

# TURKESTAN

7 MAY – 26 MAY 2006

## TOUR REPORT

**LEADER:** DAVE FARROW

Once again this tour excelled in thrilling us all with a mouth-watering list of quality birds. We birded our way through the deserts and mountains of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, up to the steppes of Astana, which sits on the River Ishim that drains to the Arctic Ocean, all the way finding the exciting birds that typify this Birdquest tour. We found 283 species, something of a record for this tour, and among our many successes were seeing fourteen adult Sociable Lapwings plus three chicks and a nest being incubated, four male Caspian Plovers with a crèche of eleven chicks, nine Pander's Ground Jays, eight Macqueen's Bustards, and four species of owl headlined by the magnificent Tengmalm's that we found in the daytime, alongside its nest hole in the Tien Shan spruce forest. Additionally we saw a wonderful spread of first-class birds that included Himalayan Snowcock, Black Grouse, White-headed Duck, Pallid Harrier, Little and Baillon's Crakes, Demoiselle Cranes, Ibisbill, White-tailed Lapwing, Black-winged and Collared Pratincoles, Yellow-eyed Dove, White-winged Woodpecker, eleven species of lark that included Black, White-winged and Hume's Short-toed Larks, Pale Martin, Brown, Altai and Black-throated Accentors, White-tailed Rubythroats, White-throated Robins, Blue-capped, Güldenstädt's and Eversmann's Redstarts, Finsch's and Variable Wheatears, Desert and Hume's Whitethroats, Paddyfield, Sykes's, Booted, Asian Desert, Eastern Orphean and Sulphur-bellied Warblers plus a stunningly vivid Severtzov's Tit-Warbler, Songar, Rufous-naped, Azure, Yellow-breasted and Turkestan Tits, White-crowned Penduline Tits, Saxaul Sparrow, Red-fronted Serin, Desert and Mongolian Finches, Red-mantled Rosefinch, Red-headed, White-capped, Grey-necked and Pine Buntings, and swarms of Rosy Starlings. What a delicious menu of delights!

We began our fun gently, with a drive from Tashkent to Samarkand that was interrupted (of course) by our first birding. As we travelled we found White Storks at their nests, Egyptian and Eurasian Black Vultures, Chukar, European and Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, many roadside European Rollers, a Red-rumped Swallow building its mud nest in a bus shelter, Pied and Variable Wheatears, Indian Golden Orioles and an infestation of Rosy Starlings around the fruiting mulberry trees.

Our first full day's birding was in the Zerafshan Hills at Aman Kutan, where the Hawthorn-scented hillside was buzzing with life. We found a pair of Lammergeiers, White-winged Woodpecker, an inquisitive Asian Paradise Flycatcher, numerous noisy White-throated Robins, Eastern Olivaceous and Eastern Orphean Warblers, Hume's Whitethroats, our first Yellow-breasted and Turkestan Tits, Eastern

Rock Nuthatches, Hume's Short-toed Larks, Rock Sparrow, Grey-capped Goldfinch and White-capped and the abundant Red-headed Buntings. A Barred Warbler joined migrant Greenish Warblers and Siberian Chiffchaffs, and a speculative stop in a new place yielded a family of Finsch's Wheatears.

A reorganised itinerary meant we had adequate time for viewing the ancient monuments, and in Samarkand we paid a morning visit to the marvellous Registan and the mausoleum of Bibi Khanum, each place alive with swarms of Alpine Swifts to accompany the visual feast of the decorated buildings. After lunch we hit the road for Bukhara, our bus dying just 30km out of town. A hot wait for new transport gave us a bonus view of a male Shikra low overhead, and then we were on our way, with another roadside stop en-route providing some great views of White-tailed Lapwings.

Close to this desert city we had a productive morning's birding at Lake Tudakul, with a 'write-in' mammal in the form of a Golden Jackal to kick things off. Our first stop yielded Pied Bushchats, Indian Reed Warblers and a couple of Moustached Warblers, and around the pools and reedbeds around the lakeshore we found Sykes's Warbler, Caspian Reed Warblers, Bearded Reedlings, migrant Red-backed Shrikes, some very obliging Rufous-tailed Scrub Robins, Citrine and Black-headed Wagtails, and some very interesting Common Reed Buntings of the *pyrrhuloides* form. Larger birds were well represented, with Whiskered, Gull-billed and Little Terns, Pygmy Cormorants, Purple Heron, Glossy Ibis, Eurasian Spoonbill, Caspian Gulls, Red-crested Pochards, Ferruginous Ducks, Greater Sand Plovers and Kentish Plovers with chicks. As the heat built up we retreated to the city, re-emerging for some sightseeing in the afternoon, and among the many madrasahs and exquisitely decorated buildings, a birds-eye view from the Kalyan minaret was a highlight.

Making an early start the following morning we headed off into the Kyzyl Kum desert, and as dawn broke we found our first Pander's Ground Jays feeding on the roadside. Several were found, some at very close range, with adults still feeding begging juveniles among the sandy hillocks. We also found song-fighting Desert Whitethroats, Scrub Warblers, Spanish Sparrow, Desert Finches and a nest with five eggs of a Steppe Grey Shrike. Migrant traps revealed large numbers of Blyth's Reed Warblers, a Long-tailed Shrike and a single Thrush Nightingale. As we headed towards the Amu Darya we found Long-legged Buzzard and Isabelline Wheatears, and then we entered the intensively cultivated region of Khorezm and our night stop at the fabled city of Khiva.

Short surveys around the city produced Eastern Olivaceous Warblers and a profusion of Rooks, and then we spent the morning looking around the wonderful 'museum-city' of old Khiva, lovingly restored to its full glory and reputedly requiring a week to see it all! We headed to the airport for a ride to Tashkent in a Yakovlev Yak-40 (another museum piece!) and on arrival we fled the heat wave afflicting the city and headed for the sylvan oasis of Beldersay in the foothills of the Tien Shan.

Around our hotel the bushes and hillsides were alive with early morning song, and we quickly found our main target of Rufous-naped Tit. We had close views of our first White-capped Penduline Tit, Yellow-breasted Tits were very visible here with a nest in the hotel building itself, and Turkestan Tits completed the set. We found more White-winged Woodpeckers, Oriental Turtle Doves, Hume's Whitethroats and White-capped Buntings, Red-rumped Swallows joined the Common House Martins nesting on the hotel terraces, and nearby in an open mountain valley we found Rock Buntings and Siberian Stonechats, plus both Eurasian and Himalayan Griffon Vultures cruising overhead.

Dragging ourselves away from this lovely spot, we headed back to Tashkent airport and our flight to Almaty, saying farewell to Sardor, our very competent guide, and hello to Vassily and his team. Pausing in Almaty city for a night, we were on the road again the next morning heading east towards

China and the deserts of the south-east. We paused by a colony of Pale Martins, busy around a sand cliff until the appearance of some Eurasian Hobbies caused them to disappear into the ether. Around rocky hills we found singing Grey-necked Buntings, Golden Eagle and Black-eared Kites. As the desert sun pumped out its heat, we eventually found four handsome Saxaul Sparrows, numerous Turkestan Shrikes and some skittish Mongolian Finches. In some riverine Turanga woodland we found four Yellow-eyed Doves, plus another male White-winged Woodpecker. At the end of the day we retreated to our lodgings in a shady wood by the Charyn River, finding Azure Tits nesting right outside our rooms, Eurasian Woodcocks roding over the trees and some very vocal European Scops Owls calling around us, one of which surprised us with a very close view as it peered out of a nest box!

