

Almaty, Kazakhstan 24th June–4th July 2017



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Introduction This report details an 11-day trip undertaken by three UAE-based birders (OC, SL and SJ) teaming up with CB (based in Almaty). Although a little later in the summer than most groups visit, and visiting only a relatively small region (within a few hundred kilometres of Almaty) we found Kazakhstan to be a country of vast, awe-inspiring (and empty) landscapes full of birds, most of which were still singing strongly and with large numbers of fledged juveniles of many species. Although we were too late for any northbound passerine migration, autumn wader migration was just starting. In all, this is proved a superb trip with 193 species confirmed (six heard only) including many mouthwatering highlights in a wonderful range of habitats.

Logistics and gear

Chris and Lybvov Brodie made all arrangements re accommodation and transport and Chris's friend and driver Pavel drove us round for the entire trip (c1800 km in all; see map on page 4). I am not sure how easy it would be to book car rental / hotels etc. (save for the Almaty one detailed below) by anyone unable to speak Russian. Access to the higher reaches of Ili-Alatau National Park (and Big Almaty Lake) also requires some inside knowledge and discussion with the army; this had been arranged prior to our arrival. We brought camping equipment for the three days on the Kanshangel / Topar / Sorbulak loop and CB had purchased food etc. beforehand; it was not too difficult to top up with necessities such as beer, fresh bread etc. en-route.

We faced a range of weather, with a day of cloud and some heavy rain at Ili-Alatau and then breezy squalls and lots of low cloud at Charyn / Sugata. The rest of the time the weather was clear and sunny, with the sun strong everywhere and rather hot (up to c35°C) in the lowland steppe and adjacent Takum desert northwest of Almaty.

There were lots of good photography opportunities and scopes were essential given the scale of the landscape and distance to some of the birds. Playback was hardly used save for certain cases such as **White-crowned Penduline-Tit** and **White-capped Bunting**. Recordings amassed on the trip are accessible from *Xeno-canto* directly via [this link](#).

Sites visited and accommodation

- **Ili-Alatau National Park, Tien Shan mountains:** Two full days at start of the trip plus 5hrs on last morning. Less than 1hr drive steeply uphill from Almaty; we stayed two nights at the **Alpen Rose Guesthouse**, conspicuous on the left at c2300m; other places to stay were not obvious. Our first full day was blighted by low cloud and rain, heavy in the afternoon, but our remaining time here was blessed by clear skies and strong sun. The **'Kosmo' station** (3200m) at the top of the mountain is c45min drive above Alpen Rose; getting through the checkpoint at 2700m and visiting the delta at **Big Almaty Lake** lower down needs clearance from the army. This was arranged by CB and Pavel prior to our arrival.



Black-throated Accentor (SJ)



Incomparable Tien Shan lunch (SJ)

- **Sugata Plain & Charyn River Gorge:** Three days spent here, including the c200km drive from Almaty with roadside stops at opportune places. We stayed two nights at the very nice **Charyn River Lodge**, seemingly the only place anywhere in this area. Doorstep birding in the riparian woodland from the lodge was great; the very arid **Sugata Plain** was only 15km to the east and **Charyn Gorge** itself about 20km south of the road through the plain.

We also visited the higher elevation (c2000m), wetter steppe approximately 1hr to the south at **Temerlik** (on the road to Kegen) and, on the travelling days paused at **Kokpek Gorge** (c30mins west of Sugata Plain, on the main road to/from Almaty).

- **Minor road from A2 to Kona village / Tamgaly Petroglyphs / Kanshangel:** We spent a full day driving this, as the rolling yellow steppe gradually reached the edge of the Takum desert at Kanshangel, where we camped near the water hole in the desert c5km north west of town. Next morning we spent c6hrs in the area around the waterhole. Many roadside stops were made on this bumpy, potholed and empty road, including a short walk to into the low hills to view Tamgaly petroglyphs.

