Birding in Armenia and Georgia
(With a Few Steps Into Azerbaijan and a Side of Turkey)
April-May 2016

by Jeff Hopkins

I have always wanted to visit the Caucasus, even since before I was a birder. There was just always something intriguing and exotic about it to me. So when I saw Birdquest offering a short tour to Georgia, I jumped at the opportunity to go there and to Armenia. Birding-wise both countries are fantastic with some really special species. I wound up with 169 species and 16 lifers. I’d recommend both for any birder.

In addition to the Georgia tour, Birdquest also offered a tour to Turkey which I also signed up for. Since many of the birds available in Armenia were likely on the tour in Turkey, I originally only planned a couple days sightseeing in Armenia with no birding planned. Unfortunately, I found that because of all the political turmoil in that neck of the world, the trip would evolve through several iterations before I was done.

For example, I knew when I signed up that birding in southeastern Turkey was “risky” because of the situation in neighboring Syria. As it turned out, I was the only one who signed up for the Turkey tour, so it never went ahead. In retrospect, that was a good thing because things got a lot worse in Turkey.
When the Turkey tour fell through, I contemplated doing it on my own, but instead I increased my time in Armenia specifically for birdwatching, added a side visit to Batumi, Georgia, and also decided to go to Baku, Azerbaijan, just for some sightseeing and to put another pin in the map. My return flight was already booked from Istanbul, so I also decided on a day in Istanbul at the end of the trip to see Yelkouan shearwater.

So far so good...until the frozen war in Nagorno-Karabakh thawed out. I knew that the Armenians didn’t especially care about people visiting Azerbaijan, but I knew the Azeris could give you trouble with an Armenian stamp in your passport. I figured recent events would make that even more challenging, and the last thing I wanted to do was to be interrogated in an airport for hours (or god forbid have my binoculars confiscated). It was impossible to switch my flights to go to Azerbaijan first to make the problem go away, so I decided that “discretion was the better part of valor” and I dropped the days in Baku knowing I could still get to Azerbaijan without officially entering. Read on, to learn how.

Logistics

Georgia and Armenia are not the easiest countries to get around in for a solo independent traveler, especially outside of the capital cities. But everything went smoothly, despite all the changes.

Both Armenian and Georgian have their own alphabets which are unlike any others, including each other’s. English language day tours can be found in both countries, and English language menus are available in nicer restaurants, but English is not widely spoken outside the capitals. To make life easier, I took a couple of tours to some of the major tourist sights outside Yerevan and Tbilisi, and hired guides for a lot of the birding rather than organize my own transport or hire a car.

As former soviet republics, Russian is still used, more so in Armenia than in Georgia, so some knowledge of Russian definitely helps. I can read Cyrillic which helped a lot in finding my way around though I don’t speak Russian beyond the basics. Fortunately, I have a skill with languages, and after a few days with a bit of effort I was starting to pick up some of the Armenian and Georgian alphabets. But I didn’t learn either of the languages beyond “hello” and “thank you.”

Most of the tourists in Armenia that I encountered were Russian. There are more Western Europeans in Georgia, but still nowhere near the numbers of tourists as in larger tourist centers of Europe (that’s a good thing).

I booked hotels for the non-tour portions of the vacation through booking.com.

- In Yerevan, I stayed at the Hotel Kantar, a hostel/pension close to Republic Square. It cost 33,000 dram (about $68) per night with breakfast. The staff was very helpful and they all spoke English. They also organize tours. I’d highly recommend it.

- In Tbilisi, the tour stayed at the Hotel GTM Kapan right near the Metekhi Church. The location was good - an easy walk to the old city and a 5 minute walk to the Avlabari metro station. The staff spoke passable English and the breakfast buffet was OK although it started at 8 AM - rather late for birding purposes.
- In Stepantsminda, the tour stayed at the Hotel Stepantsminda on the main square. I was not impressed. The staff was rather inattentive - they wouldn’t even put out a pot of hot water for coffee in the morning for us. The heat did not work in my room and there were cigarette burns on the mattress. I suspect the only reason we stayed there was because they did buffet meals for groups. If you’re on your own, I’d stay someplace else.

- In Batumi, I stayed at the Hotel Iris. It was pretty cheap: 50 Lari ($23) per night without breakfast. My room was on the 4th floor and there was no elevator. All of the public areas were being renovated and were quite messy, although the rooms were fine. The restaurant on the ground floor, the Cape Town, serves good Georgian food.

- In Istanbul, I went back and forth as to whether to stay in one of the tourist areas, but as my flights changed it became better to stay close to the airport. I stayed at the Tempo Suites Hotel in the Ataköy district for about $70/night without breakfast. It’s a mid-level business hotel, but with some quirks. Each floor has a theme - mine was the “comic book floor.” It’s a short walk from the metro, and in a busy neighborhood with plenty of small stores and restaurants.

Transport

Flights between cities are either infrequent or non-existent. Much of the transport in the Caucasus is done by minibus (marshrutka). They go everywhere. I really didn’t want to deal with the crowded minibuses, so I chose to take trains to get between cities. Trains in the Caucasus are SLOW, partly because of the topography, and partly because they make a lot of stops in small towns. But they all ran on time, and the overnight Yerevan-Tbilisi train saved me a night of paying for a hotel and maximized my free time during daylight.

I bought the Yerevan-Tbilisi ticket myself at Yerevan Station. The woman at the counter spoke English! The price was 19,000 Armenian dram (about $40) for a berth in a first class two-person sleeper car with bed linens provided. The border crossing occurs at the delightful hour of 4-5 AM but went very smoothly. The train was an older soviet-era carriage, complete with a carriage attendant. It takes 10-1/2 hours because of its round-about route. There’s a small snack bar in the first class car, but no restaurant car. The train travels from Yerevan to Tbilisi on even dates, and in the reverse direction on odd dates.

Birdquest booked the train ticket between Tbilisi and Batumi for me through their Georgian ground agent. A seat in first class cost 25 Georgian lari (about $11.50). There was wi-fi on the train but it didn’t work all that well outside of the coastal strip and Tbilisi areas. The train from Tbilisi to Batumi took just under 6 hours. It never got much over 100 kph, and usually was much slower than that. There are two of these “fast” trains daily - one in the morning and one in the afternoon. There’s also a slower overnight train.

Taxis are widely available in the capital cities, but they are unmetered. You have to negotiate hard. Even so, when arriving at a transport hub, such as a train station or airport, you will get overcharged. I know this because when my hotel in Tbilisi called for a taxi, they always confirmed the price in advance, and I was never able to get any taxi driver to accept anything close to that price for a ride from the station.
Guides

My friend Peter Saenger, who is Curator of the bird collection at the Accopian Center for Ornithology at Muhlenberg College here in Allentown, had always raved about Armenia from when he was there. Peter was the International Field Coordinator for the research for the “Field Guide to Birds of Armenia” by Adamian and Klem. He put me in touch with several of the Armenian field researchers from the project, one of who was Luba Balyan.

Luba in turn put me in touch with Tsovinar Hovhannisyan of the Armenian Society for the Protection of Birds (ASPB). Tsovinar and I worked together and organized a couple days birding for me, focusing on a few target species to compensate for not being able to see them in Turkey. We decided that I’d spend one day south of Yerevan at Armash Fish Ponds and Vedi Gorge and one day north of Yerevan at Mount Aragats. As the time drew closer, Tsovinar let me know that my guide for the day would be...Luba Balyan.

I organized a guide for my day in Batumi through Batumi Birding. They are affiliated with the Batumi Raptor Count and offer personalized tours throughout Georgia and even Armenia. I had originally contacted them about the possibility to find Caspian snowcock. That proved to require too much time and was too expensive for a solo traveler. So based on a target list I sent them and my limited time, we came up with a plan for a one-day tour to visit Mtirala National Park, the Batumi Botanical Gardens, and the Chorokhi Delta.

My guide for the day around Batumi was Guille (Guillermo) Mayor, a Spanish birder/conservationist who lives in Georgia and works on the Batumi Raptor Count as well as many other conservation projects there. He speaks fluent English, decent Georgian, and of course, Spanish.

Of course, the Birdquest tour was fully guided. The guide for that was Dani Lopez-Velasco, another Spaniard. Dani was excellent, as expected. As it turns out Dani and Guille knew each other, and even better, Guille had given Dani some pointers on where to find some targets. There were 9 clients on that tour, from England, Scotland, Ireland, the US, and Malaysia.

