

BREAKOUT BIRDING 3



Shepherd's hut, Kazbegi / Pallas' Gull / Dalmatian Pelican / Cathedral interior, Tbilisi

DUBAI, ROMANIA AND GEORGIA

JANUARY 20th TO APRIL 3rd 2021

Jules Eden, with:

Stewart Kirkaldy - Dubai

Iliutia and Marius from BirdinginRomania.com - Danube Delta

Alex from BirdingCaucasus.com - Georgia.

I don't do Lockdowns. Hate them. So when a child like weeping Minister of Health announces that from January to an undated point in the future, we have to all stay at home for the good of the NHS, that's enough.

Time to go somewhere better.

With a Romanian wife, the answer is Bucharest – but not direct from the UK, there's a 14 day home quarantine if you come in from London.

Dubai is the best option, free of quarantine both ways.

Let's do this.

DUBAI

DAY 1

The flight, half empty but still full of Essex Girls discussing shopping trips in the Arab state was bizarre. They were not supposed to be travelling.

I had a letter of business invitation in case of problems, but no-one at check in was bothered.

They check your PCR cert on arrival but it is quick and organised. Just as well as mine was £250 in London. A rip off. One day anyone "Covid Profiteering" should stand trial. Watch out Bezos and all of Hancock's pub friends.

Arrival to The Palm and the Waldorf Hotel and a sea facing room which would come in useful later.

As we had arrived at an un-Godly hour of the morning, we had to kill a few hours before the "room was ready". There is nothing odder than a gentleman birder walking around the pool with binoculars whilst Instagramming babes are oiling up with sunscreen. I got a GRACEFUL PRINIA as well as a WHITE-EARED BULBUL, but a lot of strange looks like I was the weird one.



Instagrammer preens on the Palm beach.

Oh, hang on, it's the wife!

I had booked a day's guiding via the excellent www.uaebirding.com website, and a 6 a.m kicker the next morning left Angela, my wife a tad confused as to why I should leave such luxury and miss the opulent breakfast "to go to another swamp".

Stewart Kirkaldy meets me with a coffee and a hash brown burger wrap and we are off.

He has a Resplendant Quetzal tattoo on his right arm. Clearly dedicated to trogons as much as I am. I couldn't see his left arm, but as a true Scot I assumed the ink was of a capercaillie with the face of Nicola Sturgeon.

First stop, the famous Pivot Fields, which are now closed. But there's a way in for the locals who have done the knowledge.

Stewy hits us on a WHITE-TAILED LAPWING, before Daurian Shrikes and Desert Wheatears. A good start especially with one thousand Pin-tailed Sandgrouse vermiculating in front of the car. Sadly these are bred to kill by the locals.

A few minutes drive from the Pivots is an area of sandy thorn scrub. We split up and both play the call to get an ASIAN DESERT WARBLER.

Next stop is an area called Expo Lake. Dubai is still selling its World 2020 Expo, obviously cancelled "because of Covid" – but the infrastructure is all in place.

A troupe of ARABIAN BABBLERS shows really well.

On the way to the next site we come across “the photographers”. There is a strange enmity from birder to toggger in these parts. Both sides have the same wishes – bird close in front of you – but the birders blame the others for scaring owls et al from known sites, and the toggers blame the birders for encroaching on land which gets everyone banned. Stewmeister asks if they have seen anything, but knows deep down they wouldn’t have a clue what they had been looking at.

We push on the next site – Al-Qudra. But something seems to be wrong with my tough looking well-muscled Scotsman. “What’s up dude?” I ask.

It turns out that the next spot is also where the Sheikh of Dubai breeds his Houbara Bustards for slaughter by Saker later. Protecting these poor creatures is Stewart’s nemesis. The Salmond to his Sturgeon. The Edward Longshanks to his Mel Gibson.

Yes – its “Psycho-Afghan in a Datsun Sunny”.

Within seconds of getting me onto a momentary scope view of CREAM-COLOURED COURSER, the nutter has abandoned his bustards and driven like hell towards us.