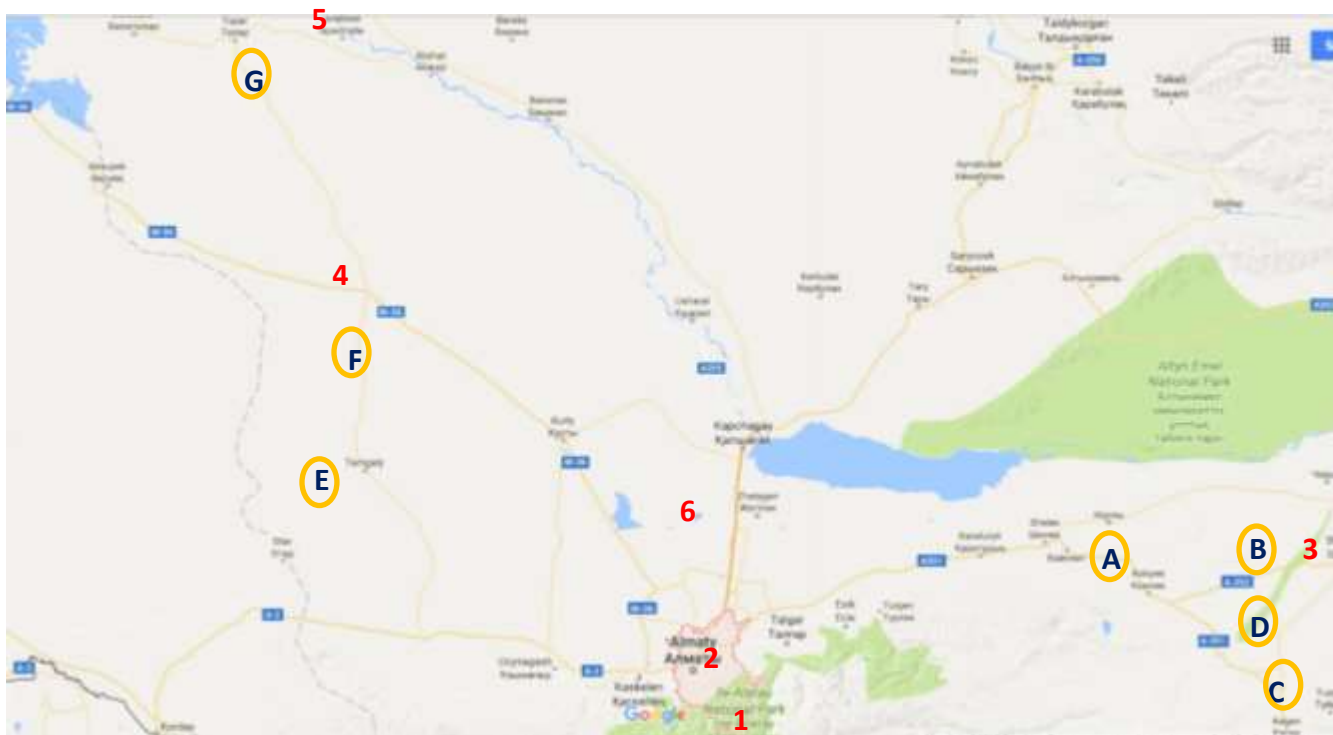
- **Road from Kanshangel to Topar, and then onto turanga forests in the delta to the south west of Lake Balkhash:** North of Kanshangel, within 1hr the Takum desert grades into rich wetlands just south of Topar with many roadside pools and reedbeds. We birded here both on the way north and south again the next day, camping overnight in an idyllic patch of turanga forest surrounded by wetlands c30mins beyond the small village of Topar.
- **Sorbulak Lake and Lesser Sorbulak Lake:** This was the last major site we visited; it was reached after a drive of c3hrs from Topar. We spent one afternoon and the following day until 1330 exploring the south edge of Sorbulak Lake and the smaller lakes and wetlands to the east and south of the main lake. Access was via the endless maze of sandy and gravel tracks through the rolling steppe before we eventually emerged onto the main M36 road north of Shamalgan, c1hr north of Almaty.

- In addition to the above, we also used a **hotel in central Almaty** as a staging post between Ili-Alatau / Charyn and Charyn / camping, plus the last night on return from Sorbulak. This was the very good Almaty Hotel (advertised on www.booking.com at [this link](#)).