All of the guides were extremely personable, knew where to find the birds, and knew their stuff. I’d recommend any of them.

Day by Day Account

I’m using a convention seen in other reports. I highlight the first sighting of a species for the trip in bold, with lifers shown in bold and red.

April 30th – First Day in Armenia

I arrived at Yerevan Airport at about 3:45 AM which was right about on time (Why do all the flights from Europe to the Caucasus arrive at such an ungodly hour)? Surprisingly, my Azeri visa caused a little delay clearing immigration. The officer called his supervisor over to discuss my plans regarding Azerbaijan, but it wasn’t a big issue. Once through, I hit the ATM and after a quick taxi into town, I was at my hotel at about 5 AM...but of course my room wasn’t ready for me at that hour. I had a quick nap in the common room, and once it was light I left my bags with the desk, and headed out to explore the city.
First bird for the Caucasus: **common swift.** Like much of Eastern Europe, they’re common in the cities.

I wandered out to Republic Square and up the pedestrian zone to the Cascade only picking up **house sparrow.** At the base of the Cascade I found a couple **laughing doves** mixed in with the **rock pigeons.** **Barn swallows** whizzed past as I climbed the Cascade to Victory Park. It was clear enough to see the twin peaks of Mount Ararat from the top. In Victory Park I picked up my first **hooded crows, Eurasian magpies,** and **Eurasian blackbirds,** and heard a few **great tits.** At the Mayr Hayastan (Mother Armenia) Monument, there was a flock of **Eurasian Jackdaws** and I heard **common cuckoo, chaffinch,** and **hoopoe,** too. Walking back out of the park I found a **lesser whitethroat.**

Next I caught a taxi to the train station to pick up my ticket to Tbilisi. Then I wandered up to the Cathedral before catching another taxi to the Armenian Genocide Memorial at Tsitsernakaberd. The grounds held quite a few **great tits** and I heard a **greenfinch** and a **collared dove** but not much else.

After that sobering experience I decided to walk back to town. I saw my only **rook** of the trip along the way. Eventually I found a path into the Hrazdan River gorge. I heard a few things (more **tits,** chaffinches, **blackbirds,** and **crows** and may have also heard a **rock nuthatch,** but the only new bird added was a **white wagtail.**

By this point it was mid-afternoon, so I grabbed a quick **shawarma** and went back to my room to collapse for a couple hours. After that, I spent a little more time wandering around the city with no real **birding** done. I had a **late dinner** — my first taste of Armenian **khorovats** (barbeque). Yum.

May 1st – Garni and Geghard

I had planned on taking a taxi to the bus station to catch a **marshrutke** to Garni to see the Roman Temple and then onward to Geghard Monastery, but once I started talking to the cab driver (in **French**!) he offered me a reasonable price for a full excursion, so I skipped the marshrutke and went by cab for the day.

I soon found that magpies were quite common outside **Yerevan.** After about 45 minutes, we made a stop at Charents Arch, although I think it was partly so the driver could have a smoke. Sadly, it was too cloudy to see Ararat. In the grounds of the park I heard the common species, but I’d left the bins in the car. Good thing too – I slipped on some mud coming back to the cab and wound up with mud all over me and my camera. After a quick clean-up it was on to Garni.

We arrived at Garni before the gates opened, so I took the opportunity to walk partway down into the gorge. My target was western rock nuthatch which had been seen in other reports. I found a couple spotted flycatchers and some **Eurasian starlings.** I also had a hoopoe in flight and heard a couple cuckoos. On the cliff up at the temple, there were **jackdaws** and magpies. I tried the nuthatch tape and at first there was no response, but eventually a bird sat on the wires. I thought it was a shrike, since I’ve never seen nuthatches sit on wires like that, but eventually it turned and I saw its tiny bill (compared to a shrike anyway). So I had my lifer **western rock nuthatch.** It continued to flit around the area, and I watched it for a while.

After that, I climbed back up to the temple and toured the grounds for a bit. There were a few hoopoes and a **Eurasian starling** along with flocks of **Eurasian tree sparrows.** Looking down into the
gorge, I saw a few **crag martins** flying around. By about 10:30 the crowds were showing up so it was off to Geghard.

The weather was starting to turn a bit, and the birds at Geghard were limited. I saw a great tit in the trees at the entrance and heard quite a few **blackbirds**, but that was about it. But the monastery is amazing. It’s essentially a group of caves with a monastery attached. After a tour of the amazing site, we headed back to Yerevan. A quick scenery photo stop gave me the first **corn bunting** of the trip, but the only birds seen along the drive were more crows and magpies.

The rest of the afternoon was spent shopping at the Vermissage “Artists” (read: souvenir) market. No birds were observed except wooden ones. I had some delicious kebabs for dinner at a pub.

May 2 – Sevan and Dilijan

Today I had set up a tour to visit the Sevanavank Monastery on a promontory in Lake Sevan and the Haghartsin and Goshavank Monasteries near Dilijan. The former was a sure location for Armenian gull and the latter held out the possibility for semi-collared flycatcher.

My driver, Gurgen, spoke English, so eventually the conversation turned its way to birds. He knew that there were many of a particular bird at Lake Sevan. He only knew the Russian name: **chaika**. I showed him the picture of the gull, and he said yes, that was a **chaika**. As we pulled off the main road onto the monastery causeway, he also pointed to a spot where we could pull out after my visit and see many gulls.

Sevanavank Monastery is at the top of a hill that overlooks the north end of Lake Sevan. There were large flocks of **Armenian Gulls** all over the lake. There were also flocks of common swifts flying around and into the monastery. As I walked around I also head a mountain (Caucasian) chiffchaff singing down below along the lakeshore.

However, as I toured the monastery I could see and hear a large thunderstorm moving across the lake in my direction. Since being at the highest point in the middle of lake was no place to be in a thunderstorm, I made my way down to the car just as the rain started to fall. There was no point in getting out to look at the gulls in the rain, so we drove from Sevan to Dilijan through the pouring rain and even some pea-sized hail. I saw more Armenian gulls as we drove along the lakeshore, and even picked out a flying great cormorant.
Gurgen tried to beat the rain to Haghartsin Monastery, and we arrived at the road up to the monastery just as the first drops started to fall. On the way up, we heard some birdsong. Gurgen asked if I wanted to stop to check it out, but I said it would be better to get to the top and tour the monastery before the rain came. No such luck. There was a full downpour at Haghartsin as we pulled up. We debated waiting for the rain to let up a bit, but I finally got antsy and pulled out the umbrella and stated touring. There were a few blackbirds singing but not much else to speak of while walking around the monastery in the rain.

On the way back down the mountain, we did stop at a few places to listen for birds. Mostly we heard blackbirds (and saw a few). Gurgen picked out a small passerine in a roadside bush that turned out to be a **coal tit**. We also heard a green warbler, but I wasn’t going to try to look for that in the rain. So we continued on to Goshavank Monastery.

By the time we reached Goshavank, the rain had stopped and the birds were singing. I wandered around the monastery grounds and picked up my first **samamisicus** common redstart of the trip. I saw plenty of chaffinches and great tits, but no warblers. I also tried walking up one of the streets in the village, and turned up a couple **European greenfinches** in a distant tree, but no other birds besides domestic turkeys.

Heading back down we stopped again at a place with birdsong. Again it was mostly chaffinches and great tits, although I did mange to coax out a male **Eurasian blackcap**. And while I was working on him, a **common raven** flew over.

From there it was back to Yerevan, with a stop along the roadside so Gurgen could buy some fresh mushrooms (about $2 for a bucketful). He and I talked more about birds and conservation along the way and he expressed some interest in learning more about the birds of Armenia. So I took his email and sent him a few links for him to learn more. We got home at about 5 PM. After another wonderful meal of **khoravats**, I got ready for my first day of real birding.

May 3rd – Armash and Vedi

Today was my day to go birding with Luba Balyan at Armash Fish Farms and Vedi Gorge. I had one target at each: white-tailed lapwing at Armash and trumpeter finch at Vedi. I’d also asked Luba about pale rockfinch at Vedi but was told it was too early – they wouldn’t have arrived.