A thorough search of this area produced just a handful of Black-bellied Sandgrouse – the desert was clearly very dry and a previously productive waterhole was all but dried out. We did however find our first Macqueen's Bustard, Tawny Pipits, Desert Wheatears and a Desert Warbler with a nest containing three chicks, and a single Black Stork sailed over. Lusher areas yielded Richard's Pipit, song-fighting Barred Warblers and Citrine Wagtails, and we found a small flock of male Lesser Kestrels cruising over the grasshopper-rich grass. We visited the spectacular Red Canyon, and nearby we found Greater Sand Plovers and Horned Larks on the stony plain, and Isabelline Wheatears were as abundant as their Great Gerbil friends.

Another waterhole visited produced another 35 Black-bellied Sandgrouse, and we found our first flock of Demoiselle Cranes with Collared Pratincoles hawking over their heads. We then headed into rain as we returned to Almaty and up into the Tien Shan mountains. The heat wave had broken just in time to dump a load of rain and snow over the high slopes, something of a day of climatic extremes! A pair of Brown Dipper and a trio of Blue Whistling Thrushes introduced us to the local avifauna, and a pair of Eversmann's Redstarts made a prompt appearance behind our lodgings as the thaw commenced.

Seeing one of the most difficult species so soon after arrival set the tone for the rest of our stay. On our first morning, we started (with a bump!) under blue skies and blinding sunshine at 3400m, when we found a pair of Himalayan Snowcocks ambling across a snowy slope, the male stopping periodically to yodel at us. A short stroll around the semi-abandoned Cosmostantsia revealed Gldenstdt's Redstarts, Brown and Altai Accentors, Red-billed and Alpine Choughs, Water Pipits and Plain Mountain Finches. Dropping lower into the juniper thickets we found White-tailed Rubythroats, Black-throated Accentor, White-winged Grosbeaks, Red-mantled Rosefinches, Sulphur-bellied Warbler and a stunningly vivid Severtzov's Tit Warbler. And all before lunch!

We descended to the Bolshoi Almatinskiy lakeside where we found dapper Ruddy Shelducks and a single Ibisbill, preening itself among the boulders. Walking in the spruce forests we saw a very pallid Merlin, Spotted Nutcrackers, flighty Red-fronted Serins, Blue-capped Redstarts, Songar Tit, Greenish and Hume's Leaf Warblers. An unexpected call from a forested hillside lured us in for a thorough search, which led to the discovery of a nest hole with a Tengmalm's Owl sitting calmly nearby! Prolonged close views were repeated with a second visit to the site (ensuring this became 'bird-of-the-trip'), which produced another surprise with a lekking Black Grouse! As we descended the slopes towards the plains once more, a showy Grasshopper Warbler posed at the roadside.

Once more in the sweeping lowlands, we stopped for lunch by Lake Sorbulak, where between mouthfuls we saw Great White Pelicans among the Dalmatian colony, Horned and Black-necked Grebes, Caspian Gulls, and Black and White-winged Terns. A nearby farm building had a busy colony of bubble-gum pink Rosy Starlings, and as we neared our destination, Calandra Larks began to

appear at the roadsides. Our next halt was in the endless space of the Taucum desert that dwarfed our yurt camp set amid the dry plain. Here we found a gorgeous group of Caspian Plovers, with four chestnut-breasted males herding a crèche of eleven chicks, while numerous Greater Sand Plovers, Isabelline Wheatears and Bimaculated, Greater and Lesser Short-toed Larks littered the landscape. A vigil at a nearby waterhole scanned the incoming flocks of Black-bellied Sandgrouse, among which we found 13 lovely bronzed Pin-taileds and an unlovely flight view of a single Pallas's. A visit to the local migrant-trap produced Desert Finches, Oriental and European Turtle Doves, Great Reed Warbler and a single Wood Warbler. A midday pause however was rudely interrupted by a mini-tornado ripping through our camp, destroying one-and-a-half of our three yurts and exposing their occupants to the elements! A sterling group effort (and valuable engineering experience!) assisted the rebuilding of one of them, and then it was time for more birding! At a rich bushy wadi, where we had to dodge jay-walking Horsfield's Tortoises, we found an obliging female European Nightjar, Rufous-tailed Bush Robins and some 'proper' Steppe Grey Shrikes. As we returned across the rain-kissed desert we startled a Macqueen's Bustard at close range, which proceeded to run about fanning its tail upwards and giving us the best of possible views. Surmising its young were nearby, we returned to our rebuilt camp, to enjoy a feast of 'Beshbirmak' (Horse and pasta!) washed down with the local tonic!

We left this magic landscape for a much more temperate one – the wide-open spaces of Astana situated at 51 degrees North. Assisted once again by our local birding guide here, we immediately headed out onto the surrounding marshes, enjoying a balmy evening watching reedbeds full of Paddyfield Warblers plus a few Savi's Warblers, while the air was filled with Black-winged Pratincoles hawking insects.

Our hunt for the critically-endangered Sociable Lapwing struck gold on the open steppe, where we found a group of 12 of these striking birds. As we watched, one pair separated themselves from the group and the female sat down, obviously incubating, but we had to resist the urge to investigate more closely! Other joys of the area appeared, with dainty Pallid Harriers cruising about, our first Black and White-winged Larks, Common Quail, large flocks of Demoiselle Cranes, and numerous hunting Short-eared Owls. Booted Warblers sang from the low plants, Sykes's Wagtails abounded and a Long-eared Owl sat on its nest alongside a large downy chick.

A drive out to the Kurgalzhin steppe lakes was punctuated with some handsome Red-footed Falcons, and then we found another Sociable Lapwing – a female together with three chicks! Around the lakes we scanned through flocks of gulls finding Slender-billed, a single Little, Mew, Pallas's and numerous Steppe Gulls (the latter three species also busy with chicks around a colony). Mute Swans were joined by Whoopers, White-headed Ducks showed well as did summer-plumaged Red-necked Phalaropes, Curlew Sandpipers, Ruff and plenty of Terek Sandpipers. Northern Wheatears dotted the land, we found a convenient roadside drinking pool attended by a flock of Twite, and once again Black and White-winged Larks abounded.

On our last morning in this fantastic area, we began in an area of riverine scrub where Azure Tits, Bluethroats, Cetti's Warbler and Common Rosefinches were in good voice. Our target of Pine Bunting gave itself up without a fuss, with four birds seen in the morning sunshine. A final quick trip to the city reedbeds was successful when crakes started appearing, with three confiding Little Crakes, plus a Baillon's Crake that came to within just three metres of us! How absolutely marvellous! What a splendid way to end a great trip!

Once again, this exciting Birdquest that travels through Central Asia, from the Kyzyl Kum desert in the south through to the steppes of Northern Kazakhstan, proved itself to be one of the finest Palaearctic birding adventures with a fantastic wealth of memorable birds.

## SYSTEMATIC LIST

Species which were heard but not seen are indicated by the symbol (H).

Species which were not personally recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (NL).

### PODICIPEDIDAE

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*: Several were seen at Lake Tudakul and another near Astana.

Red-necked Grebe *Podiceps grisegena*: Good numbers on the Astana steppe lakes this year with up to 15 seen in a day.

Horned Grebe *Podiceps auritus*: A single bird was seen on Lake Sorbulak, then a couple more on the Astana steppe lakes.

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*: A couple were seen in Uzbekistan then plenty more at Sorbulak and on the Astana lakes.

Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis*: Our first was at Sorbulak then we had several encounters with small groups on the Astana steppe lakes.

### PHALACROCORACIDAE

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*: Plentiful at Sorbulak and on the Astana lakes, plus a few seen at Lake Tudakul.

Pygmy Cormorant *Phalacrocorax pygmeus*: Some fine views of up to 20 birds around Lake Tudakul.

### PELICANIDAE

Great White Pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus*: A surprise find of three birds with the following species at Lake Sorbulak.

Dalmatian Pelican *Pelecanus crispus*: A colony of 235 or more at Sorbulak provided some good close looks at flying and swimming birds. We also had good views of birds around the Kurghalzhin lakes near Astana.

### ARDEIDAE

Great Bittern *Botaurus stellaris*: One was seen in flight at roadside pools near Lake Sorbulak.

Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*: Some four or so were seen in the air as we approached Khiva.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*: Six or so were seen around Lake Tudakul.

Great Egret *Egretta alba*: Odd ones were seen around wetland habitats along our route, with several more in the Astana area.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*: A scattering of sightings, most numerous at Lake Tudakul and in the Astana area.

Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea*: Only seen around Lake Tudakul where we found five.

### CICONIIDAE

Black Stork *Ciconia nigra*: A single individual cruised over us in the Charyn deserts.

White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*: 72 were counted along the road from Tashkent to Samarkand, the colony of nests visible on roadside pylons.

### THRESKIORNITHIDAE

Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*: One was seen en-route from Tashkent, then another four were seen around Lake Tudakul.

Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia*: Three birds seen circling and dropping in at Lake Tudakul.

## ANATIDAE

- Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*: Up to 20 seen on the Astana steppe lakes. These are the 'real thing' here in Kazakhstan and not part of the introduced population of western Europe.
- Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus*: Several seen on two days on the Astana steppe lakes.
- Greylag Goose *Anser anser*: Numerous on the Astana steppe lakes, also noted at Lake Tudakul and near Nurly. These pink-billed birds are of the eastern *rubrirostris* race
- Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea*: Several seen around Charyn, on the Bolshoi Almatinskiy lake and by the waterhole at Kanshengyal.
- Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*: Numerous on the Astana steppe lakes, plus a single at Sorbulak.
- Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope*: A drake was seen at Sorbulak and then several more on the Astana steppe lakes.
- Gadwall *Anas strepera*: Present in small numbers at Lake Tudakul, at Sorbulak and on the Astana steppe lakes.
- Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca*:
- Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*: Odd birds encountered, Sorbulak, and around the Astana steppe lakes.
- Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*: A few were seen around the Astana steppe lakes.
- Garganey *Anas querquedula*: Pleasingly numerous around the Astana steppe lakes, plus a handful of others seen at Sorbulak and at Lake Tudakul.
- Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata*: Fairly common around the Astana steppe lakes, others were noted at Lake Tudakul and Sorbulak.
- Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina*: A good showing by these exotic ducks at Lake Tudakul, plus a few pairs at Sorbulak and then plenty more around the Astana steppe lakes.
- Common Pochard *Aythya ferina*: A single was seen at Lake Tudakul, then we found many around the Astana steppe lakes.
- Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca*: Five were seen at Lake Tudakul, then another two were seen on the Astana steppe lakes.
- Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*: Several seen on the Astana steppe lakes.
- Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula*: Four immature drakes was seen on Lake Jumay.
- White-headed Duck *Oxyura leucocephala*: A pair were seen close to Astana, then we found 17 birds including some nice blue-billed males on Lake Jumay.

## ACCIPITRIDAE

- European Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus*: Three singles were seen; in the Kyzyl Kum desert, the Charyn desert, and near Astana.
- Black-eared Kite *Milvus lineatus*: A few were seen patrolling the plains in the Charyn area, then quite a few at Sorbulak and a couple at Kanshengyal.
- Lammergeier *Gypaetus barbatus*: Nice views of two at Aman Kutan at just 1700m, then another was seen at a more typical altitude in the Tien Shan.
- Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*: Odd birds were seen near Samarkand, near Charyn and near Kanshengyal.
- Eurasian Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus*: Five were seen at Aman Kutan, then one more at Beldersay.
- Himalayan Griffon Vulture *Gyps himalayensis*: Three birds were seen distantly cruising over the Chimgan mountains, then we found another sub-adult bird in the Tien Shan near Almaty.
- Eurasian Black Vulture *Aegypius monachus*: Four were seen en-route between Tashkent and Samarkand, a couple at Aman Kutan, and another two near Kokpek..
- Short-toed Eagle *Circaetus gallicus*: A fairly distant bird was seen hovering over the desert near Kanshengyal.
- Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*: Frequently seen around wetland habitats, particularly numerous at Lake Tudakul and around the Astana steppe lakes.

Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus*: Only seen in the Astana region where we saw numerous males hunting over the steppe.

Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus*: Just three seen, at Charyn, Kanshengyal and Astana.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*: Several singles were seen in Uzbekistan and also in the Tien Shan.

Shikra *Accipiter badius*: Some good looks at these this year, with our first male soaring low over our broken-down bus near Samarkand, another in Bukhara and two in the Charyn area.

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*: Scattered sightings of *vulpinus* race birds, at Aman Kutan, Beldersay, the Tien Shan and Astana area.

Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus*: More plentiful than the above, typically found on the open arid plains and deserts and most memorably in the Charyn area where we enjoyed close views of birds from the vehicles.

Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*: A couple were seen in the Kokpek area, plus an immature in the Tien Shan.

Booted Eagle *Hieraetus pennatus*: A couple of dark phase birds were seen in the Charyn area, plus an immature bird roaming about in the Tien Shan.

#### FALCONIDAE

Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni*: A group of four males of these delightful falcons was seen hunting grasshoppers on the Sugaty Plain.

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*: Seen regularly throughout the tour.

Red-footed Falcon *Falco vespertinus*: Some wonderful views of birds close to their nests in roadside shelter belts near Astana.

Merlin *Falco columbarius*: We had a good look at a male of the ghostly *pallidus* race in the Bolshoi Almatinskiy.

Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo*: A few were encountered, mostly in Uzbekistan and the Charyn area. Nests were seen on our first morning by our Tashkent hotel and in the orchard at Pavlogradka

#### TETRAONIDAE

Black Grouse *Tetrao tetrix*: Part of the double-surprise of hearing a Tengmalm's Owl and then this in the same corner of forest in the Tien Shan. On our final visit to that enchanted forest patch, we watched a single cock lekking beneath the spruces in the early morning. And I didn't even know we were in range for the species!

#### PHASIANIDAE

Himalayan Snowcock *Tetraogallus himalayensis*: A pair were watched at a reasonably close range at 3400m in the Tien Shan, the male making his eerie call across the snowy slope as he followed the female. Unusually that was our only sighting. Some others were heard, but my guess is that they had gone higher up in response to the warm weather.

Chukar *Alectoris chukar*: Our only sightings were of two near Samarkand, then three more were seen at Aman Kutan.

Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix*: We had good flight views of at least five in one small area near Astana, as we marched across the steppes!

Common Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus* (H): Several birds were heard calling in the distance in the Charyn area, plus another in the Tien Shan.

#### RALLIDAE

Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus* (H): Heard grunting and squealing in the reedbeds at Lake Tudakul and at Sorbulak.



Little Crake *Porzana parva*: Some good close looks at up to four birds in various states of plumage in the reedbeds near Astana, with one or two vocal males coming very close to where we were standing. In spite of changes to the reedbeds here, this site continues to produce!

Baillon's Crake *Porzana pusilla*: A splendid individual in the reedbeds near Astana decided to come to within three metres of where we stood, allowing for full scrutiny of his delicate plumage. The last bird of the tour, and alongside the previous species it did get a little confusing until we had fine views of both!

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*: A few scattered sightings.

Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra*: Common on the Astana steppe lakes, also seen at Lake Tudakul and Sorbulak.

#### GRUIDAE

Demoiselle Crane *Anthropoides virgo*: Our first encounter was with a migrant flock of 14 in a field near Nurly, then we found some big flocks around Astana with 600 counted in one day. We also found a pair with chicks on the shore of one of the Kurghalzhin lakes. Perhaps the most attractive member of its family!