Sorbulak collage (OC)

Overview map of sites visited and accommodation used:



Accommodation used		Other sites visited	
1	Hotel Alpen Rose, Ili-Alatau National Park	A	Kokpek Gorge
2	Hotel in central Almaty	B	Sugata Plain
3	Charyn River Lodge	C	Temerlik
4	Kanshangel waterhole and campsite	D	Charyn River Gorge
5	Turanga forest campsite NW of Topar	E	Tamgaly Petroglyphs
6	Sorbulak and Lesser Sorbulak lakes and campsite	F	Lark Highway
		G	Topar Wetlands

Birding Highlights See daily checklist appended at the end for a full breakdown of daily sightings.

1 Ili-Alatau National Park: We explored this epic Tien Shan montane landscape, mainly from c2000m up to the highest point, where the road ends at the ‘Kosmo’ station at the very top. Birding was prolific with many highlights.

- A. Around the **Alpen Rose guest house**: The spruce forest here had easy **Black-throated Accentors**, **Blue-capped Redstarts** and **Woodcock** displaying at dusk; **Red-fronted Serin** and ‘**Eastern**’ **Goldfinches** occurred from here all the way up to 2800m and we had brief views of **Blue Whistling-Thrush**, **Common Crossbill** and heard **Nutcracker**. **Three-toed Woodpecker** was seen three times, but only well once.
- B. The next stop up the hill is **Big Almaty Lake**; it was possible to see **Ibisbill** by distantly scoping from the dam wall but much better views were obtained by walking to scan the delta mouth with a third bird close to the track were it descended to the lake. En-route, the only **Songar** and **Coal Tits** of the trip were found, along with **Corncrake** calling, good views of **Hobby** and more **Black-throated Accentors**. The willow scrub between the road and dam had singing **Eversmann’s Redstart** and plentiful **Red-fronted Serins**, along with our first brief **Azure Tit** (possibly nesting in the eaves of the building close to the track on the left as one walks to the dam wall).

- C. The next inevitable stop, higher up, is the **army checkpoint** (**Eversmann's Redstart** nesting somewhere nearby here) with, in particular, the steep juniper covered alpine slope c1km across the meadow to the west (behind the actual army camp) getting much attention. We spent much time here over three days, finding it full of singing **White-tailed Rubythroats** and **Siberian Stonechats**, smaller numbers of **Red-mantled Rosefinches** and, with persistence, good or very good looks at **White-browed Tit-Warbler** and **Sulphur-bellied Warbler** and brief looks at **White-winged Grosbeak**. **Himalayan Snowcock** were heard and briefly seen on the scree slopes further up but these were better looked for just below the 'Kosmo' Station a short drive of c10mins further uphill.
- D. Finally the **'Kosmo' Station**. This was choked in mist on our first day, but crystal clear on the next two visits. **Himalayan Snowcocks** were calling loudly until c0830 on our second visit (but none heard on the third visit when we didn't arrive until 0930) and seen quite well on both the steep rocky ridge to the left side of the road and the gentler grassy ridge on the right, c400m below the final barrier. Obtaining a visual is much easier on the latter; we had a group of five that then flew across the valley and vanished amongst the boulders. Other birds included **choughs** (two species) and, right at the top, fantastic looks at **Güldenstädt's Redstarts** (common, and several broods on the wing on the slope below the buildings) with **Brown** and **Altai Accentors** obvious in the immediate area and regular **Plain Mountain Finches** bouncing about. **Hobby** and even **Red-footed Falcon** were brief flybys but more reliable, presumably, were good views of flyover **Golden Eagle** and **Lammergeier**.