I left my hotel at 8 AM to find an old Russian Jeep with an ASPB logo on the side parked in front. Luba hopped out and introduced herself. She also introduced me to Mamikon Ghasabian, the director of the ASPB who would be our driver for the day. One of the most respected bird experts in Armenia would be my “driver.” Nice.

We headed south out of the city into the semi-desert along the Araks River Valley. Initially we had the typical roadside birds along the way, but as the habitat dried out, we picked up a couple of “steppe” birds, such as **black-headed bunting** and **crested lark**. As we drove, Luba gave me a brief history of the Armash Fish Ponds. They formerly were owned by a single owner, but have since been partitioned into a couple of separate private parcels. The ASPB have a cooperative relationship with the largest owner who allows them to do surveys and bring guests onto the site. It’s been declared an Important Bird Area (IBA), and justifiably so.
Surenavan, the town just outside the farm is known for its nesting white storks. There is a celebration in town when the storks return. According to Luba, each nest is numbered and the residents keep track of the progress of every nest. She also said that having a stork nest on your house is especially lucky. Of course we saw quite a few white storks as we passed.

After a little more than an hour we turned into the fish farm. Mamikon checked in with the manager while Luba and I checked out the birds around the office. There were huge flocks of barn and bank swallows and quite a few jackdaws. As we scanned, a flock of glossy ibis flew in and while I watched them, Luba said “I just saw a white tailed lapwing” – my main target at the fish farm. I got all excited, but she laughed and told me not to worry.

Once we were all checked in, we headed a few meters down the road and stopped. We’d found a few white-tailed lapwings right where Luba had seen one. Many older reports I’d read noted that the lapwings were deep into the farm, but Luba said this was the usual place, right near the entrance. There were also a few black-winged stilts and a wood sandpiper.

We drove a bit further and parked next to one of the ponds. Birds were everywhere. The reed beds had great reed warbler and plenty of bearded reedlings (although seeing them was another matter). Every so often the song of a cetti’s warbler would burst out and we saw one of those, too.

The pond itself was full of water birds. We picked out common pochard, red-headed pochard, great crested grebe, little grebe, and hundreds of common coots. Flying above the ponds were more white-winged terns than I’ve even seen before and the occasional western marsh harrier. Pygmy cormorants were everywhere. Herons and egrets were also well represented. They were mostly grey herons and little egrets, although scattered great egrets and black-crowned night-herons were also seen in numbers with a few purple herons thrown in. And all of this was backed up by the clear view of the twin peaks of Ararat close by.

Next stop was a drier grassy area where we stopped for blue-cheeked bee-eaters. We kept trying for pictures, but they wouldn’t sit still. When they flew off we picked out a couple of black-winged pratincoles mixed in with a flock of northern lapwings. We were also surprised by a drake mallard hidden in the grass. There were lots of black-headed yellow wagtails, a few black-headed buntings, and in the distance Mamikon spotted a few garganey and our first little ringed plover of the day. Eventually a Eurasian kestrel put everything up as it hunted. Then a cuckoo flew in, perched nearby, and started singing.
We continued around the ponds, adding **black-headed gull** and a lone **slender-billed gull** to our list. Luba spotted a flock of **great white pelicans** flying around. I also picked out a drake **white-headed duck** among the more common species. Luba said there should be more, but try as we might, that was the only one we could find there.

Eventually we made our way to the back side of the pond, where we met the owner of the farm who was fishing (and drinking) with a group of friends from Russia. The fishing was poor but the drinking was evidently quite successful. In order to maintain good relations we had to stop and chat with them. Of course we were invited to share their vodka. Neither Luba nor I drink, but Mamikon took one for the team - or maybe two - and after numerous excuses and protestations, we escaped to continue our birding. We were worried when we immediately saw another truck pulled over at the side of the road, but it turned out to just be one of the workers. While Mamikon stopped to schmooze, I tracked down some passerines and picked out a migrating **Menetries' warbler**.

On the way to our next stop, we saw a group of men with a net full of fish. Luba said they were transferring fish that had outgrown one pond to a pond for larger specimens. The workers joked that we should help them. We laughingly declined, but Mamikon got out and started talking to them. To our surprise he came back to the vehicle with a plastic bag full of fish that he put in the back of the jeep.

We were now near the back of the farms along the border with Turkey. Mamikon pointed out the only tree in the farm other than those around buildings and said we were heading there for lunch. I looked at my watch and saw it was already 12:30! I hadn’t even noticed the time passing. On the way to the lunch spot, we found a **common kingfisher** perched right beside the road.

Then we saw a **European bee-eater** pick a huge dragonfly out of the air. I got off a few pictures, but before Mamikon could get his camera out, the dragonfly was swallowed. So we pushed on to the tree, where there was a small picnic shelter. Mamikon and Luba put out a wonderful lunch spread and introduced me to some Armenian foods while we watched the terns fly around over the ponds.

After lunch we went to a pond that was recently drained and provided good mudflats for shorebirds. It was full of **ruffs** in various-colored plumages, hundreds of **black-tailed godwits**, and wood sandpipers. We each took a turn at the scope. Luba picked out both **common ringed plover** and **Kentish plover**.
along with a couple Eurasian oystercatchers. Mamikon found a common sandpiper, some little stints and common redshanks. I found some common terns at the back of the pond. I also found a black-bellied plover (grey plover) which they said was rather uncommon. Then I found three more of them! After he and Luba both confirmed the ID, Mamikon took some photos for documentation.

After cleaning up lunch, we moved to another set of ponds. We found more white-headed ducks along with a few ferruginous ducks. We kept going deeper in, to some mudflats with a few ruddy shelducks, a lone common shelduck, and some gulls. Opposite that was another pond where we added a flock of northern shovelers and a red-backed shrike. Luba called the shrike “Zorro” after the masked TV and movie character and from then on, all shrikes were called Zorro. She climbed through the fence to take a closer look at the ducks. She was hoping for a rail or marbled teal, but came up empty.

While she was doing that Mamikon was checking out the gulls on the mudflat. One was an adult Pallas’ gull in near breeding plumage, but with it were several larger, browner immature gulls. Luba and Mamikon both agreed they were not Armenian gulls. The size (bigger than the Pallas’) didn’t leave too many options. Luba thought it might be an immature great black-backed gull, but it didn’t look like one to me. I thought the head shape looked good for Caspian gull but the larger size might not have fit. Mamikon tried to take pictures from all sorts of angles so he could consult with some gull experts, but we left it as “mystery gull” at the time. And Luba and I both agreed that we both hate gulls.

By now it was time to go to Vedi, so we headed out of the farms, and into the mountains. We drove through town, through a huge garbage dump (As Luba put it, “Birders go to such wonderful places”) and up into the gorge. We saw lots of wheatears along the way. Finsch’s wheatear was most common, but northern wheatear and Isabelline wheatear were also present. We saw more red-backed shrikes (Zorro!) and also a lesser grey shrike. After crossing a small creek-bed, we pulled up at a clearing with a picnic table. This was the spot.
We immediately started checking out the creek. Nothing. So we started looking for the calling chukar on the cliff side. It was so close, but we couldn’t find it. Luba pointed out an eastern rock nuthatch nest that she found on a previous visit, but the occupants weren’t around. We also looked for raptors and found several **long-legged buzzards** flying around a couple of **Eurasian griffon vultures** and a lone **cinereous vulture**, which Luba said was one of Mamikon’s favorite birds. Mamikon and I went back to the creek and eventually a couple of black-headed buntings came in but were chased out by Zorro. All the while there were hundreds of Eurasian bee-eaters passing over and Finsch’s wheatears singing on the ledges.

Meanwhile, Luba hadn’t given up on finding the chukar and finally she shouted, “Got it!” We looked at the **chukar** in the scope for a while, then went back to the vigil. A couple of **ortolan buntings** next came in to the drip, and after they left Mamikon called us over to see an interesting wheatear. We couldn’t figure out what it was until it’s parent showed up to feed it and its siblings. It was a northern. Luba then noticed the nuthatch come in to the nest then disappear just as quickly, but I missed it.

The sun was starting to sink behind the cliffs. For a lark, Luba played the tape of the trumpeter finch. No response. But five minutes later two little birds buzzed in. I found one of them on the ledge above the creek. It had a red bill! Female **trumpeter finch**! She dropped down to the creek to drink. When I went over to follow her, Luba called me back. The male had replaced her on the ledge. We watched them for a minute or two before they flew off. We waited a while longer and Luba noticed the **eastern rock nuthatch** come back. This time I saw him.