#### OTIDIDAE

Macqueen's Bustard *Chlamydotis macqueenii*: These made an early appearance on the tour with a total of four seen in the Charyn deserts, then at Kanshengyal we saw three or four splendid examples walking out onto the plain, the best of which was a bird startled by our vehicles at close range, yet it ran back and forwards in the low bushes nearby, fanning and cocking its tail but not running away from us! Possibly the best view this leader has had of the species in six visits to Kazakhstan, we could only guess that there were some chicks nearby and it was all some kind of distraction display. Numbers here were down on previous visits however, and the bad news is that the area is to be rented as a hunting ground for an Arab Sheikh! The Central Asian population, recently split from Houbara Bustard *C. undulata* on the basis of morphological and behavioural differences, is now highly endangered due to excessive hunting by wealthy Arabs both in the Gulf region and Pakistan.

#### IBIDORHYNCHIDAE

Ibisbill *Ibidorhyncha struthersii*: A single bird was present by the river emerging onto the Bolshoi Almatinskiy lake, sat preening unconcernedly as we crept up on it. A good view of a great bird.

#### RECURVIROSTRIDAE

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*: A few were seen on various pools along our route, most commonly around the Astana steppe lakes and in Uzbekistan.

Pied Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta*: A single in the heat haze at Kurghalzhin.

#### GLAREOLIDAE

Collared Pratincole *Glareola pratincola*: Two were seen distantly at Lake Tudakul and three that were no closer hawking over a field of Demoiselle Cranes at Nurly.

Black-winged Pratincole *Glareola nordmanni*: Our first were some 40 hawking in the sunshine over us and the reedbeds on our first evening in Astana. We went on to see plenty more over the steppes of the surrounding area, with nesting colonies in several areas indicated by their lively scolding.

## CHARADRIIDAE

- Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*: Odd pairs were seen at several localities, usually on open areas near waterholes.
- Common Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*: A single seen on the Kurghalzhin lakes.
- Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus*: A half-dozen seen at Lake Tudakul included a pair with three fluffy chicks.
- Greater Sand Plover *Charadrius leschenaulti*: Our first were a pair at Lake Tudakul, then we found just twice that in the Charyn region. They were more numerous at Kanshengyal around our camp and out on the flat plain where we saw 20 or so in a day, including well grown juveniles
- Caspian Plover *Charadrius asiaticus*: Our first contact was at some distance, and after walking 1000m closer, we enjoyed great views of a crèche of four vividly-coloured males herding 11 chicks through the low sward, perfectly lit by a setting sun on the endless plain at Kanshengyal.
- Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*: Several summer-plumaged birds seen on the Astana steppe lakes.
- Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius*: A few hours into our search for this rare bird, we spotted an angry bird powering upwards to see off a passing Pallid Harrier. We discovered 12 birds here, two of which formed a pair, the female sitting down to reveal where her nest was! Another single was seen at a second site, then we found a female with three chicks on the Kurghalzhin steppe, heartening to see successful breeding of these drastically declining bird.
- White-tailed Lapwing *Vanellus leucurus*: Eleven birds on roadside flashes near Bukhara were much appreciated, then we saw another eight at Lake Tudakul.
- Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*: Plentiful in the Astana area, with odd individuals encountered in the Charyn area and at Kanshengyal.

## SCOLOPACIDAE

- Little Stint *Calidris minuta*: A single was seen at Lake Tudakul, and then dozens more were seen on the shores of the Astana steppe lakes.
- Temminck's Stint *Calidris temminckii*: A single was seen on a roadside flash near Bukhara then another four in the Astana region.
- Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*: A couple of dozen lovely summer-plumaged birds seen around the Astana steppe lakes.
- Dunlin *Calidris alpina*: Just a few around the Astana steppe lakes.
- Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*: A score of birds were seen at Sorbulak, then a few hundred on two days around the Astana steppe lakes that included some splendid examples of their breeding dress.
- Eurasian Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola*: Two roding birds were visible at dusk from our lodge at Charyn.
- Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*: A few vocal pairs of birds were seen around the Astana steppe.
- Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata*: Two birds were seen on a heat-hazy lake near Astana
- Common Redshank *Tringa totanus*: Also present around the Astana steppe lakes.
- Marsh Sandpiper *Tringa stagnatilis*: A few very nice summer plumaged birds seen on wetlands around Astana.
- Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* (NL); Three seen at Lake Tudakul.
- Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*: A single bird was flushed from a pool at Kanshengyal.
- Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*: Few were seen around Astana, more were at Lake Tudakul. The Russian name is 'Fifi'!
- Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus*: Up to ten seen around the Kurghalzhin lakes, and five more near Pavlogradka.

- Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*: Odd birds encountered along our route, often along rivers.  
Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*: Two lovely summer-plumaged examples at the Astana steppe lakes.  
Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus*: Somewhat down in numbers during our visit, we saw just 200 over two days around the Astana steppe lakes.

#### LARIDAE

- Pallas's Gull *Larus ichthyaetus*: One of the highlights of the Kurghalzhin lakes, where a total of 96 birds were counted on two lakes, one of which held a colony that was divided into incubating and displaying birds, and a group of parents standing with 14 chicks. We also enjoyed some great flight views as adult birds foraged over the steppe.  
Little Gull *Larus minutus*: A single adult seen on the Kurghalzhin lakes.  
Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus*: Seen around all the major wetlands visited.  
Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei*: At least 20 seen around the Kurghalzhin lakes, all in full breeding flush.  
Mew Gull *Larus canus*: 60 birds, many with chicks, alongside the Pallas's and Steppe Gulls colony on the Astana steppe lakes.  
Caspian Gull *Larus [cachinnans] cachinnans*: Fairly numerous at Lake Tudakul, and then again at Lake Sorbulak where some large grey chicks were seen on a nest on a reedbed pool.  
Steppe Gull *Larus [cachinnans] barabensis*: All the birds seen around Astana were of this form, showing darker upperparts than the above, a less brutal looking bill and a more rounded head, and a smaller white mirror on the underside of the wingtip.

#### STERNIDAE

- Gull-billed Tern *Sterna nilotica*: Two were seen at Lake Tudakul, three over fields close to Khiva, a couple on the Kurghalzhin lakes and a single dipped into the Kanshengyal waterhole.  
Caspian Tern *Sterna caspia*: A healthy showing on the Astana steppe lakes where we saw a group of 21, also a single at Lake Tudakul.  
Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*: Seen frequently in the Astana area and a few at Sorbulak, also at various localities in Uzbekistan the tour. Many of the birds showed much black on the bills, which is typical of the form *minussensis*. Central and eastern Kazakhstan is an area of intergradation between this form (breeding from central Siberia and the Altai eastwards) and the nominate race.  
Little Tern *Sterna albifrons*: A good number were seen at Lake Tudakul, then again on the Astana steppe lakes.  
Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybridus*: A single breeding plumage bird seen at Lake Tudakul  
Black Tern *Chlidonias niger*: Many seen about the pools and reedbeds around Astana, and at least six at Sorbulak.  
White-winged Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus*: We saw four over the lake at Sorbulak, then plenty more over the marshes and ponds of the Astana region.

#### PTEROCLIDIDAE

- Black-bellied Sandgrouse *Pterocles orientalis*: We saw our first 25 near one waterhole and 35 near another in the Charyn desert, then we counted 553 coming to a waterhole in the Taucum desert, accounting for probably most of the birds in the area.  
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse *Pterocles alchata*: Some good looks at 13 of these bronze beauties coming to a waterhole in the Taucum desert, the most ever seen on this tour.  
Pallas's Sandgrouse *Syrrhaptes paradoxus*: Well we looked long and hard for these, and did the best we could to find them at several sites, but they had obviously 'gone nomadic' on us. A distant flight view for a couple of us at Kanshengyal was the best we could manage.

## COLUMBIDAE

Rock Dove *Columba livia*: Available!

Yellow-eyed Dove *Columba eversmanni*: Some good looks at up to four birds on a busy afternoon in the Ili river Turanga woods, first spotted perched up at great range but staying in position until we got close to them. A real speciality of this tour.

Common Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus*: Vocal birds encountered at Beldersay, and singles around Almaty and Astana.

European Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur*: Several encountered in open country in Uzbekistan, a flock of presumably this species shooting eastwards at Beldersay, and then a good study of one or two at Kanshengyal allowing comparisons with the following species.