Left: Tien Shan collage (OC)

Right: Himalayan Snowcock and Sulphur-bellied Warbler (SL)

2 Road from Almaty to Kokpek:

- A. The **main road between Almaty and Kokpek** (actually rather closer to the former) is pretty busy and noisy with traffic although lined with attractive scrubby woodland in many places. Several roadside stops in the early morning after leaving Almaty produced **Red-headed Buntings**, many **European Rollers** and **Long-tailed Shrike**. The main target here was **White-crowned Penduline-Tit** and we found several old nests, then a lone bird and eventually a recently fledged brood being fed by adults.
- B. **Kokpek Gorge:** Our two visits, here, en-route to and from the Charyn area, were plagued by windy, unsettled conditions and then showers. We concentrated mainly on a broad valley to the right of the main road, with a large tree obvious up the valley. Here we found **Rock Bunting**, many juvenile **Chukars** and **Pied Wheatears** and heard **White-capped Bunting**, our main target. This was eventually seen, on the second attempt, in a very narrow, steep valley a little further on the left, although the tape was needed to get close views. **Golden Eagle** and **Blue Rock Thrush** were also in residence here. We saw **Hume's Whitethroats** at both sites although the birds were not singing and views were intermittent and mostly frustrating.

3 Charyn River and Gorge area:

- A. **Sugata Plain:** This vast, barren and very arid plain begins not far east of Kokpek village. The main area to concentrate on is the tiny drinking pool below the arid ridges to the north of the road, just east of where a gorge leads up to a radio mast. Birds were far more concentrated here than anywhere else; we spent several hours on two days staking out the pool. **Rock Sparrows** and **Mongolian Finches** were abundant during our visits, with **Grey-necked Buntings**, **Red-headed Buntings**, **Horned** and **Greater Short-toed Larks** less so but still obvious and patience produced a few **Asian Crimson-winged Finches**. Walking onto to the low hills behind the drinking pool produced many more of the same and much more prolonged views of **Grey-necked Buntings**.
- The narrow gorge running into the hills just west of the drinking pool was great for the same species in lower densities, but also families of **Turkestan Shrikes** and, eventually, **Hume's Whitethroat**. However, with regard to the latter, beware the breeding **Eastern Orphean Warblers**, which were both commoner and easier to see.
 - **Isabelline** and **Desert Wheatears** and **Long-legged Buzzard** were scattered all over the area and we managed two looks at **Asian Desert Warbler** but the only **Pallas's Sandgrouse** seen was a flyby from road just before the plain dips into the Charyn river valley; poor views of this species was the only disappointment of the entire trip.



Underwhelming Hume's (SL)



Overwhelming Charyn (SJ)

B. Charyn River Lodge: This idyllic location is situated in a large expanse of riparian forest. **Azure Tit** proved very easy to find here with repeated views on each walk. Other species included lots of singing **'Eastern' Nightingales** and **Golden Orioles** (hard to pin down but analysis of photos indicated **Indian**), **Eurasian Scops-Owl** easy at night, and at low density, **White-winged Woodpecker**, **caudatus Long-tailed Tit** and even a few tits looking solid for **Turkestan** (with **Great Tit** much commoner). An hour spent in the riverside scrub and scanning from the river bridge produced **Turkestan Shrikes**, **Pale** and **Sand Martins** over the river, **Turkestan Tit** and **White-winged Woodpecker** again and nice views of **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** down to drink (no Pallas's but, arriving at c0830 we may have got only the tail end). An **Egyptian Vulture** was working the ridge on the edge of the gorge.

Charyn / Sugata collage (OC)



- C. Charyn River Gorge:** There were not too many birds on the drive through the barren plains to the gorge nor in the descent to the river itself but the eerie wind-blasted rock formations and spectacular scenery more than made up for that. **Grey-necked Bunting** and **Pied Wheatear** were seen on the way down with **'Eastern' Nightingale** singing at the picnic area at the base.
- D. Temerlik wetland and steppe:** We visited here at the end of the day after visiting the gorge and were taking a long shot for Upland Buzzard. That didn't appear and we were also blighted by cool, dull and eventually wet conditions. The ascent through the hills was memorable with **Eurasian Crag Martin** at another crossing of the Charyn River and soon after that our first **Rosy Starlings** appeared. The lush steppe and meandering river floodplains were marvellous, being full of **Eurasian Skylark**, **Siberian Stonechat** and a nesting **Citrine Wagtails** (clearly *citreola / werae*, not *calcarata* as anticipated) and we also found a group of 21 **Demoiselle Cranes** and saw **Musk Rat**. This was a wonderful area and certainly worth much more time than we were able to devote.

