

Uzbekistan 6 – 20 Aug 2023

By

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Chimgan

Introduction

This trip reports consists of 10 pages and will conform to the following format: An introduction, including admin and logistics, day to day itineraries, highlighting species of interest, followed by a consolidated species list and a summary. I travelled to Uzbekistan with my wife for a cultural family holiday. This is not intended to be a birding trip report. It's for anyone travelling to the country, with some spare time or able to conduct some ad-hoc birding. A more focussed birding trip, visiting locations off the beaten track and into the Kyzylkum Desert would no doubt yield more species and specialities. I extended my time in Tashkent with the aim of journeying to the Chimgan Mountains for a day's birding. I used a trip report on the OSME site submitted by David(s) Showler & Hodgekinson from May 15, visiting the Chimgan area for a couple of days which was very useful and gave me a good start point in a vast area where the habitat is similar throughout – Thankyou.

Admin & Logistics

Fieldguides:

The Birds of Central Asia – Helm

OSME trip report by David A. Showler, David Hodkinson, May 2015

All records for the trip were entered into Ebird.

We toured the country with Voyages Jules Verne, and it was an excellent trip. It did allow for limited birding as we visited the cultural and historic sites as well as moments when we stopped for lunch etc. My wife gets used to me wandering off with my bins and so did the guide eventually.

The guide who was excellent arranged a Taxi to mountains on the 18th of Oct following the main tour during my extended stay in Tashkent. He was excellent and the driver turned up on time and on the return and this went without a hitch. This could be done self-drive with a hire car as the journey is straightforward, but I didn't have time to arrange this. Public transport seems a bit iffy at that time of year and I didn't want to get stranded 90km from Tashkent in the Chimgan Mountains with a plane to catch the next day. The return taxi fare cost me \$150. Maybe a bit pricey, but it was

guaranteed and a nice big new Chevy which wasn't going to have any unforeseen mechanical problems, that may have ruined the day. Generally, the holiday costs in country were low, so I had some spare Dollars, hence the costs weren't an issue. You could probably do it cheaper if you tried.

Bird Guiding

I contacted several companies prior to departing the UK. One never replied, I couldn't get any response from a potential bird guide and one company said they could arrange it for \$500. This seemed a bit steep, so I declined, did my homework and research, and decided to go it alone. It didn't work out badly.

Day 1 – 6 Oct (Travel)

An evening flight from Heathrow with Uzbekistan Airlines had us arriving in Tashkent at about 0300 on 7th Oct.

Day 2 – 7 Oct (Arrival, Tashkent Sightseeing)

We dropped our bags at the hotel and started on the tour visiting several sites in Tashkent. In the early afternoon we checked in for a well-earned sleep. As we visited the sites several commoner birds were seen which became common throughout including Common Mynahs, Laughing Doves, Magpies and Lesser Whitethroats. At one of the many Madrassas an Eastern Olivaceous Warbler was seen in some conifers.

Day 3 – 8 Oct (Flight to Urgench and onward to Khiva)

An early morning flight from Tashkent to Urgench saw us arrive at about 1030. Outside the airport, A Lesser Black-backed Gull sailed by, and a European Sparrowhawk shot overhead. Common Mynahs were ever present, and several Rooks and Jackdaws were noted.

The tour of Khiva was interesting and a pair of what appeared to be Indian (Bactrian) House Sparrows were surprising. A couple of Eurasian Collared Doves was also added to the list. In the early evening I walked behind the hotel and found a drainage channel. Typically, the most numerous birds were the Common Mynahs, although in the channel several Eurasian Tree Sparrows drank, and a Crested Lark was heard and then seen. Several White Wagtails were present along with a Masked Wagtail, unfortunately it wouldn't pose for the camera.

Day 4 – 9 Oct (Khiva)

My wife and I left the hotel at first light and took photos without the masses being present. We walked around Khiva and added a flyby Shikra and photographed a couple of Masked Wagtails eventually, feeding around a sandy paddock just outside the West gate. A couple of flyover Common Starlings were the only other bird of note.