“Go go, I call the Police. You go now.” Stew tries to be polite saying we are just watching the coursers but Afghan’s tone is rising. As we drive off I did mention that we could have both taken him out but that would have been a lifetime in jail in this Emirate, so important are future dead bustards.

We drove back up the highway and stopped where we could get a better lateral view of the coursers...but guess who turned up near us in the lay-by screaming abuse? No wonder we have never beaten these people in any war.

Time to head for the coast. Our next target has a few spots from Dubai up to the pointy bit farther east. Our first call was decided by the fact that there is a massive off-licence right by where the birds are.

Parking spots are hard to find as all the ex-pat alchies are here in force to stock up on booze. Some good waders and gulls are near enough to scope. The tide is half way out – but I catch a glimpse of something big and white way out left.

Scoped- it is the big target – CRAB PLOVER. We scurry left through broken rocks and dead cats to find about 10 of them. Way to go, us! One proceeded to come even closer.



A showy Crab Plover

We celebrate our good plover fortune with a shopping trip. Mr Kirkaldy knows all the different prices for whisky in Dubai and nails a bottle of something peaty for half the price of Duty Free. I just buy the biggest case of beer that I can physically lift. In this part of the world it's all about Beeronomics.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NBpko8lHdrl>

Our last stop for the day is Jebel Jais, a bit farther east. It's an irrigated part of the country, but good for wheatears and other passerines.

However for the time of year birds seemed surprisingly tough to see. We were both getting frustrated at wandering through goat farms and dry wadis with not a peep until we found a bit of elevation and a new track to a hotel being built up in the hills. This threw up some goodies in quick succession.

SPECTACLED BULBUL, HUME'S WHEATEAR and at last the other biggie for these parts PLAIN LEAF-WARBLER. It may be the blandest *phyllo* but it is one of the toughest to see. Unless of course you fancy walking around Iran with a pair of binoculars. Nope? Me neither.



Hume's Wheatear

Back to the Waldorf as the sun sets and the comedy moment of our arrival in a dusty Land Cruiser alongside all the Lambos and Ferraris spewing out beautiful women with their Arab-Gangsta boyfriends. The main porter remembers me from the early morning and is aghast that I have actually been into the desert interior to look at birds.

DAY 2

It starts with bad news. Romania has added Dubai to the 14 day quarantine on arrival list. This is bad as there should be a free run from here to Bucharest, so we have to fly to somewhere neutral before going to Angela's home.

I leave her with various WHO Covid rate and IATA websites to find a solution as I have to meet today's guide.

As Stewart is in full employment, it is only occasionally he can guide. Today it is Dermot who has only recently taken up birding to fill the gaps from arranging Oman desert tours with tented camps.

What he may lack in birding ability he makes up for with sensible driving and a large selection of drinking yoghurt.

We get to Wamm Farms – a special hotspot in the Emirates. You have to arrange permission to go there as there are herds of Friesian cows for local milk and they grow large areas of grass for our bovine chums. One slight problem is that it is right by an ectopic part of Oman's border. Do not point your bins in that direction as all hell will let loose.



Wamm Farms –entrance, park outside. And no bawdy songs in Dibba please.

The birdy area at Wamm seems to be the Cow Graveyard. You are constantly stepping over skulls and spines in pursuit of the birds.

We get onto a PERSIAN WHEATEAR, or Red-Tailed in another nomenclature. That's about is here, no warblers calling back. Time to go to Dibba Port where there should be easier newbies.

SOOTY GULL is easy, but there is a slight problem here. It seems that UAE Construction has decided to re-develop the whole coast from Dibba to Fujairah at the same time. What should be sweet gull spots with chances for waders has become a chugging, messy dump.

I get a 2nd winter HUEGLIN'S GULL on the beach near Fuji but it's a long way home and Dermot doesn't want to lose his license by speeding.