We then settled back into the jeep for the drive home. Immediately after leaving the gorge we found a group of 4-5 more nuthatches. Then Mamikon took a different route out through a side canyon. That canyon was also full of wheatears. Eventually we came to a high grassy plateau where we had corn and black-headed buntings and crested larks. And Luba pointed out some really gorgeous wild iris flowers.

We eventually came out at the town of Kaghstrashen. After that it was a slow drive back to civilization via the old road. We made a quick stop for Mamikon to give the bag of fish (remember the fish?) to his sister, then we headed for home. We got back to Yerevan at about 8 PM. A long day, but very satisfying.

**May 4th – Mount Aragats**

Luba and Mamikon again picked me up at 8 AM and this time we headed in the opposite direction from Armash. The goal was to find a Radde’s accentor on Mount Aragats. Due to the wind up on the mountain, it would prove to be a challenge.

We first made a stop at the Armenian Alphabet Monument. It was very birdy there. While wandering around the letters, I picked out my first **Eurasian goldfinch** of the trip. Luba called me to see a white-throated robin, but it had flown and been replaced by a **common whitethroat** by the time I got to her. We wandered down the road a bit picking up new species: **water pipit**, **linnet**, and **whinchat**. The pipit gave us a bit of a challenge because the subspecies found in the Caucasus looks a lot like a tawny pipit.
Then Mamikon called us back. The **white-throated robin** had reappeared. We also had common redstart, black-headed bunting and a different bunting that only Luba and I saw. We went through all the possibilities and still were uncertain. She thought it might be a female yellowhammer, but I felt it was an immature ortolan bunting. So we now had a mystery bunting to join our mystery gulls.

We continued down the road by car stopping where we found anything interesting. Mamikon found a **short-toed snake-eagle** that we got in the scope. We had a **Eurasian jay** or two fly across the road. Another stop added **Siberian stonechat**, **tree pipit**, and a heard-only chiffchaff (probably mountain). Most other raptors were long-legged buzzards.

As the elevation climbed, we started seeing more of the higher elevation birds. We had our first **ring ouzel** and a nice male **rufous-tailed rock thrush**, a **rock bunting**, and numerous northern wheatears.

As we reached the snow fields, we started hearing and seeing **Eurasian skylark** and our first flock of **(Caucasian) twite**. Further on we added **horned larks** to the mix. Mamikon pointed out a **black redstart** on a stone structure where he knew they nested. Eventually we were driving with 4-5m high snow banks on either side of the jeep.

At the top of the road we reached the restaurant/hotel. We knew it was just a matter of time before alpine accentors came in. We tromped around in the snow for a while only finding a rock pigeon (a feral one at that), and taking pictures in the snow, but eventually a couple birds came in that only Mamikon saw. We tried the tape and the pair of **alpine accentors** came back perching on the roof of a trailer just a few meters from us. So now it was time to go back down and find their cousin.

We dove back down through the melting snowfields calling out the birds: horned lark...wheatear ...wheatear... horned lark...twite...rock thrush...wheatear, etc. Suddenly we had a **white-winged snowfinch** fly across the road. A brief look but diagnostic. We made it back to the juniper scrub and listened for any sign of the Radde’s. There was plenty of birdsong, mostly pipits and wheatears, but no Radde’s.

We went up and down the road a few times looking for some places out of the wind. Eventually we found a spot that looked good. We both scanned and scanned until I found a bird on a nearby rock. I pointed it out to Luba and she shouted “Yes!” High fives all around. Luba said she was hearing it but couldn’t find it. So I finally had my **Radde’s accentor**. Both she and Mamikon agreed that it should have been a lot easier, but the wind made it tough.

We then drove to Amberd Fortress where we set up for lunch. Just as we arrived the skies opened up, so we enjoyed our lunch under the shelter, but the storm passed quickly. And as it did, a **booted eagle**
took to the skies. After looking at that, an immature lammergeier flew by lit up by the sun giving us spectacular looks. Wow. There were also a couple ravens flying up and down the valley.

It was time to start heading back. I had a train to Tbilisi to catch and wanted to stop in Echmiadzin for some quick sightseeing so we headed downhill. At one point, we passed a small stream and I remarked, “That would be a good place for dippers” to which Mamikon replied “Yes, there are two.” I thought he was joking but they pointed out a white-throated dipper on the rocks to me. Another stop turned up a bluethroat, the first Luba and Mamikon had seen at altitude that year. After that it was an uneventful drive to Echmiadzin. Mamikon and Luba came in with me as I did my sightseeing, with Luba hearing a woodpecker that was probably a Syrian.

We then headed back to Yerevan, and on the way we had the most amazing view of Mount Ararat. A patch of sunny blue sky had opened in the clouds around the peak of Great Ararat giving it a halo like in an Orthodox icon. We pulled over on the busy highway and we all stopped and took pictures. Mamikon even climbed on a wall to get an unobstructed view. We all agreed it was the perfect ending to my visit to Armenia.

After a quick dinner it was off to the train station for the Midnight Train to Georgia. Actually it left at just before 10PM...

May 5th – Tbilisi and Davit Gareji

…and arrived around 8 AM. First bird in Georgia: Eurasian jackdaws, seen from the train south of Tbilisi. The only ones I saw in Georgia.

I found an ATM, took a taxi to my hotel which was right across from the Metekhi Church. My room was ready, so I cleaned up and then hit the town. Like Yerevan, there were plenty of common swifts swirling around. I first wandered around Freedom Square and a bit of the riverside just getting my bearings. I ended up at Pushkin Square where I would hook up with a tour to the Davit Gareji monasteries.

Davit Gareji is a complex of cave monasteries from the 6th century. One of the structures is still an active monastery. Many of the others have painted frescoes which are still visible. Although not as vivid as the caves in Cappadocia, Turkey, they’re still quite interesting. And for me a second benefit was that the complex is right on the Georgia/Azerbaijan border. In fact, many of the caves are on the Azerbaijan side of the border and you can (usually) cross freely between the two countries.

The plan was to join a tour with a company called Gareji Line. They have a daily minibus tour to the Davit Gareji monastery for only 25 Lari (about $11.50). The tours leave at 11 AM and return to Tbilisi at about 7 PM. This gives roughly 2-1/2 hours at the monastery as well as a dinner stop at a Georgian-Polish Pub called the Oasis Club on the outskirts of Udabno town.

We left Tbilisi at about 11, made a quick stop for provisions just outside of town (there’s no water or food at the site), then took the main road past the airport to Sagarejo, where we turned south into the semi-desert region. We made several stops for photos between Sagarejo and the monastery, all of which had singing corn buntings. I also saw a hoopoe fly off at one stop. The road was paved to the town of Udabno, and after that it was dirt. We arrived at the base of the mountain at about 1:30 and were told to be back at the vehicle at 4 at the latest.
I then started the long hike up to the top of the ridge. I missed the turn to the easier trail and wound up taking the longer harder route up. Lord, it was hot! I was really too exhausted to look for anything, although there weren’t too many birds singing in the afternoon heat. I picked out a Siberian stonechat and could hear an occasional cetti’s warbler sing, but that was all I could see until I hit the top of the ridge. Any birds I could hear were deep in the trees below me, but I could hear music coming from the top.

Once down at on the trail (in Azerbaijan!), I could hear something calling down below in the valley. It sounded like a couple black francolins, so I checked my tape and concluded it was. I started spending a lot of time looking for those and less time looking at the caves, but I couldn’t find one.

I finally spent some time in the caves looking at the frescoes, and then went back to looking down into the valley. Eventually I spotted what looked like a bird sitting on a rock way down below me. Not the greatest view, but it surely had to be a black francolin, didn’t it? When I walked a bit onward and went back to look at it again, it was gone, so that pretty much confirmed it.

I walked along to some more caves, and when I came back out there were three **Egyptian vultures** flying around the cliff above me. I also had a nice male Finsch’s wheatear displaying near me. (I counted the vultures and wheatear for Georgia). I heard the francolins again down below and made another concerted effort to see one. This time I found a different bird sitting on a rock, and while watching it, I saw it call and move. Now I definitely had my lifer **black francolin**, and my first and only lifer for Azerbaijan!