Masked Wagtail



Day 5 – 10 Oct (Khiva to Bukhara)

The journey from Khiva to Bukhara takes about 9 hours with stops. It had the potential to turn up Pander's Ground Jay in the Kyzylkum Desert. Sadly, this didn't happen. Sticking to the main road, the chances of encountering one without venturing into the desert a little would have been extremely lucky and unfortunately the luck wasn't with me. It lives to fight another day. The journey however was uneventful until the lunch break at Kyzylkum Teahouse. Not being that hungry, I ate a bit and then ventured outside around the back of the teahouse. Crested Larks were on the road and then a promising if not unimpressive sight. A tip with a few pools filled with the run-off from the basic toilet block. Not good for the average tourist but good for a birder. As I walked around avoiding the obvious, several Chiffchaffs caught flies from the rubbish tip and 3 or 4 Central Asian Lesser Whitethroats were in the nearby bushes. A flash of white caught my eye and sat on the fence was a cracking first year Red-breasted Flycatcher. A few Barn Swallows passed overhead, and an Isabelline Shrike perched on the nearby bushes. A good lunch break and I was glad I didn't eat much as some of the fellow travellers appeared to have a few issues after lunch.

A comfort break at couple of hours later, fortuitously was next to a small lake/water course. On the water was a Little Grebe, at least 7 Pygmy Cormorant and a Red-tailed Shrike perched nearby. As we entered Bukhara the first Eurasian Blackbirds were seen.



Red-breasted Flycatcher

Day 6 – 11 Oct (Bhukara)

I woke early and walked the area around Lyabi-Khauz square. Here, the ubiquitous Common Mynahs and Laughing Doves although in the trees several Central Asian Lesser Whitethroats. The city tour of Bhukara was fascinating. The Ark Fortress was impressive and as we walked the upper ramparts, I noticed a bird flycatching on the opposite side of the fort. I quickly walked across camera at the ready. Great, I photographed the first year Pied Wheatear, assuming there were a pair, when

I looked closely the other bird was an Isabelline Wheatear. An afternoon of shopping produced Eurasian Tree Sparrows but little else.

Pied Wheatear



Day 6 – 12 Oct (Bhukara)

Overnighting in Bhukara we drove to the nearby Kalyan Mosque and Maghoki Arrar Mosque. At the Kalyan Mosque I saw my first striking Turkestan Tits along with a migrant Common Redstart and many Eurasian Tree Sparrows. At another nearby water management museum highlighting the plight of the Aral Sea – a very sad and sobering display of just how destructive man is. In any event the area had extensive gardens and trees. A familiar call revealed the first of many Hume's Warblers, and 2 Hume's Lesser Whitethroats along with several Central Asian Lesser Whitethroats.

Day 7 – 13 Oct (Bhukara - Samarkand)

A travel day to Samarkand (roughly 6 hours) with only Crested Larks to show for it. Another Sparrowhawk was overhead as we toured the Mausoleum Necropolis.

Day 8 – 14 Oct (Samarkand)

A morning visit to the Meros silk paper making mill was interesting with plenty of shopping opportunities for my wife. I walked around and attempted to photograph some noisy Turkestan Tits which were not very cooperative. However, next to the mill a Grey Wagtail flew by calling. The only other bird of interest was a Chiffchaff.

In the afternoon we walked the local parks and visited the Gur Emir Mausoleum (Tamerlane's Tomb) a very spectacular site. Around the parks Hume's Warbler was the most common bird, along with the usual suspects. Over the mausoleum at dusk 5 Alpine Swifts were seen.

Day 9 – 15 Aug (Samarkand)

Whilst walking around Tamerlane's wife's Mosque, in the trees were an Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, several Hume's Warblers and a couple of Lesser Whitethroats. More Eurasian Blackbirds were present around the city.

Day 10 – 16 Oct (Samarkand)

There was an optional tour to Shakhirsabz today. Travelling through the Takhta Karacha Mountain Pass, and never one to miss a potential birding opportunity we were onboard. We stopped at a viewpoint at about 1030 and right on cue, a Eurasian Griffon and then a single Himalayan Griffon passed overhead – result! 4 Chukars flew across the road and as we got higher the Rooks were replaced by Carrion Crows.