4 Camping Loop: Almaty / Tamgaly / Kanshangel / Topar / Kanshangel / Sorbulak area / Almaty:

A. Road from A2 to Tamgaly Petroglyphs: Not long after turning north from the main A2 Almaty–Bishkent road the birding started in earnest as this very quiet road runs seemingly forever through empty, rolling steppe. Suddenly **Calandra Larks** and **Long-legged Buzzards** were everywhere, with the likes of **Hobby** and **Lesser Grey Shrike** (see top right; *OC*) families in all roadside trees. Any roadside pools or lush vegetation proved worth checking for **Red-headed Bunting** and, on our visit, a flush of early returning **Green Sandpipers**. **Spanish Sparrow**, **Bimaculated Lark** and increasingly large numbers of **Rosy Starlings** appeared, with regular flocks of the latter carrying food through the valley at the petroglyphs site. The latter is worth visiting just for the petroglyphs themselves but also hosts **Eastern Rock Nuthatch**, one of which was easily found on the low, rocky ridges.



B. Road from Tamgaly petroglyphs to Kanshangel: North from Tamgaly, after passing through some low hills, the steppe becomes even flatter and drier, with the horizon going on forever. For no obvious reason, numbers of larks increase markedly along what CB aptly terms “Lark Highway”, although given the lack of traffic and potholed nature of the road, “Lark Lane” might be a better epithet. The real task here is to extract **White-winged Lark** from the plagues of **Calandra** and **Greater Short-toed Larks** and, as we discovered by experimentation, the best tactic is to drive slowly and wait for birds to fly up from the verge and land on the tarmac ahead of you. Yomping out over the steppe is a much thirstier and overall less effective way to approach the problem. In the end, we managed good views of at least four **White-winged Larks**, mainly juveniles, on the road. Smaller numbers of **Bimaculated Larks** and the odd **Asian Short-toed Lark** were also found, along with **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** settling on the road, countless **Long-legged Buzzards** and, eventually, a nice male **Montagu’s Harrier**. Only when we got to the small roadside strip of Kanshangel itself on the main Almaty–Astana road did we start seeing **corvids**, **European Bee-eaters**, **hirundines** etc. again.

C. Around Kanshangel water hole: We camped here and then spent the following morning before it became too hot exploring the low desert to the west of the waterhole. **Sandgrouse** were pretty obvious at both ends of the day, with good views of **Black-bellied** and a few **Pin-tailed** on the ground. Lark densities were at least as high here as along the road leading into Kanshangel the evening before and all the same species were represented, i.e. including several **White-winged Larks** which again were seen well. Other species included **Demoiselle Cranes** (pair with chick) near the waterhole, **Steppe Grey Shrike** juveniles, **Montagu’s Harrier** and single non-breeding **Steppe** and **Eastern Imperial Eagles**. There is the possibility of Caspian Plover in this area, but we couldn’t locate any.



Kanshangel collage (OC)

D. Topar Wetlands and nearby turanga forest:

- **Wetlands:** About one hour north of Kanshangel, the rolling Takum desert begins to be punctuated by roadside pools of varying depth and lots of reedbeds. This wetland wonderland is extensive and the road only samples a narrow cross-section of habitat. The best and most accessible area is immediately south of the small village of Topar, where viewing is facilitated by the raised road, bridge and several small tracks that lead to other pools. Species here included small numbers of breeding waterfowl (mainly **Great Crested Grebe**, **Red-crested Pochard**, **Ferruginous Duck** with a few **White-headed Duck** easily found) and a nice colony of **Black Terns**, which included one **White-winged Black**. Nesting **Black-eared Kites** were everywhere, along with **Hobbies**, **Marsh Harrier**, **Black-**



-crowned Night-Heron, **Purple Heron** (latter very scarce locally apparently) with **Pygmy Cormorant** on a back pond alongside **Great Cormorant** a real bonus; this species appears very scarce and local in SE Kazakhstan. We birded this area both in mid afternoon (when very hot) and next morning on the way back south to try and find Black-headed Penduline-Tit. However, reedbed passerines were not obvious on the whole, although we had great views of **Bearded Reedling** and so-so views of a family of **Azure Tit**.