Oriental Turtle Dove *Streptopelia orientalis*: First encountered at Beldersay where we were able to compare the song with that of the very similar Common Wood Pigeon. In Kazakhstan they were regularly encountered, with the largest gathering being 12 around Kanshengyal. These all refer to the race *meena*.

Laughing Dove *Streptopelia senegalensis*: Common in the drier parts of Uzbekistan, plus a single seen in Chundja town in the Charyn area.

Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*: Commonly seen in Uzbekistan, plus a few more in southern Kazakhstan.

## CUCULIDAE

Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*: Seen virtually throughout, and most numerous in the Charyn area.

## STRIGIDAE

European Scops Owl *Otus scops*: Some great encounters at the Ash Tree Copse at Charyn, with point-blank views of one sat in a nest box (for some – most of whom were holding towels and toothbrushes rather than binoculars!) plus at least two seen calling by torchlight.

Long-eared Owl *Asio otus*: A traditional nest site near Astana held a large and fluffy chick plus an adult that peered out at us.

Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus*: A good year for these, with 13 or more seen on the Astana steppe, some indulging in their aerial display flights.

Tengmalm's Owl *Aegolius funereus*: A bird with a circumpolar distribution that won 'bird-of-the-trip'! Perhaps not previously recorded in the Bolshoi Almatinskiy mountains, it was a surprise to hear one calling in the daytime there. A subsequent visit to the area lured us up a steep slope among tall spruces, and eventually we found ourselves in the right spot, indicated by a natural cavity some five metres up a tree complete with a downy feather snagged on the entrance. Climbing the tree to check the hole caused an adult bird to fly from an adjacent tree, prompting a rapid and trouser-ripping descent by the leader! We located it sat nearby, allowing for some long close looks at this lovely bird. A return the following morning found the bird still not on the nest but sat in an adjacent tree, plus a second adult called close by. In addition we had views of a lekking Black Grouse in the same area, making it quite a morning!!

## CAPRIMULGIDAE

European Nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus*: We had a fantastic look at a female in the daytime in a bushy wadi near Kanshengyal, plus two others seen in that area. On range this seems to be in an area of integration between the races *sarudnyi* and *unwini*.

#### APODIDAE

Common Swift *Apus apus*: Common in Uzbekistan especially around the ancient cities, but very few seen in Kazakhstan.

Alpine Swift *Apus melba*: A delightful accompaniment to the wonderful monuments in Samarkand, where numerous noisy birds gave very close if rapid views. Two were also seen over the Red Canyon.

#### ALCEDINIDAE

Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*: Singles seen at Lake Tudakul and at Astana.

#### MEROPIDAE

Blue-cheeked Bee-eater *Merops persicus*: Plenty of these beauties seen along the roadside wires in Uzbekistan, from Samarkand to the Oxus.

European Bee-eater *Merops apiaster*: Regularly encountered, most numerous in Uzbekistan where migrant flocks were skimming along the low hills.

#### CORACIIDAE

European Roller *Coracias garrulus*: Seen most frequently in Uzbekistan and in the south of Kazakhstan, a common roadside bird!

#### UPUPIDAE

Eurasian Hoopoe *Upupa epops*: Seen regularly throughout the tour.

#### PICIDAE

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*: A single bird showed briefly in some of the few trees available on the Astana steppe!

White-winged Woodpecker *Dendrocopos leucopterus*: We had good looks at our first of this Central Asian endemic in the poplars at Aman Kutan, then a pair at Beldersay followed by a great view of a scolding male in woods along the river Ili.

#### ALAUDIDAE

Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra*: Plenty of these big brassy fellows around Kanshengyal and along the road out there. A single was also seen on the Sugaty plain.

Bimaculated Lark *Melanocorypha bimaculata*: Less numerous than the above but present in good numbers around Kanshengyal, where we had good looks at birds coming to the waterhole there. A couple were also seen near Kokpek.

White-winged Lark *Melanocorypha leucoptera*: A good number seen on the steppe around Astana, with 80 or more seen in a day.

Black Lark *Melanocorypha yeltoniensis*: One of the spectacular highlights of this tour, with hundreds of individuals seen on the Kurghalzhin steppes, lining the roads or taking to the air in 'rowing' displays. Somewhat difficult to photograph though!

Greater Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla*: A small number were found in the deserts around Charyn, but they were very numerous around Kanshengyal with song-fighting birds all around our camp where some started singing as early as 4am!.

Hume's Short-toed Lark *Calandrella acutirostris*: Some good looks at six or more near Aman Kutan, song-fighting and running about on a barren upland pasture. These demure birds showed the dark lores and dark culmen typical of this species, and sung a less elaborate song than the above species.

- Lesser Short-toed Lark *Calandrella rufescens*: We found quite a few in the Taucum desert, plus a single near Charyn. The identity of these birds has been the subject of some debate, and following a ringing expedition here in 2000, many of these were trapped and were thought to be Asian Short-toed Lark *C. cheleensis*, but now opinion has now to calling them Lesser Short-toed Larks, but I'm not sure if the race involved is *heinii* or *leucophaeus*.
- Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*: Often seen along our route, particularly in Uzbekistan.
- Oriental Skylark *Alauda gulgula*: A single was seen briefly at Lake Tudakul, in favoured habitat of vegetated patches close to shallow sandy pools.
- Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis*: The other numerous lark on the steppes around Astana.
- Horned Lark *Eremophila alpestris*: Several very nice examples showing their horns on the Sugaty Plain, favouring the stonier areas over 1000m. The race here is *brandti*.

#### HIRUNDINIDAE

- Sand Martin *Riparia riparia*: A reasonable number seen at Lake Tudakul and on the Amu Darya in Uzbekistan, at Sorbulak, Kanshengyal, and most numerous in the Astana region.
- Pale Martin *Riparia diluta*: A colony in a sand pit near Chilik was busy with an estimated 200 birds until they suddenly cleared off, a couple of patrolling Eurasian Hobbies eventually revealed themselves as the cause for the mass exodus. They are clearly quite different from Sand Martins, with a diffuse breast band, broad at the sides but tapering to nothing in the centre with a dirty wash on the throat and a more contrasting dark face. The upperparts are clearly pallid and they show some scalloping on the uppertail.
- Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*: Seen almost daily.
- Red-rumped Swallow *Hirundo daurica*: Seen around the hotel at Beldersay, and fairly commonly between Tashkent and Samarkand where we found birds nest-building in a bus shelter.
- Common House Martin *Delichon urbica*: A happy colony at the Beldersay Hotel with some nesting in alcoves on our balconies, also seen at odd places in southern Kazakhstan.

#### MOTACILLIDAE

- Richard's Pipit *Anthus richardi*: Rarely seen on this tour, we found one or maybe two rather worn-looking birds at a small marsh in the Charyn region.
- Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris*: Rather numerous this year in the drier-than-usual Charyn and Sugaty Plain area, with others noted at Kanshengyal, Astana and near Samarkand.
- Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis*: A small number of birds in song in the Tien Shan forests.
- Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta*: Several seen at higher elevations in the Tien Shan, they look much more brown and buff than western European birds and relate to the race *coutellii*.
- Sykes's Wagtail *Motacilla [flava] beema*: Good numbers of these on the Astana steppes, we had great looks at numerous examples around the Kurghalzhin lakes.
- Black-headed Wagtail *Motacilla [flava] feldeggii*: Plenty seen at Lake Tudakul, with a few others seen elsewhere such as in the Charyn region.
- Grey-headed Wagtail *Motacilla [flava] thunbergii*: Three birds seen by the waterhole at Kanshengyal.
- Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola*: A couple of the black-backed *calcarata* race were seen at Lake Tudakul, then we found several of the grey-backed nominate race in the Charyn region and around Astana.
- Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*: A small number encountered along our route, favouring streams in the hills.
- White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*: Three seen at Lake Tudakul, two at Sorbulak and one at Kurghalzhin all refer to the *dukhenensis* form (or 'Siberian White Wagtail') which is so similar to *alba* that it's not even half-way to a split!
- Masked Wagtail *Motacilla [alba] personata*: An endearing bird regularly encountered in Uzbekistan and Southern Kazakhstan.