We stopped for a comfort stop and coffee a little further down the valley and the trees nearby were full of Hume's Warblers.



Wallcreeper



We continued to Shakhirsabz and the remains of the Ak Saray Palace. As we arrived a Common Raven flew low above us calling. As the guide described the area and its significance, I was distracted by a bird flying across the high façade faces of the Palace entrance gate. As I raised my bins and got on the bird, I involuntarily shouted out Wallcreeper – not that anyone else was interested. Interesting though the guide was, I was off for a photo. I watched the bird for some 10 minutes before it flew off, securing some good images. I returned to the group content and received some quizzical looks – such is birding with non-birders.

We returned through the mountain pass, and I noted at least 2 more Himalayan Vultures and along the road in the semi-desert at least 2 Long-legged Buzzards and another Common Raven. We stopped at an old Russian film set used for a 70's Western film – Bizarre and probably the least impressive tourist hot spot. I wandered off, unimpressed. Another Long-legged Buzzard passed overhead, and I heard a bird singing. I searched for a while and a Wheatear was perched on a rock. Closer inspection and a photo revealed an all-black tail and rufous ear coverts, as it chased another the tail pattern was obvious revealing a pair of Desert Wheatears. We returned to Samarkand and the evening fast train to Tashkent.

Desert Wheatear



Day 11 – 17 Oct (Taskent Botanical Gardens)

With most of the group departing for the UK, I had opted to do an additional 3 nights in Tashkent. Aiming to see a bit more of the place, visit the International Plov centre – Uzbekistan’s famous national dish and seemingly loved by all and eaten in mass quantities. We had tried Plov in Bhukara, Samarkand and now for Tashkent. All vary in fruitiness and spiciness, but all are delicious. The other aim to go birding to the Tashkent Botanical Gardens – highlighted on Ebird as a hotspot and holding a few species high on my list and travel to the Chimgan Mountains for a day.

We took a taxi (\$5) to the Botanical Gardens, seemingly the only and easiest way to get there, unless you are familiar with the local busses. The metro is very easy to use, and we used it a lot and it’s cheap, but it didn’t go anywhere near the gardens. The return taxi fare was about the same in local currency.

We arrived at the gardens and started to walk, common woodland birds appeared in the form of Chaffinches, Blackbirds and a single Brambling was a good find. A Common Buzzard was high above us with Hume’s Warblers and Turkestan Tits flitting about in good numbers. I was alerted by a Long-tailed Tit like call and a bird being chased by a Turkestan Tit. YES!!!! An Azure “Yellow-breasted” Tit, one of the target birds and what a cracker. I’d waited a long time to see an Azure Tit and there were a pair in front of me. Taking some acceptable photos – I’m no photographer, I moved on very happy.



Azure “Yellow-breasted” Tit



We continued adding several more Azure Tits and Lesser Whitethroats became numerous. A bird flew from the undergrowth and perched with its back to me, cocking its very rufous tail and rump, with much white in the wings and an obvious supercilium, a Rufous Bush Chat peered at me before alighting never to be seen again. As I continued a pair of Black-throated Thrushes chased each other but sadly no White-winged Woodpecker.

Day 12 – 18 Oct (Chimgan Mountains)

We departed the hotel at 0630 in our private taxi hire for the Chimgan Mountains, arriving just before 0800. Along the Chirchik river a Western Marsh Harrier was seen. We arrived at the mountains and the weather was fine. Armed with a packed breakfast from the hotel and provisions for a packed lunch from the local supermarket and fruit market we were set.

As suggested in the trip report we were dropped at the Rake Nur resort. We walked down the hill, and the nearby bushes were alive with Chaffinches and Bramblings, a few Hume’s Warblers and Lesser Whitethroats but little else. We continued into the village with major construction on the way, but the river seemed dryer than was mentioned, so no chance of a Dipper.