DAY 3

Glory be. It's Australia Day, and as Stewart works up the Aussie Embassy helping Okkers get back home in these Covid times, he has a day off.

6 a.m'er and yet again I miss the gluttonous hotel breakfast buffet, and back to Wamm and that part of UAE as that's the best chance of newbies.

Loch Dibba was found by Stewart a few years ago. It's a massive water filled stone quarry but with good hinterland around it.

Off-roading we spot a slightly more matt wheatear. And it is the VARIABLE WHEATEAR. Just like a Hume's but in the right light you can see the difference.

A female HOODED WHEATEAR perches near us as well. Stu has been calling local birders as some had been seen before. Nice work fella.

His final moment of glory was a bird that I had spent several failed hours of searching for with Dermot...we had a couple of calls but no show.

He had it in the scope – and served up like a Bird Buffet was STRIOLATED BUNTING.

Hoots Mon, you da man!

It's only a half dayer as Stewart has to get back home and we have to change rooms at the Waldorf. Angela has found a solution to get to Romania.

It's Cairo.

But we need a bit more time in Dubai to sort PCR's to go there.

Before vacating our sea view room – I am scoping a gull feeding frenzy from the balcony and up out of the water pop 2 SOCOTRAN COMORANTS.

A nice finish to Dubai before it is locked down and the Instagrammers are all sent home. The cost for a hotel PCR, needed for Egypt was \$50 and done by a doctor. It really is rip-off Britain, that charges 5 times as much. Your head will be on a spike Hancock.

EGYPT

Not really birding here – as it is time for my wife to bucket list some strange triangular buildings in the desert west of Cairo.

I have been a few times before and once saw a hoopoe-lark by Cheops. Now it is more built up and busy.

But you can never get enough of this old ruin.



We stayed at the Kempinski by the Nile, except that our room had no view of the worlds 2nd biggest river. Odd that, as most rooms were empty and you would have thought it might have been nice of them to sort that.

And to cap it all, in this world of Booking.com and Trip Advisor, I was actually texted to rate how good was my check-in to the hotel!

After 10 minutes of being there. FFS.

ROMANIA

Customs at Bucharest are not so worried about where we have come from, but more-so that I have a British passport. I get the 3rd degree before being allowed in.

DAY 1

The Danube Delta.

The town of Tulcea is the kick-off point for the Delta. The trains from Bucharest are very slow and you have to change far west of Constanta. So the best option is a bus. Cheap, but you are packed in tight on small seats. It's a 4 hour trip with a loo break half way. Everyone is masked but one old lady in the back is hacking away in true covid style. You can't open any windows.

On arrival, the team – Iliuta, boss of BirdinginRomania and Marius arrive to get me and first stop is Ciuperca Lake a few minutes away.

Here I finally get a clean, definite CASPIAN GULL. As here they are in the majority – whereas in Bucharest the Yellow-legged seems the more abundant. Telling the 2 apart can be tricky as from a distance, all eyes seem black and finding the gray secondary protrusions into the black of the primaries is beyond my optical skills. We have a couple more hours in the region of the Tulcea before the first of my 3 nights at a reasonable local hotel.



Proper Caspian Gulls

DAY 2

Wild Goose Chase

Despite the cold – it seems the geese think it is warming up enough to bugger off to Siberia. If I were here a month ago there would be plenty more – so it takes the best part of the day to finally locate a flock containing RED-BREASTED GOOSE.

5 of them in a flock of 2 thousand White-fronted. A great spot from Marius here. Top birding. They stay in view for a good length of time until something puts the whole lot of them.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xWQ7QgUwQCw>

For the rest of the day we cruise around and find 15 Long-eared owls in pine trees outside of a small village.

And then we hit on a “Mystery Goose”

There’s a half white goose in another flock of White-fronts.

Could it be a blue Snow Goose?

Could it be a leukistic White-front? Chances even for a Ross'.

You decide.



Leukistic White-Front I reckon

The day finishes with Smew, Goosander, Bewick's swans, and a shed load of Long-legged Buzzards.