Just beyond Topar village there is an obvious roadside bus stop, surrounded by low bushes, seemingly pink-flowering *Tamarix*. Here we found a pair of **Saxaul Sparrows**, apparently with young in a crevice in the bus shelter and the smart male singing (or trying to...) Also in this area were obvious **Turkestan Shrikes**, **Lesser Whitethroats** (seemingly / presumably *halimodendri*; at least with calls identical to those that winter in the UAE) and, more notably, a family of **Sykes's Warblers** calling a lot and we even heard a little song.



Sykes's Warbler



Yellow-eyed Stock Dove (both SL)

- **Turanga forest:** The final spot in this area, c30mins beyond Topar was a wonderful camping site in a patch turanga forest, surrounded by shallow pools and marshes. Birds were not common here and it took a while for the late afternoon heat to subside and birds to start moving. However, once they did, **White-winged Woodpecker** became fairly obvious and we found a male drumming on the roadside telegraph poles at dawn next morning. Telegraph poles were also the best place to see **Yellow-eyed Stock-Dove**; we heard a few and had a number of flyovers but best views came from a pair on the poles at dusk and another bird down to drink in the pool by the bridge. **Turkestan Tit** was reasonably obvious in the open woodland – although not as obvious as **Azure Tit** – and other birds included **Great Bittern** (heard only), nesting **Roller**, and more **Lesser Whitethroats** and **Saxaul Sparrow** in the nearby scrub.

E. Sorbulak Lake and Lesser Sorbulak lakes area: We finished our tour here, with an afternoon working the south edge the very large main Sorbulak Lake, starting at the dam wall obvious from the highway. From here, a confusing network of sandy tracks wind round the edge of the lake and across the rolling grasslands, seemingly forever. A network of smaller, rather shallow lakes (some temporary) run through the steppe east of Sorbulak and we explored here before camping for the night and continuing birding the next morning. For waterfowl and waders, this provided a prolific site and we added c25 species not seen elsewhere on the trip. As well as good numbers and variety of ducks (including a few **White-headed** and **Ferruginous**; **Ruddy Shelduck** abundant), grebes, herons and many waders (especially **Northern Lapwings** and **Tringa**) the main species here are **White-tailed Sea Eagle** (two seen) and **Dalmatian Pelican** (obvious on both the main lake and several smaller lakes). Just one **Great White Pelican** was confirmed although many distant pelicans, apparently nesting, where on a large island at the far end of the main lake. **Caspian Gulls** (nesting locally), **Gull-billed** and **Black Terns** also featured and, although passerines were not particularly obvious, examining the scrubby edges and reedbeds in the early morning produced great views of **Bearded Reedling**, **Cetti's Warbler** and the (inevitable) **Azure Tits**. Attempts to locate **Paddyfield Warbler** were unsuccessful but **Clamorous Reed Warblers** were noisy on at least one lake and we also had **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** down to drink both in the evening and following morning.

On the way out next morning, we examined a number of other pools, producing **Collared Pratincole** and many breeding **Black-necked Grebes**, a pair of **Demoiselle Cranes** and we finished off at a lush fishing lake not far from the highway north of Shamalgan. By now it was pretty hot, with but we still added singing **Great Reed Warblers** and **Little Bittern** was easy to see; some nearby shady scrub where we had lunch produced a calling **Penduline-Tit** that we taped in to find it, as expected, **White-crowned**. A partially made nest was found nearby and we were back in Almaty by 1500 that afternoon.