## CINCLIDAE

White-throated Dipper *Cinclus cinclus*: One shot past us along the stream valley at Aman Kutan.

Brown Dipper *Cinclus pallasii*: A pair were seen on a rushing mountain river at 2000m followed by another single at 2600m, in the Tien Shan

## TROGLODYTIDAE

Winter Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*: One or two seen plus other songsters heard, in the Tien Shan.

## PRUNELLIDAE

Brown Accentor *Prunella fulvescens*: Just two were seen at the Cosmostantsia, singing with gusto from dilapidated buildings.

Black-throated Accentor *Prunella atrogularis*: Numerous in the junipers around the Tien Shan observatory, we enjoyed some good looks at this dapper fellow.

Altai Accentor *Prunella himalayana*: Some great views of three or so around the snow-covered Cosmostantsia.

## TURDIDAE

Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin *Cercotrichas galactotes*: Four birds seen at Lake Tudakul were quite showy and vocal, one more was glimpsed near Nurly and three showed off well in the bushy wadi at Kanshengyal.

Thrush Nightingale *Luscinia luscinia*: A surprise find of a migrant bird skulking under roadside bushes in the Kyzyl Kum desert.

Common Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos*: Plentiful and noisy at Aman Kutan, single migrants seen in the Kyzyl Kum and Taucum deserts, many at Beldersay, deafeningly numerous around our Charyn accommodation, and heard near Astana. These birds of the race *hafizi* visibly differ from western populations by being greyer with a more contrastingly rusty tail, and having pale edges to their wing coverts and a pale supercilium, plus their songs sounds rougher.

Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica*: Four singing males were sat in the open at a small marsh near Charyn, then a few were seen in the Astana area.

White-tailed Rubythroat *Luscinia pectoralis*: Some splendid encounters with these in the Tien Shan. Often the most visible species there, singing from the tops of the junipers.

White-throated Robin *Irania gutturalis*: Some 15 or 20 of these attractive chats were enjoyed at Aman Kutan, all quite visible and obvious, singing from the tops of bushes and rocks.

Eversmann's Redstart *Phoenicurus erythronota*: A pair had taken up residence behind the Tien Shan Observatory, found there on our first evening then seen again the following evening, disappearing in-between times

Blue-capped Redstart *Phoenicurus caeruleocephalus*: We found several among the spruce trees in the Tien Shan, singing their feeble little song.

Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*: Two migrant females seen at Kanshengyal farm.

Güldenstädt's Redstart *Phoenicurus erythrogaster*: A pair performed for us around the Cosmostantsia, the male singing from the dilapidated buildings.

Siberian Stonechat *Saxicola maura*: Four were seen in a mountain valley at Chimgan, then not seen again until we reached the Kurghalzhin steppe where they were fairly common.

Pied Bushchat *Saxicola caprata*: Commonly found around Lake Tudakul, heard by our Bukhara hotel and seen near our Khiva hotel, yet not in-between for some reason.

- Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina*: A single migrant was seen at Aman Kutan, then they quite plentiful in the deserts alongside the Amu Darya, around the Sugaty plain and Charyn region, and a common 'yard-bird' at our Kanshengyal camp, often mimicking Common Quail, European Bee-eater and Desert Wheatear!
- Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*: A small number seen in the snow at the highest altitudes in the Tien Shan, and then more commonly on the steppes around Astana.
- Pied Wheatear *Oenanthe pleschanka*: Often seen, in 'rocky hills' habitat near Samarkand, at Aman Kutan where we watched two snakes plundering the nest cavity of a very agitated pair, at Chimgan and a few in the Charyn area. We spent a long time scrutinising some birds and need further convincing that they weren't *O. picata*! In the quarry near Samarkand we enjoyed a long look at male of the *vittata* form.
- Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti*: Only found in the Charyn deserts where we found them to be quite numerous and visible in some parts, with 15 seen in a day there.
- Finsch's Wheatear *Oenanthe finschii*: A nice surprise to see this, the first time on this tour. One or more adults were seen on rocky hills near Samarkand, with one or more recently-fledged juveniles posing for us at close range. This must be the furthest north-western part of their range.
- Variable Wheatear (Eastern Pied W) *Oenanthe picata*: A male of the race *capistrata* was seen in a roadside quarry as we travelled to Samarkand, though it didn't permit a lengthy scrutiny. Pied Wheatears of both regular and *vittata* forms were also present, creating a confusing collection of black-and-white birds!
- Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius*: Three were seen at Aman Kutan and a single at Kokpek.
- Blue Whistling Thrush *Myophonus caeruleus*: One was seen fleetingly at Beldersay, and then we saw three as we ascended the bumpy road to the Tien Shan Observatory.
- Common Blackbird *Turdus merula*: Not uncommon at Aman Kutan, Beldersay, Almaty city and along the road eastwards, and in the Tien Shan forests, where they are represented by the race *intermedius*.
- Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris*: Two singles were seen near Astana.
- Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*: Seen at both ends of the Tien Shan, at Bolshoi Almatinskiy and Beldersay, and also at Aman Kutan.

#### SYLVIIDAE

- Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti*: Heard in several places, with singles seen along the Ishim river near Astana and at Aman Kutan.
- Scrub Warbler *Scotocerca inquieta*: Three furtive birds were seen in a windy Kyzyl Kum desert.
- Savi's Warbler *Locustella luscinioides*: Three 'reeling' birds showed in the reedbeds near Astana on our first evening there, then again on our last morning.
- Common Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella naevia*: A splendid look at two in full voice at 2100m in the Tien Shan, with several more heard there, also heard by the Charyn river and at Aman Kutan.
- Moustached Warbler *Acrocephalus melanopogon*: One or two birds sang gustily from roadside reedbeds at Lake Tudakul, showing us their salient features.
- Paddyfield Warbler *Acrocephalus agricola*: Very numerous this year in the reedbeds around Astana, with plenty of good looks possible.
- Blyth's Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus dumetorum*: Seen and more often heard throughout except for in the higher mountains, most would refer to migrants though at Astana they were assumed to be on their breeding grounds.
- Caspian Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus fuscus*: A small number were seen singing away in the reedbeds at Lake Tudakul, with odd migrants in the Kyzyl Kum and Taucum deserts.