The time was getting tight, so I climbed back up to the ridge line and back down into Georgia, this time going down the easier trail. I had a western rock nuthatch at the top of the ridge and a Siberian...
stonechat feeding a begging fledgling partway down. Once back at the active monastery, I picked out a couple **common house martins** mixed in with the many barn swallows.

We left promptly at 4 PM, stopped at the Udabno Club, where I rehydrated and also had my first **khachapuri** (cheese pie) in Georgia, after which we headed back to Tbilisi. The only birds spotted on the way back were the ubiquitous corn buntings along with a single crested lark and a couple red-backed shrikes. I had the driver drop me off at the metro station near my hotel rather than go all the way back to Pushkin Square and made the walk back to my hotel for an early night.

**May 6th – Tbilisi**

Today was a day for sightseeing in Tbilisi, so the birds were essentially the common urban birds.

I walked from my hotel above Rike Park to Freedom Square then on to Rustaveli Square. The only birds I saw were house sparrows and hooded crows. I then walked back along the eastern bank of the river where I saw a couple Armenian gulls.

By noon I was back at Rike Park, so I took the cable car up to the top of Narikala Hill. I found a common redstart in the brush near the Kartlis Deda monument and a great tit in the trees opposite. I heard a lot of birdsong in the greenery on the back side of the mountain and eventually found a stairway down only to discover it was the Botanical Gardens.

I wandered around the gardens finding a lone **middle spotted woodpecker** among the numerous blackbirds and great tits. I then left by the main entrance, walked down to Meidan, and had a late lunch. While I was eating, the skies opened up so I headed back to the hotel for a while. A break in the rain gave me a chance to try some more sightseeing, but the rain came back again. So I called it a day and met up with the tour group in the evening.

**May 7th – Transit to Stepantsminda**

The tour started today in earnest. While waiting for the vehicles, we had a flyover black-crowned night-heron as well as a flock of immature Armenian gulls. A European greenfinch flew into the tree across from the hotel but was scared off by the house sparrows. We also noticed that some of the swifts flew into a hole in a brick wall at the Metekhi Church. Once the vehicles arrived, we piled in and headed north.

Semi-collared flycatcher had been reported near Ananuri, so we made a stop there since it was likely the only place we’d get it on the tour. On one side of the road, we had great tits, **blue tits**, a **wood pigeon**, a **garden warbler**, and a spotted flycatcher. On the opposite side of the road we had quite a few **green warblers** way up in the canopy, a Eurasian jay, a couple **long-tailed tits**, and a rather responsive **red-breasted flycatcher**.
Jvari Pass was fogged in, so we stopped partway down on the north side for lunch. To everyone’s surprise, we found a **Eurasian golden oriole** on the ground hunkered down against the rain and sleet. We also had a few water pipits, a ring ouzel, some **red-billed choughs**, and a distant male rufous-tailed rock thrush. Further down we found a male **Guldenstadt’s redstart**, one of the targets of the tour, and a **golden eagle** in flight.

We made it to Stepantsminda at about 2, and since the weather was reasonably clear, we headed up the mountainside to go after the specialties. First we found another male Guldenstadt’s redstart in a pasture at the bottom of the mountain. Once up on the slope, with all the scopes it didn’t take long before someone found a **Caucasian black grouse**, and soon after that a **Caucasian snowcock** was found, too. Then Dani noticed that a few **Caucasian Great rosefinches** had flown into the nearby thorn scrub including a gorgeous male. So he breathed a sigh of relief. They’re not always found.

We had a lammergeier and a couple Eurasian griffon vultures fly past the top of the mountain along with a few **alpine choughs**. Keeping our eyes on the skies, we found migrating **European honey-buzzards** and a lone **common/steppe buzzard**. There were **alpine swifts** flying around below us with **common house martins** mixed in. While everyone was trying for better looks at the “Chickens” a couple of us wandered over to the thorn scrub and found the **mountain chiffchaff** that had been singing and also a **mistle thrush**. And on our way back down to the vehicles we had a flock of **fire-fronted serins**. So we’d found all the regional specialty targets of the tour on the first afternoon.

Instead of going to the hotel, we took a walk along the riverside near Gergeti. There was the possibility of wallcreeper, but we couldn’t find one. We did find a **common sandpiper**, a **grey wagtail**, a common redstart, and a couple **white-throated dippers**. A walk in the nearby tree grove turned up a few more green warblers, chaffinches, great tits, and a **Eurasian treecreeper**. Some in the group saw a great spotted woodpecker, but I never got on it.

After a long day, we checked in at the hotel just as it was getting dark and tallied the day’s list at dinner.
It was raining when we woke up and the mountains were fogged in. Looking for chickens was out of the question, so we headed back to the Gergeti area. First we walked into a scrubby area near the tree grove and flushed a Eurasian nightjar, a migrant who was roosting there. There were plenty of passerines in the scrub. Most were dunnocks and common rosefinches, but we also had a mountain chiffchaff and a common whitethroat. A walk in the tree grove added coal tit and the riverside walk added black redstart, red-breasted flycatcher, and a flock of goldfinches to the previous day’s species.

We eventually made it to the mountainside. The rain was easing but the mountaintops were still fogged in. The male Guldenstadt’s redstart was still in the pasture and today he was joined by the missus. And where the day before there had been a couple great rosefinches in the thorn scrub, today there was a huge flock. I saw about 15. Dani estimated there were 50. Outstanding! We heard one snowcock in the fog, but there was no chance of seeing them, so after picking out various wheatears, pipits, thrushes, and similar mountain passerines, we made our way back to the vehicles and headed south of town.

We drove to a wet scrubby area. A lone European bee-eater was resting on some wires and someone picked out a rufous-tailed rock thrush on the hill, a Eurasian kestrel hunting over the field along with a couple of shrikes (Zorro!). A few griffon vultures and a couple lammergeiers were flying around, and when we looked up at them we noticed a steady stream of honey-buzzards, so we started looking for other species mixed in. We had good looks at a steppe eagle, and persistence turned up a black kite and a Eurasian sparrowhawk.

The main reason for coming to this site was the possibility of corn crake. Dani tried a tape at an appropriate area and we got a couple responses. So we tried for the nearest one. He was responsive and came within a couple meters of us, but wouldn’t show himself. While trying for him we noticed a barred warbler, so we focused on that for a while. Eventually Dani suggested that we move our position a bit, and as we did one of the group saw two crakes challenging each other out in the open, but they quickly disappeared. We tried for one of them but got nothing, so we moved on a bit.

At this second spot we got another response, so we ignored the mud and water as best we could and kept at it. It came in so close you could feel it calling! Dani saw some movement in the grass and after some frustrating seconds I saw it too. Eventually, I saw a head pop up out of the leaves and look around. It was a corn crake. They do exist! While Dani was trying to get the others on it, it walked out into the open! Even those who’d seen one before agreed it was the best look they’d ever had. We finished the session with a couple more barred warblers and a flyover flock of bee-eaters.

So what next?

Dani had a tip about a place where we could find wallcreeper, so we headed back south toward Jvari Pass to the town of Kobi where there’s a large rock face right along the highway. We started scanning that while continuing to watch the raptor migration. We picked out another golden eagle and a couple steppe buzzards from the stream of honey buzzards. Of course, there were lammergeiers and griffon vultures, and high up along the cliff were some crag martins. Then someone found the wallcreeper. We watched him fly back and forth across the rock trying to describe where he was to those who lost him (“He’s on the big black patch...now he moved to the orange lichen...etc.”) Eventually he flew off and we moved on.
We then continued up to the pass, where it was perfectly clear but rather cold and windy. We had a small flock of twite flitting around and also a rock pigeon that was probably a legitimate “wild” bird. Then someone found a distant **alpine accentor**. While trying to get that in the scope, a closer one was found. More surprising, we found a male black-headed bunting on the cliff below the pull-out. It wasn’t easy to see since it was sheltering from the wind, and we had to be careful that nobody fell over the edge while looking at it.

It was now around 5:00, so we headed back down to town, but instead of stopping we continued north toward the Russian border. Within sight of the actual border gate we pulled over and did some more hawk watching. Of course there were honey buzzards, and we had both Eurasian and Levant sparrowhawks (although I never saw the latter as it was very distant). After that, as darkness fell, we headed back to Stepantsminda and dinner.

