nesting nearby, lots of **Red-crested Pochard** etc. plus also **Bluethroat** (hard to find elsewhere). A short distance further on comes **Birtaban** (vast lake, mostly unworkable but shallow wetlands on the north side very nice and others along the road to **Shalkar** south of the main lake get you closer to small pools and edges). **Black-winged Pratincoles** were nesting on the edge of the road to **Shalkar** (and fairly common in the general area of **Birtaban**). It was worth following the track all the way to where it bisects the shallow lagoons and main lake short of **Shalkar village** itself; for example this was the only place where **Ruddy Shelduck** were seen and terns were diverse and numerous.

- C. **East of Korgalzhyn** – the ‘new road’ out of the village, passes the radio mast and Balyksol / Birtaban turn and then very soon heads into some very nice steppe that goes on and on. There are some vast lakes and vegetated wetlands in this general area none are close to the road and they are difficult to access without some off-piste driving and local knowledge; we did not attempt to reach any. **White-winged Lark** (and the inevitable **Black Larks**) was seen well here singing and **Black-winged Pratincoles** were about too. On our return to Astana we continued much further along this road, stopping at the highly recommended and very accessible **Arkyty Lake** en-route. At least in June 2022, this area had been hosting post-breeding Sociable Lapwings but we failed to find any, although it was a warm and breezy late morning and there are large areas south of the lake that we did not search. However, post-breeding groups of **Black-winged Pratincoles** were easy and close. The road to the main highway north rapidly deteriorates after Arkyty – it becomes tediously slow but passable – and was ok in the end; we had the only **Demoiselle Cranes** of the trip very soon after hitting the main road.
- D. **Korgalzhyn village and immediately surrounding area** – to get a break from the car, we made a couple of evening walks to the river bridge and beyond from the accommodation. This was very nice and produced the likes of flyover **Dalmatian Pelican** and **Pallas’s Gulls**, various waders and a late evening roost of **Red-footed Falcon** (and one **Lesser Kestrel**) in the large copse of trees just beyond and north of the bridge. This and others around the village are some of the few extensive areas of trees locally, supporting, for example, breeding **European Bee-eaters**, **Eurasian Golden Oriole** (in our guesthouse garden!), **Cetti’s Warbler** and **Hobby**. Obviously, during migration periods, such areas will surely be extremely rewarding.



Species of particular note in the Korgalzhyn area

There are almost too many of these to list; some of the good or really good stuff (**Black Lark**, **Pallas’s Gull**, **Red-footed Falcon**, **Long-legged Buzzard**) are pretty common and so can be and regularly are bumped into anywhere and everywhere whilst the likes of waders, breeding **Yellow Wagtails**, **Siberian Stonechats** etc. are impossible to miss; none warrant further discussion (but see brief sites details above). A few species that perhaps deserve a little more comment are:

- **Mute Swan** Less common than Whooper Swan and not at all approachable; seen at two sites only (Birtaban and Zumai). Several broods seen.
- **Ruddy Shelduck** Only seen along the road to Shalkar on the south side of the main lake at Birtaban.
- **White-headed Duck** Seemingly very local but easily found and seen very well at Maishukar and, more numerous but also more distantly, at Zumai.
- **Steppe Eagle** Just two seen; one along the main road between Astana and Zhanteke and another along the road to Zumai.
- **Pallid Harrier** Widespread but not as abundant as expected and mainly hunting males seen; presumably much more numerous later in summer when juveniles are flying and females are not staying close to nests.
- **Black-winged Pratincole** Local but in the end easy and fairly numerous; seen very well in the Birtaban and Arkyty areas and also along the 'new road'.



- **Red-necked Phalarope** The third most numerous wader (after Ruff and Northern Lapwing).
- **'Large white-headed Gulls'** These caused serious ID problems; it was not clear if the majority were Steppe or Caspian; both suspected but former seemingly more numerous.
- **Glossy Ibis** One only, on the wetlands north of Birtaban village.
- **Dalmatian Pelican** – widespread but at low density. Seen at four sites, total of 14 individuals, all flyovers.
- **Greater Flamingo** Seemingly rare away from the national park core area (which is difficult to access without a dedicated tour). However, seen well at Zumai lakes (where apparently regular); two other high-flying flocks seen in the early morning.
- **White-winged Lark** Far less numerous than Black Lark. Seen in flight along the Zumai road and, much better, along the 'new road' leading east, where birds were seen and heard singing.
- **Paddyfield Warbler** Probably very common, the difficulty being easy access to reedbed edges in such a vast area with a lot of boggy ground. Still singing strongly and perching prominently, even in breezy conditions and seen well both at Zumai Lake and in reedbeds on the edge of the main Birtaban lake along the Shalkar road.
- **Booted Warbler** probably very common, at least in its preferred habitat (the richer, lush vegetation that lines the roads through the steppe to Maishukar and Zumai. Family groups were very easy to find here and a delight to watch.



3 Burabay area

We could find no information about birding this area prior to visiting (a search of trip reports was not exhaustive but there was not a single eBird checklist, for example). However, as satellite maps made clear, it is an extensive area of lakes, set amidst forest and low hills, habitat which is not plentiful in northern Kazakhstan. That raised the possibility of some rather different scenery and, perhaps, birds compared to the steppes of Korgalzhyn. This proved correct on both fronts and, although it was certainly not Siberia, or even Siberia-lite, an evening and morning here was very well spent. The extra day we had initially booked but had to can thanks to Air Astana would have been handy but probably not added loads more species. The Astana–Burabay road is a toll road and very fast.

We concentrated almost exclusively on the area around our hotel, in the area (village?) of Shchuchinskiy (to be precise, the lake south of and the forests areas immediately north and west of [53.012081, 70.200393](#)). You can immediately get into extensive, albeit fairly dry and uniform age, pine plantations, easily explored via a long cycle / walking track. More interesting bird-wise were damper hollows with birches and some reedbed or willow and it was also possible to access the scrub and some reedbeds of the nearby lake edge. Although our hotel, and others nearby, were very busy and noisy in the evening, early morning in this area was great with good bird activity.

One of the most interesting (and numerous) species was **Siberian Chiffchaff**, singing everywhere and easy to hear and see (with a nest found along the access road to the hotel). **Blyth's Reed Warbler** was also another major result (seemingly quite common in reedbed edges at or near the lakeshore) as was **Pine Bunting** (two seen; male singing). Several **Black-throated Divers**, amidst **Goldeneye** and **Red-breasted Merganser** on the lake, did not detract from the boreal feel. With a back-up cast of breeding **Rufous Turtle Dove**, **Fieldfare**, lots of **Willow Tits**, **Great Spotted Woodpecker** (and even a brief view of a **Black Woodpecker**), **Spotted Flycatcher** and **Redstart** this proved to be time well spent and was enjoyable, relaxed birding. There was no sign of Long-tailed Tits (which should be of the attractive white-headed *caudatus*) nor any Azure Tits but they may simply require more time.



After an evening and then a full morning, we took the scenic route out, via Burabay town itself – this was ok and the lakeside and hill views were quite nice but there as not a great deal to see in terms of birds and there were a lot of tourists, so the windy roads were quite slow in places.

However, one last stop was highly worthwhile - **Balykty Lake**, just south of the Burabay exit on the Astana road (easily visible from the main road, just after the very first toll you go through) and very easily reached southbound via a track at [52.796000, 70.206000](#)) and proved an excellent place for a short stop. As well as masses (and masses...) of **Black-necked Grebes**, there were also **Terek Sandpipers** and **Pallas's Gull**, whilst a few **Pine Buntings** and other passerines were readily found along the track.