DAY 3

Delta Boat Trip

Iliuta had prepped me the night before with Extreme Angling Clothes.

Over trousers, under trousers, thick coats and heavy duty gloves. Even wellies and balaclavas. It was going to be cold on the water today.

The boss owns a whole host of boats as he does delta cruises in the summer – and we set off in our open topped fibreglass 30 footer.

The first tree lined channel throws up Lesser-spotted Woodies, a Black Woody and my first European GRAY-HEADED WOODPECKER. Previous *Picus Canus* have only been in China and Nepal.



Black Woodpecker



Gray-Headed Woodpecker

A Greater-spotted Eagle shows really well and we continue our route through channels and lakes to get to the famous delta town of Mile 23.

This is the only real habitation within the delta itself, and so is comprised of fishermen and hoteliers.

Just before we arrive we nail a PALLAS' GULL and full breeding plumage DALMATIAN PELICAN.

The boat ride back gets us the first of the Little Gulls to arrive here as well as incredible views of Bearded Tits.

The following morning, before my bus back to Buch, there's enough time to hit up a Sombre Tit in some wooded hills as well as finding a viewpoint for perfect Danube Delta photos.

There are less people coughing on the charabanc home. A good sign the pandemic is easing in these parts.

But as much as I loved the beauty of Tulcea and the Delta – as a Londoner, it was nice to get back to a crowded dirty city at last.



Sombre Tit

Delta on a spring morning

There's a two week intermission here as Angela and I bounce around Romania getting her vaccinated, a small property bought and renovated, as well an offer to host a radio show in Bucharest after I had appeared twice on "Ex-Pat Life" for Guerilla Radio

<https://www.guerrillaradio.ro/podcasturi/expat-life-04-03-2021/>

<https://www.guerrillaradio.ro/podcasturi/expat-life-11-03-2021/>

A text comes in from Marius – the warblers have arrived!

DAY 4

It takes a 7 a.m train to get to Constanta at a reasonable birding hour. In fact First Class ain't so bad on RomaniaRail. It's just slow.

The warblers have come in to a reeded area north of Constanta, through Mamaia [so quiet now, but Babylon in the summer] and near a small village of Vadu, over-looked by a massive abandoned chemical factory.

Fortunately there are huge areas of reedbeds here – although it is chipped away at the borders for the EU market for thatching for their Hansel and Gretel cottages.

Marius is confident of our target, but I have birded long enough to know that the only thing definite in the bird world is that Covid will screw up everything.

It's taking too long – not a sound from our warbler, but plenty of Water Pipits, Black-necked grebes and a few more Dalmatian Pelicans.

We go to Plan B – we play the call through the car speakers to get more range across the windy reeds, and it works – finally a pair of MOUSTACHED WARBLERS come in and super-skulk a few metres away on the water line.



That's it with the Birding in Romania team – I need to get a train back to Bucharest in time for the bars to be still open.

Another intermission for a few weeks that sees a planned trip to Morocco cancelled after Royal Air Maroc cancel my flights with 2 days notice before I fly, a Romanian Temporary Residence permit which would have gotten me a vaccine – refused because of Brexit – but I have had some luck. An advert seen on Cloudbirders – checks that no visas or quarantine are needed, just the 72 hour PCR – and they have guide availability. And it's a short distance from Bucharest to get to:

GEORGIA [the country - not where they play the Masters]

DAY 1

Arrival and straight to Plan B.

Plan A never stood a chance. After a 5 a.m arrival and rendezvous with Alex from BirdingCaucasus, I am told that the road north to Kazbegi is closed and will be for a few days to come because of heavy snow. We will do the trip in reverse. The only problem with this is that every day counts with the warbler migration and we could be a bit too early by going South first. It is the only option though – so we set the SatNav for Lake Jandari.