**May 9th – Better Looks**

The morning dawned bright and clear so right after coffee we were up on the mountainside. The fine weather meant that the Guldenstadt’s and great rosefinches were gone – they’d moved up on the mountain. But it also meant that we could get great views of the chickens, aided by the previous day’s snowfall at the higher elevations. We quickly found multiple Caucasian black grouse displaying. We kept hearing snowcocks, but they kept hidden for the longest time. Finally, we moved to a different angle and saw one, and I even saw it in flight. By the time our session was finished we’d seen 3 or 4 more.

We made a quick stop at the fields south of town where we added a whinchat and a rock bunting to the trip list, then moved on to the Truso Valley. As we drove down the valley we had a couple shrikes, a few twite, and a couple cuckoos. The raptor parade continued too, with common/steppe and honey buzzards, another black kite and sparrowhawk, and the (by now) expected griffon vultures and lammergeiers.

But the best was at the end of the valley: we found a golden eagle gathering nesting material. He actually broke a branch off a tree! But before he could get far with it, he was harassed by a group of red-billed choughs who made him drop it. We then watched him dodge the choughs for 10 minutes
before they left him alone. He then found another branch and brought it to the nest, where he
replaced the female on the nest. And she was promptly mobbed by the choughs.

Interestingly, we also noticed a couple of soldiers in a small lean-to at the end of the valley. Our driver
said it was an observation post looking for invading Russian troops. We were miles from the Russian
border, so we weren’t sure it made any sense. However, I later figured out the the disputed area of
South Ossetia, over which Georgia fought a brief war with Russia in 2008, was just beyond the gap in
the mountains. The observation post made perfect sense.

We drove back to town for lunch, took a short break, and then drove up to the Sameba Church for a
little sightseeing. On the ridge across from the monastery we found a griffon vulture on a nest. After
exploring the monastery, the rest of the group did some more hawk-watching - I took a break instead.
The drive back down added a Eurasian jay and a flock of heard only siskins among the more common
passerines. After that, we called it an early night.

May 10th – Back to Tbilisi

Back to the mountainside one last time...we spotted some black grouse fairly easily, but the snowcocks
were barely singing and certainly weren’t showing again. Rather than hike all the way up the slope to
look for them, a few us us decided to focus on the passerines in the thorn scrub. The dominant species
was common rosefinch, but there were a few ring ouzels and blackbirds, as well as dunnock and
mountain chiffschaff. I also heard a song I didn’t recognize. After a lot of searching, I found the bird
displaying. When it perched I saw it was a tree pipit. Eventually the rest of the group came back down
(no snowcocks) and with a last look at great rosefinch, we headed back to the hotel, packed up, and
headed south.

We made a stop on the way up to the pass when Dani saw a snowfinch shoot across the road, then
another at the pass to for one last try for snowfinch and horned larks, neither of which we found. So
we headed back to Ananuri for another try for the semi-collared flycatcher. We spent about 2 hours
there in an unsuccessful search although we did find great and blue tits, red-breasted flycatcher, green
and garden warblers, and common redstart. A flock of European bee-eaters flew around over the
woods. We also heard a great spotted woodpecker, although I didn’t see it (others did). Some of the
group also found a Eurasian nuthatch, but not everyone saw it.

With time available, we then made a stop at Lisi Lake on the outskirts of Tbilisi. This was a great place.
There’s reeds at one end of the lake which support great crested and little grebes, several little
bittern, a great egret, and great reed and sedge warbler. Paddyfield warbler has also been recorded
there, but we couldn’t find one. There were at least 2 western marsh harriers hunting over the reeds
as well as a single whiskered tern. We also had our first common starlings of the trip.

Opposite the lake there are some pastures with scattered trees. We spent a while looking for a singing
corn bunting and found a European roller in the process. And when one of the group wandered off to
look for a wagtail that flew by – it turned out to be a white – he discovered a flock of starlings. Most
were commons, but there were a couple rosy starlings mixed in. And while scoping them, we found a
handful of yellow wagtails.

Dani then decided that we’d head down into the pastures to get a better look at the wagtails, and it
turned out to be a great decision. The area was full of birds. Not only did we have the expected corn
buntings and red-backed shrikes, but as we drove down the road we kept finding new species. There were many black-headed buntings and a lone lesser grey shrike. A stop to get out of the vehicles gave us a short-toed snake eagle on a power pylon. Another stop gave us a few Ortolan buntings and a pair of woodchat shrikes. A third stop turned up a flock of rock sparrows foraging in the grass. However, we never did find the yellow wags.

It was now getting late, and many of the group had early morning flights, so we headed back to the hotel. While checking in I had my last new bird of the tour – a flyover little egret.

May 11th – Off to The Coast

Today was uneventful, bird-wise. I took the 8:45 AM train to Batumi arriving just after 2. The rest of the day was spent wandering around town. The expected hooded crows and house sparrows were around along with a few barn swallows and common swifts. The park along the coast had a couple goldfinches. I spent a little time sea-watching which gave me a couple great cormorants and a single white-headed gull, which was probably a yellow legged, and a distant tern that I couldn’t identify.

May 12th – Birding Around Batumi

I was met at my hotel at 5 AM by Guille Mayor and our driver Ruslan. The original plan was to go to Mtirala National Park in the morning, and after a stop for Krüper’s nuthatch, we’d finish up in the Chorokhi River Delta. However, since it was raining (again!), and Mtirala was sure to be in the rain clouds, we reversed the order and headed to Chorokhi first. On the way there, Guille had a surprise for me: a little crake had been found in someone’s yard the night before. We were going to release it into the marsh!

We arrived on the north bank of the river just around dawn as the marsh was coming to life. There were quite a few purple herons and night herons flying around. Guille pointed out a little bittern and as it got brighter we found a few more. A small flock of glossy ibis flew in and we picked out a few great egrets in the reeds. And lots of yellow-legged gulls were flying along the coast.

Guille then said it was time to “Release the crake!” He got the bird out of the back of the car and we both took pictures of it. After all, when do you get to see a little crake up close? He offered me the chance to release the bird, but I let the professional do it. When Guille let the bird go, it took a step, flew into the reeds, and disappeared. It’s not countable, and it would have been a lifer, but that was still a once in a lifetime experience.
We moved on to some nearby ponds. Guille pointed out cattle egrets and squacco herons. There were large flocks of barn and bank swallows and a few thrush nightingales singing (I eventually saw one). The ponds were empty though. The only bird on the ponds was a great crested grebe. There weren’t even any great reed warblers singing.

We then headed to some fields that used to be some sort of military training area. As we got out of the car, Guille spotted a huge kettle of honey-buzzards. For a couple of hawk-watchers, this was spectacular. With them we found a common/steppe buzzard, a black kite, and a Eurasian sparrowhawk. We also had a string of bee-eaters migrating and thousands of yellow-legged gulls.

The brushy fields were shrike central. I have never seen so many shrikes, but unlike other stops on the trip, they were evenly split between red-backed and lesser grey. We picked out a European roller among the shrikes and heard a corn bunting or two. A large flock of passerines turned out to be rosy starlings. But it seemed every movement in the bushes was a shrike. Mixed in we heard some bird song, and we eventually tracked it down to several barred warblers and one common whitethroat, and while we tracked those down, we found a couple of honey buzzards foraging on the ground.

Last stop in the delta were some more ponds right along the coast on the south side of the river. The target here was grey-headed swamphen, a recent split from purple swamphen. These are hard birds to find in Batumi. Shooting birds for sport is very popular in Georgia and there aren’t many of them left. It was a long shot, but we went for it anyway, since there were plenty of other good birds there.

As we walked from the car, we had a couple great cormorants fly along the shore. Then a shorebird flew in and landed on the shingle beach. Guille got the scope on it. It was a greater sandplover, a very rare bird in Georgia. Further on, we heard a brief song behind us that sounded like a river warbler, another one of my targets. We spent a while looking through the brush for that, but only found another booted warbler. Mixed in with the red-backed shrikes, we found a woodchat shrike.

We made it to the first pond. There was an island in the middle, and on it were a nice gull-billed tern, a few black-winged stilts, some ruffs, wood sandpipers, a redshank, and a little stint. In the open water there was a small flock of garganey. Then as he scoped them, Guille found a couple ferruginous ducks.