- Indian Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus brunnescens*: Noisy and easy to locate, we found plenty in the reedbeds around Lake Tudakul.
- Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus*: A couple of migrants were seen fairly well at Kanshengyal, which was fortunate as we only heard a couple of distant ones in the Astana reedbeds. Unusual in their absence, maybe they just hadn't arrived yet.
- Eastern Olivaceous Warbler *Hippolais pallida*: Two were seen singing and skulking in trees at Aman Kutan, and at least four were singing and showing well in the heart of Khiva city, the only place in all Khorezm that had any birds!
- Booted Warbler *Hippolais caligata*: In contrast to the following species, this fellow was mainly found in the most insignificant swathes of vegetation on the steppes of Astana, and we had great looks at multiple examples, singing their bubbling little song, usually just a half-metre off the ground.
- Sykes's Warbler *Hippolais rama*: The southern counterpart of the above, preferring trees and shrubs and having a very different song. We saw our first at Lake Tudakul where they were quite numerous, then we saw a handful more in the Turanga woods and scrub along the Ili valley. Two more were seen in the lush bushy wadi at Kanshengyal.
- Asian Desert Warbler *Sylvia nana*: A songster revealed himself nicely in the Charyn deserts, revealing a nest with three well-grown chicks, in a deep cup made of grass 20cm up in a low Saxaul-type bush.
- Eastern Orphean Warbler *Sylvia crassirostris*: At least five of these big fellows were seen at Aman Kutan, giving us some good displays as they sang throatily from the Hawthorn bushes.
- Barred Warbler *Sylvia nisoria*: Odd migrants were seen at Aman Kutan and Kanshengyal, and territorial birds engaging in song-flights were seen well in the Charyn region.
- Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca*: Some birds apparently of this *curruca* form were seen around Astana. We saw of the form *halimodendri* (which is not treated separately in the 'Sylvia Warblers' book), which has a distinct warbling song, like the next species. We found them in the semi-deserts Uzbekistan and southern Kazakhstan. Should it be split, then the name 'Steppe Lesser Whitethroat' could perhaps be applied...
- Hume's Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia althaea*: Common around Beldersay and at Aman Kutan, the most striking difference between this and the European birds is the loud warbling song, instead of a harsh rattle. It prefers mountains and its breeding range extends through to northern Pakistan.
- Desert Whitethroat *Sylvia minula*: Reasonable encounters with a couple of pairs in the Kyzyl Kum, diminutive and sandy, and doing elaborate song flights in the stiff breeze .
- Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis*: Scattered sightings of singles across the tour, these grey-mantled birds should be of the race *rubicola*.
- Greenish Warbler *Phylloscopus trochiloides*: A scattering of sightings mostly relating to migrants, at Aman Kutan, Beldersay, Kanshengyal, Astana and in the Bolshoi Almatinskiy where they were probably on territory.
- Hume's Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus humei*: Common in the Bolshoi Almatinskiy (living up to its German name of 'Tien Shan Warbler') with others seen scattered about, particularly the migrant swarm at Kanshengyal farm.
- Sulphur-bellied Warbler *Phylloscopus griseolus*: Easy to find this year, we saw two or three, our first being a very obliging close and vocal bird near the Bolshoi Almatinskiy Observatory.
- Wood Warbler *Phylloscopus sibilatrix*: A single migrant bird seen briefly at Kanshengyal farm.
- Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*: A couple of birds at Kanshengyal farm appeared much brighter and olive-toned than the nearby *tristis* birds, and were thought to be perhaps the *abietinus* race.

Siberian Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus tristis*: Lots of migrants encountered at Beldersay and other spots in Uzbekistan, then a handful more at Kanshengyal and in the Astana area, singing their very un-Chiffchaff like song!

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*: A couple were seen in the Bolshoi Almatinskiy spruces.

Severtzov's Tit-Warbler *Leptopoecile sophiae*: Fantastic looks at a vivid male in the Tien Shan, that came across the tops of the low junipers towards us, stopping to eyeball us at four metres range!

#### MUSCICAPIDAE

Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*: Many migrants seen at Aman Kutan and Kanshengyal, with others encountered along the way.

Asian Paradise Flycatcher *Terpsiphone paradisi*: One zoomed into view for us at Aman Kutan. It seems strange to see this outside of a tropical forest!

#### TIMALIIDAE

Bearded Reedling *Panurus biarmicus*: A group of eight showed well at Lake Tudakul, plus a few singles were seen zipping over the reedbeds around Astana.

#### PARIDAE

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus* (NL): Four were seen near the Ash Tree Lodge at Charyn.

Songar Tit *Parus songarus*: Some good looks at three or more in the spruces at Bolshoi Almatinskiy.

Rufous-naped Tit *Parus rufonuchalis*: One of these handsome tits was watched closely near our well-appointed hotel at Beldersay, here at the western edge of their range that extends as far east as Nepal.

Coal Tit *Parus ater*: A small number noted in the spruce forest at Bolshoi Almatinskiy.

Azure Tit *Parus cyanus*: A pleasing addition to the delights of our Ash Tree Copse accommodation, where birds of the *tianschanicus* race called loudly all around the camp and carried food to a nest box in the 'car-park'. Another three were seen on our last morning at Astana, here of the brighter whiter *hyperrhiphaeus* race.

Yellow-breasted Tit *Parus flavipectus*: At least six of these delightful birds were seen around Aman Kutan, and they were positively common at Beldersay where one was seen carrying food to a hole in the side of the hotel.

Great Tit *Parus major*: Just a few seen, along the Charyn river and in shelter belts along the road to Almaty. Also heard in Astana.

Turkestan Tit *Parus bokharensis*: Our first examples of this Central Asian endemic were seen at Aman Kutan, then more at Beldersay and in the Ili valley poplar woods.

#### SITTIDAE

Eastern Rock Nuthatch *Sitta tephronota*: At least four birds were seen in classic rocky habitats around Aman Kutan, always rather furtive though.

#### CERTHIIDAE

Eurasian Treecreeper *Certhia familiaris*: A couple were seen in the Bolshoi Almatinskiy spruces, of the *tianschanica* race here.

#### REMIZIDAE

European Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinus* (H): Heard along the Ishim river near Astana.

White-crowned Penduline Tit *Remiz coronatus*: Good views of several during the tour, with a great look at one at Beldersay, a couple seen briefly at Aman Kutan, then more along the road from Almaty to Chilik and around the Charyn river where a nest was located.

## ORNIOTIDAE

Eurasian Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus*: These required greater scrutiny this year following the splitting of the following form. We found three migrant birds at Kanshengyal Farm and another near Astana.

Indian Golden Oriole *Oriolus kundoo*: Differing from the above in having a big black teardrop behind the eye and much yellow in the wings, this is a common bird throughout Uzbekistan, also seen along the shelter belts between Almaty and Chilik.

## LANIIDAE

Turkestan Shrike *Lanius [isabellinus] phoenicuroides*: Some splendid examples of this fellow seen at Aman Kutan, Lake Tudakul, in a lush wadi at Kanshengyal and very commonly in the Charyn region.

Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*: A couple of migrants were seen at Lake Tudakul and not again till we saw three in bushes near Astana.

Long-tailed Shrike *Lanius schach*: A few were seen along roadsides in Uzbekistan, then a single posed for us in the Kyzyl Kum desert.

Lesser Grey Shrike *Lanius minor*: Commonly found wherever trees adjoined open country, such as the roadside shelter belts between Almaty and Chilik and at Aman Kutan.

Steppe Grey Shrike *Lanius pallidirostris*: Three birds seen near Kanshengyal were convincing for this taxon, with a pair showing some sexual dimorphism. One of the pair (the female?) showed a pale crescent of grey on the lores, softer tones overall and a little peachy on the breast. Both showed a large white wing patch restricted to the primaries. In the Kyzyl Kum desert we saw two, one of which had a nest with five eggs, though no *pallidirostris* bill or facial features were noted, then we had some views of two or three birds in the Charyn deserts that showed strikingly white wings and big black masks. Three different parts of the supposed range of *pallidirostris*, and they all looked different, so is this form highly variable?

## CORVIDAE

Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica*: Recorded almost daily!

Pander's Ground Jay *Podoces panderi*: A splendid fellow that obliged once again by appearing right on the roadside! On a windy morning in the Kyzyl Kum desert we found a total of nine birds, including some well-grown juveniles that were still being fed by the athletic adults.

Spotted Nutcracker *Nucifraga caryocatactes*: Up to four in a day seen among the Tien Shan spruces, not being so obvious except for their repeated flights to and from suspected nests.

Alpine Chough *Pyrrhonorax graculus*: Just three of these dapper fellows seen around the Cosmostantsia.

Red-billed Chough *Pyrrhonorax pyrrhonorax*: Just two or three seen around the Cosmostantsia, alongside the previous species.

Western Jackdaw *Corvus monedula*: Seen regularly in suitable habitat, all were of the silver-necked *soemmerringii* race.

Rook *Corvus frugilegus*: Common, no doubt benefiting from all the trees planted in shelter belts. We were deafened by a large rookery in Khiva city, and they were numerous around Astana. (which is bad news for Sociable Lapwings and indeed this may contribute to their decline, as Rooks extend their range into the open steppe. Or perhaps it's just a lack of Saiga!)