The legacy of Communism is everywhere here – huge panel built high-rise housing blocks, and Communist era cars are plentiful too. But off the main highway we find the serenity of the Caucasus. SIBERIAN CHIFFCHAFF is seen by a small river – calling distinctly. It's not a full species but the *tristis* ssp of a normal Chiffchaff.

The lake is not far away and we get there and park up on the grass next to the water. Alex gets onto a Stonechat and in some taxonomies it is a NORTHERN CASPIAN STONECHAT, however in reality it is a new ssp *hemprichii* that used to be a *variagatus*. No tick but a nice start. It seems a good day for raptor migration and over the next hour we see Steppe Buzzards and Steppe Eagles overhead. And finally 4 ARMENIAN GULLS come close enough for identification.



Lake Jandari

Record shot, *hemprichii* stonechat

Our final destination and base for 3 nights is Dedoplistskaro quite near the Azerbaijan border. There is a huge Georgian enmity to their neighbours, which Alex says is due to centuries of border issues and their attitude – but we know deep down it was that Azerbaijan won Eurovision in 2011 when Georgia didn't even make the final.

DAY 2

Taribana Plain

We are hitting the steppes today to see what is around. It is a cold and wet day – perfect for not seeing migratory warblers but good still for larks –

Skylark, Crested, Great Short-Toed and Calandra as well as loads of Isabelline Wheatears. Eastern Imperial Eagle shows soon as well as Lesser Gray Shrike.

On the way back we get a nice flock of ROCK PETRONIA.

DAY 3

Pantishana Canyon, Vashlovani N.P.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=60jni3GCMjE>

The early morning is spent getting my Day 3 PCR test – the rule here. An hour's drive to a private hospital on a Sunday, arranged by Alex ends with a £20 PCR test.

The cheapest yet. We really are being ripped off back in Blighty. On to the steppes now.

Still no warbler migration, but we do get perfect views of Chukar, Wryneck, Rock Bunting, Wallcreeper and Western Rock Nuthatch.

On the steppes on the way back all 4 harriers are seen well especially Pallid Harrier.

Nothing new for me but as I said to Alex, a few years ago and this would have been my best ever birding day. It's all about the timing.

DAY 4

Stepantsminda – formerly known as Kasbegi.

It's a long drive, a transect of Georgia from SE to North with a slow crawl through Tbilisi half way through. We get to Steps for lunch and see Lammergeier from the restaurant balcony. Alex has over-ordered for lunch and we have to get through 20 huge Georgian dumplings as well as lamb kebabs.

Post lunch birdage provides my best session since Day 1 in Dubai – a distant memory by now.

A large patch of Sea Buckthorn, a spiky small tree for those not bothered with flora – gets the local ssp of Black Redstart – then I see a bright white cap – yeehah, there's GULDENSTADTS REDSTART. And another, and another. This is the perfect time of year for them to be low and a minute from the car park. Easy birding. Alex gets a CAUCASIAN GREATER ROSEFINCH in the same

buckthorn stand and for a beautiful moment I had male redstart and rosefinch in the same binocular view.

Now for more of the Caucasian Big Five. We find our first viewpoint still under snow – but have to trudge knee deep through it to scope a mountainside. No luck but Twite *ssp brevirostris* and Ring Ouzel are seen well.

Alex reckons to try another side of the canyon a short drive away, and bless his lucky eyes and powerful scope, we get on to 96, yes ninety-six CAUCASIAN BLACK GROUSE.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cVkbYYaCeUo>

The day finishes with reasonable views of a couple of RED-FRONTED SERINS

We have 3 nights at a sweet Guesthouse run by a charming Georgian called Now. Food is perfect, again in huge quantities, Wifi excellent but the whole area is very cold. I have to sleep with some clothes on.

DAY 5

The best viewpoint for another of the Big 5 is snowed over – so we have to park by the monastery and trek through the snow and ice to get to a good position. It is minus 5 and with windchill probably -8. We look for 3 hours with no success. This is repeated in the evening again with no success. The disappointment sandwiches a CAUCASIAN MOUNTAIN CHIFFCHAFF and *ssp Dipper*.