We moved along what seemed like a levee to another view of the pond hoping for the swamphen. We spotted a little ringed plover along the way, then ended up on a small causeway between two large reed beds. Guille pointed out a marsh warbler and I heard a great reed warbler or two. Further on we found abooted warbler. We got another look at the birds on the island, but try as we might there was no sign of the swamphen. Oh well, like I said, it was a long shot.

Ruslan drove us across town to the northern suburbs where the Botanical Gardens are located, but instead of going into the gardens, we drove up onto the ridge above them. We walked a bit of the road looking for Krüper’s nuthatch, but only heard chaffinches and great tits. We tried a different road where there were some more pines and had more of the same and a spotted flycatcher. At one point we heard a nuthatch way below us, but it was too far to see.

We walked up the hill some more to another grove of pines, but that was empty, so we walked back down finding a green warbler at eye level—a much better view than previously. And while looking at
noticed a dipper fly downstream. Then we walked back to the HQ adding a white wagtail to the day.

As expected, it was now clear and sunny, so with that success, we drove back down, grabbed some khatcaspuri for lunch, then headed up to Mtirala National Park. After about a half hour driving, Ruslan said something that Guille translated as “end of the asphalt.” Uh oh. We still had a few kilometers to go, but after a little while we arrived at park headquarters.

At Mtirala I had two targets: lesser spotted woodpecker and another shot at semi-collared flycatcher. The woodpecker could be found pretty much anywhere, but the flycatcher was likely partway up the mountain. The main part of Mtirala is in a very narrow mountain river valley. It’s a very beautiful setting, but it also means is that the trails are very steep heading up the mountain sides. They were probably steeper than I could handle, especially with extremely sore legs from four days of hiking up mountainsides in Stepantsminda, but I gave it a go anyway.

The hiking was tough and so was the birding. First off it was mid-afternoon, but on top of that the trail started off paralleling the river, which drowned out much of the bird sounds. Guille kept trying for the woodpecker but all we found were great tits and chaffinches (sound familiar?) We kept heading upward, and spotted a Eurasian wren perched on some wires and a grey wagtail along a small side creek.

We’d gone about 2 km, and I was starting to flag. There was a side trail signposted to a lake, so Guille suggested that we try that instead. He checked it out first and determined it was as steep as the main trail, so we decided to turn around. We found another side trail that led down to the river, so we tried that one, but it dead-ended after a couple hundred meters. So we hiked back up to the main trail and continued back.

Then Guille remembered a hand-operated ropeway that crossed the river. He ran down to the river to see if it was still operational. It was, so he called me to join him. We pulled ourselves across the river and came up on a dirt road on the opposite side. We walked that road back to the headquarters building when we found a woodpecker. It was too big to be a lesser spotted. It was a white-backed woodpecker. A great bird, but it’s ironic that the only woodpecker we saw was the one most birders want to find in Georgia, but wasn’t the one I wanted most.

We came to a small hotel and restaurant so we took a break and had a few drinks. While sitting there I noticed a dipper fly downstream. Then we walked back to the HQ adding a white wagtail to the day-
list. We met up with a well-rested Ruslan and headed back out. We made one last stop on the way out for a final try for the woodpecker, but it was not to be.

We made it back to my hotel at about 7 where I said my thanks and goodbyes. Although I only went one-for-four on targets, it was still a wonderful day of birding. I had a great Georgian meal at the Cape Town (!) restaurant on the ground floor of my hotel.

May 13th and 14th – Back to Tbilisi and Beyond

These were sightseeing days. First was another morning wandering around a damp Batumi. The only new birds beyond those seen the first day in Batumi were a few great cormorants and a grey heron offshore, and a heard only Eurasian collared-dove in the park along the shoreline. I finished up with a few common house martins nesting in the eaves of the Batumi Central Station as I waited for my train.

The day in Tbilisi was also uneventful. Guille had sent me a location way out in the suburbs where he’d recently seen the woodpecker, but I decided to spend the morning touring around the old town and the National Museum. The afternoon was spent simply relaxing and passing the time until my 11 PM flight to Istanbul. I needed a change of pace, so dinner was a nice curry at a small Pakistani restaurant I found near Meidan.

My Turkish Airlines flight to Istanbul was late, and by the time I cleared the extremely long immigration lines at Ataturk Airport and my taxi driver found my hotel, it was after 2 AM.

May 15th – Istanbul

I’d been to Istanbul before so sightseeing wasn’t really on the agenda. I really only had one thing to do in Istanbul and that was to find a Yelkouan shearwater.

So after a lie-in, at about 8 AM I hopped on the metro, connected to the tramway, and headed to the Eminönü ferry terminal. While waiting for the ferry, I scanned the Bosporus. All I found were yellow-legged gulls. On land, there was a common starling hopping around the benches mixed in with the house sparrows and hooded crows. I also realized when they called that the flock of swifts overhead were alpine swifts.

The ferry to Kadiköy pulled out at 9:40 with me on the upper outside deck. After a few minutes, and hundreds of gulls, I spotted a couple great cormorants. Then this small shearwater flew by. It was tiny! I almost thought it was a storm-petrel, but no, it was a Yelkouan shearwater.

The ferry continued on to the Asian side where I saw a another flock of shearwaters, a few black-headed gulls and a European shag. When we got to Kadiköy, I simply walked out and got back on the ferry. On the way out of the harbor, I saw about 20 more shags, a few cormorants, and a grey heron on the breakwater. A couple more flocks of shearwaters and we were back in Europe. Mission accomplished.

I then did a little bit of sightseeing at the Blue Mosque (where I saw a great tit) and Hagia Sofia. I made my way to Taksim Square then wandered down Istiklal Caddesi down past Galata Tower and back across the Golden Horn to Eminönü. At this point I realized I could simply go back to my hotel for the
rest of the afternoon or take the circle cruise of the Bosporus. I chose the latter. Why not? It only cost 12 Lira (about $4).

The cruise went up the Bosporus to beyond the second bridge. On the cruise I saw hundreds more shearwaters, many cormorants, and also had close-up looks at the yellow-legged gulls as the kids on the boat fed them popcorn and crackers. Most were immatures but there were a few adults.

After the boat docked back at Eminönü, I hopped back on the tram, connected to the metro, and got back to Ataköy where my hotel was. After a nice iskender kebab dinner, I strolled back to my hotel and wrapped up the vacation.

Species List

Garganey - *Anas querquedula* - A few at Armash Fish Ponds and a few more at the Chorokhi Delta.

Ferruginous Duck – *Aythya nyroca* - Two at Armash Fish Ponds and a two more at the Chorokhi Delta.

Caucasian Grouse - *Tetrao mlokosiewiczi* – Lifer. Seen daily at Stepantsminda except for when it was snowing on the mountain top. Usually in the grasses and scrub below the scree line.

Caucasian Snowcock - *Tetraogallus caucasicus* – Lifer. Seen daily at Stepantsminda except for when it was snowing on the mountain. Easily heard, but much harder to find than the previous species since they’re more cryptically colored and live even higher on the mountain among the rocks and scree.

Black Francolin – *Francolinus francolinus* – Lifer. Two birds seen and a few more heard in Azerbaijan in the valley below Davit Gareji (Udabno Caves).

Chukar - *Alectoris chukar* – One bird seen in Vedi Gorge.

Little Grebe - *Tachybaptus ruficollis* – A few birds seen at Armash Fish Ponds and one at Lisi Lake outside Tbilisi.

Great Crested Grebe - *Podiceps cristatus* – Many at Armash Fish Ponds. A few at Lisi Lake and a couple at the Chorokhi Delta.

White Stork – *Ciconia ciconia* – Common in the Armash area, especially in the town of Surenavan just outside the fish farms. Also a couple in some small towns outside Echmiadzin.

Great Cormorant - *Phalacrocorax carbo* – In Armenia, one at Lake Sevan and a few at Armash. In Georgia, several in the Chorokhi Delta and one offshore in Batumi. Common on the Bosporus in Istanbul.

European Shag - *Phalacrocorax aristotelis* – 10-20 on the Kadiköy side of the Bosporus in Istanbul.

Pygmy Cormorant - *Phalacrocorax pygmeus* – Abundant at Armash Fish Ponds.