A Woodpecker flew across in front of me and perched – White-winged Woodpecker, joined by another. It was a relief to get this one under the belt quickly. Several Azure Tits were in the nearby trees and a pair of Indian Sparrows were in the hedge. As we walked back up the hill towards the Rake Nur resort an unfamiliar call alerted me. As I searched, I found a cracking Black-throated

Accentor with another below it. It became clear that the summer breeding species had gone sadly but had been replaced by the wintering visitors.

I entered the Rake Nur area, lined with Poplars. Many Blackbirds were present along with at least 4 Black-throated Thrushes of various ages but at least 1 adult. Greenfinches were in the trees and a solitary Mistle Thrush called and preened.

Reading the previous trip report, I looked for a track up into the mountains opposite the Rake Nur resort. A new skiing hotel (Fanat) is nearly completed opposite with a green fence. There is a gateway in the new fence and this path which turns into a track leads off into the mountain and foothills. We followed this track as it looked like a very likely area with the right sort of habitat (Juniper scrub, scattered trees, and higher up scree slopes with scattered vegetation). It proved to be an excellent area. As I looked up, a single Black Vulture was consorting with several Himalayan Vultures and a pair of Common Raven called as they went.

Himalayan Vulture



As I progressed up the valley in a small re-entrant my eye was caught by a bird flycatching. Perched, it showed a red tail, typically a Redstart. It was quickly identified as an Eversmann's Redstart and was quickly joined by a female, known to be in pairs, another 2 pairs were seen on the foothills and scrub. A familiar Tit call was heard and tracking the call I was delighted to find a pair of Rufous-naped Tits, a great target bird to see on the Western edge of its range. Another Black-throated Accentor called and was more skulky than the previous birds. I climbed the hill slowly heading for the area above the tree line. As I climbed good numbers of Bramblings and Chaffinches were seen and several Linnets were present. Suddenly a flash and sat in the open was a beautiful male Blue-capped Redstart. Above the tree line, I was hoping for any lingering breeding birds, but it was very quiet and nothing was added so I descended to where my wife sat by some concrete blocks and we ate our picnic lunch with the backdrop of Great Chimgan – what a picturesque place.

Eversmann's Redstart



Black-throated Accentors



With time running out one last look around, and above us a lone Eurasian Griffon Vulture soared. Nothing new was added and the last bird in the area was a Eurasian Sparrowhawk.

Our driver was on time which we were thankful for, you always wonder if there's going to be a drama and an alternative plan will need to be enacted. As we travelled back to Tashkent passing the Chirchik river valley, a couple more Western Marsh Harriers were seen, several Black-headed Gulls, a single Great White Egret and 4 Little Egrets. The area is worthy of more exploration, where several more species would have undoubtedly been added. Happy with the day out as I kept being informed "This is not a birding trip" - next time will be.

Day 13 – 19 Oct (Tashkent)

Doing the Tashkent cultural sites, the local bazaar and of course the Plov Centre. A great day, very enjoyable but no new birds.

Day 14 – 20 (Flight to UK)

An uneventful midday flight from Tashkent to Heathrow had us arriving in the UK at about 1500 for an onward flight to Newcastle and the rain.ye

Consolidated Species List

Common Name	Scientific Name	Comments
Chukar	<i>Alectoris chukar</i>	4 flying across the road through the Takhta Karacha mountain pass
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	1 on a roadside lake transiting from Khiva to Bhukara
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	1 on the Chirchik River
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	4 on the Chirchik River
Pygmy Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax pygmeus</i>	7 on a roadside lake transiting from Khiva to Bhukara
Himalayan Griffon	<i>Gyps himalayensis</i>	3 in the Pass and 6 in the Chimgan Mountains
Eurasian Griffon	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	1 in the Pass and 1 in the Chimgan Mountains
Cinereous Vulture	<i>Aegypius maonachus</i>	1 in the Chimgan Mountains
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	3 along the Chirchik River
Shikra	<i>Accipiter badius</i>	1 flyover in Khiva

Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	1 at Urgench Airport and 1 in the Chimgan Mountains
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	1 Rufous phase over the Tashkent Botanical Gardens
Long-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>	3 over the semi-desert near the Takhta Karacha Pass
Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	4 along the Chirchik River
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus barabensis</i>	1 at Urgench Airport was a Steppe Gull
Heuglin's Gull	<i>Larus fuscus heuglini</i>	1 transiting from Khiva to Bhukara near the Turkmenistan border along the river
Feral Pigeon	<i>Columbia livia</i>	Widespread & Numerous
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	Widespread in urban locations
Laughing Dove	<i>Streptopelia senegalensis</i>	Widespread and Numerous in urban locations
Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>	5 over Tamerlane's mausoleum, Samarkand at dusk
White-winged Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopus leucopterus</i>	A pair below the Rake Nur resort
Daurian Shrike	<i>Lanius isabellinus</i>	1 behind the Kyzylkum Teahouse
Turkestan Shrike	<i>Lanius phoenicuroides</i>	1 on wires near the roadside Pool transiting from Khiva to Bhukara
Common Magpie	<i>Pica pica bactriana</i>	Widespread & Numerous with longer more graduated tail
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	Widespread
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone orientalis</i>	Replaced the above in the Takhta Karacha Mountains
Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	1 at S and 2 in the Chimgan Mountains
Turkestan Tit	<i>Parus major ferganensis</i>	Widespread in 1s and 2s
Azure "Yellow-breasted" Tit	<i>Cyanistes cyanus flavipectus</i>	Several in the Taskent Botanical Gardens and common in the Chimgan Mountains
Rufous-naped Tit	<i>Periparus rufonuchalis</i>	2 in the Chimgan Mountains
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	A small group migrating at Kyzylkum Teahouse
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	Common along the Kyzylkum Desert Road and in Khiva
Eastern Olivaceous Warbler	<i>Iduna pallida</i>	2, 1 in Tashkent and 1 in Samarkand – both in conifers
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	Several throughout
Hume's Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus humei</i>	The most common Warbler seen everywhere
Lesser Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia curruca</i>	Widespread and numerous most appeared of the Central Asian race
Hume's Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia althaea</i>	2 in the Water Museum gardens
Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>	1 at S AY S Palace gates
Common Mynah	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	The most common bird – ubiquitous
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	2 flyovers in Khiva
Black-throated Thrush	<i>Turdus atrogularis</i>	2 in Tashkent Botanical Gardens and 4 in the Rake Nur Poplars
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus bonapartei</i>	1 in Rake Nur Poplars
Rufous Bush Chat	<i>Cercotrichas galactotes</i>	1 in Tashkent Botanical Garden
Blue-capped Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus caeruleocephala</i>	1 male in the Chimgan Mountains
Eversmann's Restart	<i>Phoenicurus erythronotus</i>	6 in the Chimgan Mountains
Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>	1 in Bhukara a migrant
Isabelline Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe isabelline</i>	1 at Bhukara Ark Fort
Desert Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe deserti</i>	2 in the Pass
Pied Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe pleschanka</i>	1 at Bhukara Ark Fort
Red-breasted Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula parva</i>	1 at Kyzylkum Teahouse

Indian (Bactrian) Sparrow	<i>Passer indicus</i>	2 in Khiva and 2 in the Chimgan Mountains
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	Widespread & Common
Black-throated Accentor	<i>Prunella atrogularis</i>	3 in the Chimgan Mountains
White Wagtail	<i>Mortacilla alba</i>	Widespread & Common
White (Masked) Wagtail	<i>Mortacilla alba personata</i>	Several in Khiva
Grey Wagtail	<i>Mortacilla cinerea</i>	1 in Samarkand silk paper mill
Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	Several in Tashkent Botanical Garden and Common in Chimgan Mountains
Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>	1 in Tashkent Botanical Garden and Common in Chimgan Mountains
Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	4 in Rake Nur Poplars
Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	A small flock in the Chimgan Mountains

Summary

A modest 60 species were seen. The day in the Chimgan Mountains was excellent, providing several lifers and one of my most sought-after birds the Eversmann's Redstart. Uzbekistan is a very friendly, culturally rich country. Clean, well-organised, trouble free and very interesting. The likelihood of returning on a birding trip is high. I recommend a trip to the country for birding but do not miss what else it has to offer.