DAY 6

We have to do it all over again.

Slidy drive – park - snow-trudge - set up scopes – freeze – not see the bird.

But then, on the verge of hypothermia - Alex gets them. CAUCASIAN SNOWCOCKS. 3, distant but enough Swarovski power to pick up the key features. Big 5 in da bag.



Snowcock country

Alpine Accentors, Red-breasted Flycatcher and Yellow Wagtail *ssp feldeggi* are the extras today. We are leaving tomorrow, so this is my last night sleeping in jeans.

DAY 7

There has been no snow melt at all, so the route back is still through roads with 3 metre high snow banks either side. The truck queue going to Russia is still several kilometres long, but with Alex's nippy Toyota Delicia we are able to get through all the hazards as well as picking up Horned Larks *ssp penicillata* on the way.

There's one bit target today and it is on the other side of Tbilisi in some pine forests. We go there to get it before we have lunch. Except it proves a bugger to find, and poor Alex is pulling hair out on this one as he is writing a scientific paper on the species' distribution in Georgia. Our last patch of forest is Last Chance Saloon or we have to come back tomorrow, which will waste a lot of time as we are headed the other way entirely for most of the day.

Alex tries a different call – and at last – a reply. It comes in to a close pine and finally we get KRUPERS NUTHATCH. A thrill as I kinda collect this family, so now just a couple in India, a couple in America and the tricky one in Algeria to go.

2 tour nights and 3 of my own now in Tbilisi. Civilisation at last. The room is warm, Wifi good, but there's a 9pm curfew here, which means they close the bars at 7.30 p.m. On finding this out and seeing as its 7 pm by the time I find a bar – they are shocked to see I order 4 beers in one go – and thus begins my reputation in this sweet capital city.

DAY 8

The final day of birding in Georgia. In fact the final day of birding since leaving the UK just short of 3 months ago. The Epic Quest to not be Britain is coming to a close.

We start close to Tbilisi where a photographer has posted a pic of an Eagle Owl roost on some cliffs. The rest is straight out of Benny Hill as we drive here and there trying to find a rock face that matches the photo. Togger refuses to take calls and our frustration increases until eventually he does answer a call and gets us to “just past the blue and white house, by a pylon and look down across the canyon”. Now it is obvious. My first cliff-perched Eagle Owl ever. A good beginning to the day. Alex's next client will of course be brought right to this spot without the 3 hours of searching I had to do. It never seems to happen the other way round!



Eagle Owl

We drive to Lake Kumisi to check on waders and any cranes – and with a huge chunk of luck, there is a speck in the scope of a crane, not tickable really, then 5 fly over, right above us as if to land. DEMOISELLE CRANES. Perfect flight views.

Today was also all about trying to find a few warbler targets, as by now they must have arrived from the Middle East. If not – then there might well be something to this “climate change” all the kids are talking about.

The dusty road to the David Gareti Monastery has a few stands of low scrubby trees, and we split 3 ways to increase our chance. Alex gets the first response, and the scratchy chittery call brings in MENIETRIE’S WARBLER. I have now come full circle as I was playing this bird in Dubai in January with no success, but here it is on the other end of its migration to respond at last.

Eastern Orphee has still not arrived it seems.

We head back to Tbilisi as there are rumours of flycatchers at the not-opened-yet new zoo.

Alex’s pal Dachi has been with us all day, and as he has worked in the new zoo with set-up - he is able to get us in.

The team there point out where there have been sightings and we explore the area. Soon enough there 2 males and a female SEMI-COLLARED FLYCATCHER.

An absolute brilliant end to the day and the whole epic as it brings up my 30th newbie since that first Graceful Prinia by the Waldorf pool in Dubai.

Time to go home to London.

Thanks to Stewart, Iliuta, Marius and Alex for everything.

Let’s hope it is back to normal soon.

A just vaccinated:

Jules Eden



The author, at his finest.