Songar Tit (SJ)

Systematic List In the list that follows:

C	Common	P	Present
H	Heard with Green for species heard only	[]	Probable; not confirmed

	Ili-Alatau NP			Kokpek/Charyn/Sugata area			Kanshangel/Topar/Sorbulak area				Ili-A. NP
	SAT 24TH	SUN 25TH	MON 26TH	TUE 27TH	WED 28TH	THURS 29TH	FRI 30TH	SAT 1ST	SUN 2ND	MON 3RD	TUE 4TH
Northern Lapwing				1			10	50	C	C	
Little Ringed Plover							6	1	P	1	
Eurasian Woodcock	2										
Black-tailed Godwit									10		
Whimbrel									1		
Spotted Redshank									20	1	
Common Redshank								20	C	C	
Marsh Sandpiper										1	1
Common Greenshank									1	50	10
Green Sandpiper							12	7	30	P	
Wood Sandpiper									1	1	
Common Sandpiper					2		1		3	2	
Ruff									8		
Collared Pratincole									1	3	
Black-headed Gull									C	C	
Caspian Gull									C	C	
Common Tern								2	P	P	
Black Tern								12	50	3	
Black-bellied Sandgrouse					2	15	20	60	3	6	
Pallas's Sandgrouse					1						
Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	P		P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	
Yellow-eyed Pigeon								2 or 3	1		
Common Wood Pigeon				10			4			1	
Eurasian Collared Dove	3			P	P	P			1		
Laughing Dove			1								
Common Cuckoo	H	4	2	H	H		2	H	H		H
Little Owl							2				
Common Swift					50		2				
European Roller				20		P	25	30	C	C	
European Bee-eater				2				3	P	P	
Common Kingfisher										1	
Eurasian Hoopoe					1	10	5		P		
Three-toed Woodpecker	1	1	1								
White-winged Woodpecker				2		1		4	4		
Turkestan Shrike				10	25	10		15	1		
Lesser Grey Shrike				P		1	30	8		4	
Long-tailed Shrike	2			1							
Asian Grey Shrike					4			4			
Eurasian Nutcracker		H									
Common Magpie		6	10	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P
Red-billed Chough			30								8
Yellow-billed Chough			3								6
Rook				C		C	C		C	C	
Carrion Crow	1	4	6						C	C	P
Common Raven		2	5								4
Brown-necked Raven								200			
Eurasian Jackdaw				C	C		C		C	C	
Indian Golden Oriole	1			2	6	3					
Great Tit		2	1	P	P	P	P			P	
Turkestan Tit						3		2	6		
Azure Tit				1	20	3		8	8	8	1
Coal Tit											
Songar Tit			1								
Bearded Reedling								1		2	
White-crowned Penduline Tit			8	3						1	
Long-tailed Tit			20	1							
Sand Martin						2	1		20		

	Ili-Alatau NP			Kokpek/Charyn/Sugata area			Kanshangel/Topar/Sorbulak area				Ili-A. NP
	SAT 24TH	SUN 25TH	MON 26TH	TUE 27TH	WED 28TH	THURS 29TH	FRI 30TH	SAT 1ST	SUN 2ND	MON 3RD	TUE 4TH
<i>English name</i>											
Altai Accentor		2	3								6
Brown Dipper		1									
White Wagtail				P	P	P	P	P	P		
Citrine Wagtail					3						
Yellow Wagtail						3	4	2	P		
Grey Wagtail	1	4	5								1
Tawny Pipit				1	10	P	25		P		
Tree Pipit		6	6								
Water Pipit		30	12								6
Eastern Goldfinch		5	5		6	P					1
Common Linnet				1	1						1
Red-fronted Serin	3	6	25								12
Plain Mountain Finch		4	6								4
Asian Crimson-winged Finch				2 or 3							
Mongolian Finch				50	50			1			
Common Rosefinch	2	12	P								P
Red-mantled Rosefinch		6	3								H
White-winged Grosbeak			1								
Common Crossbill											9
White-capped Bunting				H		2					
Rock Bunting				8		4					
Corn Bunting					20		50			1	
Grey-necked Bunting				10	40						
Red-headed Bunting				3	2		25	10	3	2	
MAMMALS											
Goitered Gazelle					3			25			
Long-tailed Marmot	1	3	P								1
Musk Rat					3						
Suslik				P	P	P					
Tolai Hare				4	P						
Fox									1		



Eversmann's Redstart (OC)