Oriental Crow *Corvus [corone] orientalis*: These were encountered regularly, particularly along the fringes of the Tien Shan and outlying hills. (None at Astana) This bird is geographically separated by a wide gap from the west and central European *corone* and differs by having a smaller bill.

- Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix*: Taking over from the above around Astana, though only small numbers seen.
- Common Raven *Corvus corax*: A large family party of 15 were seen at Aman Kutan, also near Samarkand and again in the Charyn region.

#### STURNIDAE

- Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*: Seen throughout except in open desert or high mountains, always less numerous than the following species!
- Rosy Starling *Sturnus roseus*: Seen in big numbers, with mouth-watering flocks of migrants swirling about in numerous localities, most notably between Tashkent and Samarkand, at Aman Kutan and around Chilik and Kokpek. We watched a busy colony on a farm building near Sorbulak, and another swarm by the dam at Kurty.!
- Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*: Seen daily (even at 2750m in the Tien Shan) until we shook them off by flying to Astana!

#### PASSERIDAE

- Saxaul Sparrow *Passer ammodendri*: Some wonderful looks at four birds of both sexes in bushy desert in the Charyn region, on a blazingly hot afternoon. Another male was seen near one of the nearby 'waterholes'. Restricted to Central Asia.
- House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*: We saw a great number 'non-House Sparrows' in Uzbekistan and also in the Kazakh deserts, this form is significantly brighter and smarter with a big black bill. This is the migrant *bactrianus*, which tends to shun human habitation.
- Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis*: Single males were seen Lake Tudakul and in the Kyzyl Kum desert, an airborne flock of birds near Samarkand had at least some males in it, plus another was seen at Aman Kutan.
- Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*: A scattering of sightings along the way, most commonly on the southern part of our route.
- Rock Sparrow *Petronia petronia*: A single bird was chirping away at Aman Kutan.

#### FRINGILLIDAE

- Red-fronted Serin *Serinus pusillus*: Hard to pin down this year and perhaps many had gone higher up in the Tien Shan due the warm weather. We had several views of birds but always in flight.
- European Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris*: Five seen at widely scattered localities..
- Grey-capped Goldfinch *Carduelis caniceps*: We saw plenty at Aman Kutan, then a few were seen in the Bolshoi Almatinskiy, but scarcely as with the Serins.
- Twite *Carduelis flavirostris*: We struggled to get looks at our first ones on the Kurghalzhin steppe, then we found 25 coming to drink at a roadside waterhole, enabling us to get a good look at their subtle plumage. These birds are of one of four races of 'Central Asian' Twite, namely *korejevi*, and our birds clearly showed black streaked breasts, but otherwise looked rather like female Linnets!
- Common Crossbill *Loxia curvirostra* (NL): Two seen in the Tien Shan.
- Plain Mountain Finch *Leucosticte nemoricola*: No big flocks as testament to the warm conditions in the Tien Shan, we found them commonly enough around the Cosmostantsia plus odd ones in the spruce forest.
- Desert Finch *Rhodospiza obsoleta*: Our first were a pair at Lake Tudakul, then we saw plenty in the Kyzyl Kum. A couple of pairs were seen in the Ili river valley and a few more at Kanshengyal.

- Mongolian Finch *Bucanetes mongolicus*: All but three birds were on our first day in the Charyn region, with as many as 32, mostly on the wing though we did manage to scope one of them on the ground.
- Common Rosefinch *Carpodacus erythrinus*: Migrants were encountered en-route from Tashkent, between Chilik and Almaty and at Kanshengyal, and singing birds were on territory in the bushes around Astana.
- Red-mantled Rosefinch *Carpodacus rhodochlamys*: A pair of these fine finches popped out of the junipers near the Tien Shan Observatory. Gorgeous!
- White-winged Grosbeak *Mycerobas carnipes*: Vocal and bold in the junipers and spruce of the Tien Shan.

#### EMBERIZIDAE

- Pine Bunting *Emberiza leucocephalos*: We found three males and a female in riverine scrub near Astana, the most obliging male had a slightly atypical plumage with much white and little black on the face. This perhaps indicated a late transition into full breeding plumage, although after posting the picture of this bird on the internet, some suggest that it was a hybrid with a Yellowhammer, of the 'white-headed' hybrid form, which is 'one of the commonest hybrid types'. I have yet to be convinced however....
- White-capped Bunting *Emberiza stewarti*: At least four were seen around Aman Kutan, then another two were seen near our hotel at Beldersay.
- Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia*: At least five showed well in the valley at Chimgan.
- Grey-necked Bunting *Emberiza buchanani*: Just two seen singing from a rocky hillside, at a regular spot for them at Kokpek.
- Common Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*: Plenty of typical birds were seen in the reedbeds around Astana, but we found three of the unusual parrot-billed form at Lake Tudakul, with very fat bills and much less black/more white around the head and breast.
- Red-headed Bunting *Emberiza bruniceps*: Very common and vocal at Aman Kutan, with scattered sightings throughout the southern part of our route, and then commonly once more in the Kanshengyal area.
- Corn Bunting *Miliaria calandra*: Couples seen at Aman Kutan, near Almaty and at in the Charyn region.

#### MAMMALS

- Turkestan Red Pika *Ochotona rutila* (NL): Just a couple seen in the Tien Shan.
- European Hare *Lepus europaeus*: Two seen in the Astana region.
- Tolai Hare *Lepus tolai*: Several seen, at Aman Kutan, in the Kyzyl Kum desert and in the Ili river valley.
- Eurasian Red Squirrel *Sciurus vulgaris*: At least five seen in the Tien Shan, with some great looks at these handsome fellows.
- Bobak Marmot *Marmota bobak*: Some eight seen in a day on the Astana steppe.
- Long-tailed Marmot *Marmota caudata*: Some nice views of these furry fellows emerging from their burrows in the Tien Shan.
- Yellow Ground Squirrel *Spermophilus fulvus*: Seen in the drier parts of Uzbekistan and at Kanshengyal.
- Russet Ground Squirrel *Spermophilus major*: Some very cute fellows seen on the Astana steppe.
- Common Steppe Lemming *Lagurus lagurus*: One was found zipping in and out of his burrow at Kurghalzhin.
- Muskrat *Ondatra zibethicus*: A couple were seen in the Astana reedbeds, plus another seen in the Charyn region.

Great Gerbil *Rhombomys opimus*: Plenty on the Sugaty plain with Isabelline Wheatears in close association.

Corsac Fox *Vulpes corsac*: One was seen running at full tilt away from us at Kanshengyal.

Golden Jackal *Canis aureus*: A single animal was roaming the open areas near Lake Tudakul.

Marbled Polecat *Vormela peregusna* (NL): An all-too-furtive animal shot down a hole by the road in the Charyn region, unfortunately only seen well enough by one of us to identify.

## REPTILES

Horsfield's Tortoise *Agrionemus horsfieldi*: A single in the Kyzyl Kum was followed by a very healthy fifteen of them near Kanshengyal, presenting a driving hazard along the narrow dirt track!

Tartar Sand Boa *Eryx tataricum*: A very small example was photographed in the rich wadi near Kanshengyal.

Steppe Ribbon Racer *Psammophis lineolatum*: A great look at a metre-long example of this thin snake at Kanshengyal, it appeared to be pursuing a lizard before we interrupted, it's neck craned up some 20cm off the ground.

Asian Glass Lizard (Sheltopusak) *Ophisaurus apodus*: Some great looks at one basking in a bush at Aman Kutan, plus another that skipped under the wheels of our minibus.

*Coluber* sp. Two snakes were seen emerging from the nest cavity of a pair of very upset Pied Wheatears. Identity is not certain, along with many other taxa provisionally but erroneously identified by Oleg!