Great White Pelican - *Pelecanus onocrotalus* – A migrating flock at Armash Fish Ponds.

Little Bittern - *Ixobrychus minutus* – A few at Lisi Lake and a few more in the Chorokhi Delta.

Gray Heron - *Ardea cinerea* – A few at Armash, one on the River in Stepantsminda, a couple in the Chorokhi Delta, and one offshore in Batumi.

Purple Heron - *Ardea purpurea* – A couple at Armash and several in the Chorokhi Delta.

Great Egret - *Ardea alba* – A few at Armash and one at Lisi Lake.

Little Egret - *Egretta garzetta* – Several at Armash and one flyover in Tbilisi.

Cattle Egret - *Bubulcus ibis* – Several at the ponds in the Chorokhi Delta.

Squacco Heron - *Ardeola ralloides* – Fairly common in the Chorokhi Delta.

Black-crowned Night-Heron - *Nycticorax nycticorax* – A few at Armash and in the Chorokhi Delta. Also one flyover in Tbilisi.

Glossy Ibis - *Plegadis falcinellus* - A couple flocks at Armash and a single small flock at the Chorokhi Delta.

Lammergeier - *Gypaetus barbatus* – One at the Amberd Fortress on Mount Aragats in Armenia. Surprisingly common with a few seen daily in the Stepantsminda area.

Egyptian Vulture - *Neophron percnopterus* – Three seen at Davit Gareji. I counted them for Georgia, but they did fly over Azeri territory, too.

European Honey-buzzard - *Pernis apivorus* – A huge number of migrants were passing through Georgia. Constant streams in Stepantsminda whenever you looked for them as well as large kettles in the Chorokhi Delta.

Eurasian Griffon - *Gyps fulvus* – Seen daily in Stepantsminda. Also a couple in Vedi gorge.

Cinereous Vulture - *Aegypius monachus* – One seen in Vedi gorge.
Short-toed Snake-Eagle - *Circaetus gallicus* – One seen on the way to Armash and another at Lisi Lake.

Booted Eagle - *Hieraaetus pennatus* - One seen on Mount Aragats.

Steppe Eagle - *Aquila nipalensis* - Lifer. A few seen mixed in with the migrating flocks of honey-buzzards in Stepantsminda.

Golden Eagle - *Aquila chrysaetos* - One seen below Jvari Pass and a nesting pair in the Truso Valley.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk - *Accipiter nisus* - One or two birds seen daily mixed in with the honey-buzzard flocks.

Western Marsh-Harrier - *Circus aeruginosus* - A few at Armash and a couple at Lisi Lake.

Black Kite - *Milvus migrans* - Just a few seen mixed in with the honey-buzzard flocks.

Long-legged Buzzard - *Buteo rufinus* - Several in Vedi Gorge and on the way to Mount Aragats.

Common (Steppe) Buzzard - *Buteo buteo vulpinus* - One or two birds seen daily mixed in with the honey-buzzard flocks. Some authorities split this as Steppe Buzzard, but Clements does not.

Corn Crake - *Crex crex* - One seen amazingly well and a couple others heard in a field south of Stepantsminda.

Eurasian Coot - *Fulica atra* - Many at Armash and a few in the Chorokhi Delta.

Black-winged Stilt - *Himantopus himantopus* - A few at Armash and in the Chorokhi Delta.

Eurasian Oystercatcher - *Haematopus ostralegus* - A couple at Armash.

Black-bellied Plover - *Pluvialis squatarola* - Four (in breeding plumage) at Armash. Apparently an uncommon bird there. A.k.a. grey plover.

Northern Lapwing - *Vanellus vanellus* - Quite a few at Armash.

White-tailed Lapwing - *Vanellus leucurus* - Lifer. One of the specialty birds of Armash. Several seen.

Greater Sand-Plover - *Charadrius leschenaultia* - One seen along the Black Sea shore in the Chorokhi Delta. A very good bird for Georgia.

Kentish Plover - *Charadrius alexandrines* - A few at Armash.

Common Ringed Plover - *Charadrius hiaticula* - One or two at Armash.

Little Ringed Plover - *Charadrius dubius* - Several at Armash although not common. Also one seen along the Black Sea shore in the Chorokhi Delta.

Common Sandpiper - *Actitis hypoleucos* - One at Armash and one or two on the river in Stepantsminda.
Wood Sandpiper - *Tringa glareola* - Abundant at Armash. A few seen in the Chorokhi Delta.

Common Redshank - *Tringa tetanus* - A couple each at Armash and the Chorokhi Delta.

Black-tailed Godwit - *Limosa limosa* - Hundreds at Armash

Ruff - *Calidris pugnax* - Many at Armash including breeding plumage males. All but one of the birds at the Chorokhi Delta were either female or non-breeding males.

Little Stint - *Calidris minuta* - A few at Armash and one at the Chorokhi Delta

Black-winged Pratincole - *Glareola nordmanni* - Luba identified two birds at Armash as this species.

Slender-billed Gull - *Chroicocephalus genei* - One at Armash.

Black-headed Gull - *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* - A few at Armash and a few on the Asian side of the Bosporus in Istanbul.

Pallas's Gull - *Ichthyaetus ichthyaetus* - One at Armash with the “mystery gulls.”

Yellow-legged Gull - *Larus michahellis* - Thousands at the Chorokhi Delta with singles making it up to Batumi. The common gull on the Bosporus in Istanbul.


Gull-billed Tern - *Gelochelidon nilotica* - One at the Chorokhi Delta.

White-winged Tern - *Chlidonias leucopterus* - Abundant at Armash.

Whiskered Tern - *Chlidonias hybrida* - One at Lisi Lake

Common Tern - *Sterna hirundo* - A few at Armash

Rock Pigeon - *Columba livia* - Feral birds were common in cities and towns. At least one at Jvari Pass was probably a true wild bird.

Common Wood-Pigeon - *Columba palumbus* - One bird seen on the way to Stepantsminda.

Eurasian Collared-Dove - *Streptopelia decaocto* - One heard at the Armenian Genocide Memorial in Yerevan and one or two heard in the park along the shoreline in Batumi.

Laughing Dove - *Streptopelia senegalensis* - A couple in Yerevan and one in Tbilisi.

Common Cuckoo - *Cuculus canorus* - Scattered birds in wooded sites in Armenia and several at Armash. Regularly heard around Stepantsminda.
Eurasian Nightjar - *Caprimulgus europaeus* - One migrant spooked off a day roost near Gergeti (Stepantsminda).

Alpine Swift - *Apus melba* - A few seen daily in Stepantsminda. Also a flock in Instanbul.

Common Swift - *Apus apus* - Abundant in the lowlands at all sites, especially in the cities.

European Roller - *Coracias garrulus* - One near Lisi Lake and another in the Chorokhi Delta.

Blue-cheeked Bee-eater - *Merops persicus* - A handful seen at Armash.

European Bee-eater - *Merops apiaster* - Regularly seen outside the cities. Noticeable migration observed during the entire tour.

Eurasian Hoopoe - *Upupa epops* - A few seen at Garni temple and at Armash. One seen on the way to Davit Gareji.

Common Kingfisher - *Alcedo atthis* - One seen at Armash.

Middle Spotted Woodpecker - *Dendrocopos medius* - One seen in the Tbilisi Botanical Gardens.

White-backed Woodpecker - *Dendrocopos leucotos* - One seen at Mtirala National Park.

Great Spotted Woodpecker - *Dendrocopos major* - One heard near Ananuri coming back from Stepantsminda.

Syrian Woodpecker - *Dendrocopos syriacus* - One heard at Echmiadzin was probably this species.

Eurasian Kestrel - *Falco tinnunculus* - One at Armash and scattered sighting around Stepantsminda.

Red-backed Shrike - *Lanius collurio* - Abundant in the lowlands in both countries. The more common shrike. A.k.a. Zorro.

Lesser Gray Shrike - *Lanius minor* - Much more uncommon than the previous species, except for at the Chorokhi Delta where it was fairly common.

Woodchat Shrike - *Lanius senator* - Two in the scrub near Lisi Lake and two at the Chorokhi Delta.
Eurasian Golden Oriole - *Oriolus oriolus* - One unhappy migrant in the rain and sleet below Jvari Pass.

Eurasian Jay - *Garrulus glandarius* - Only 3. One on the road to Mount Aragats, one near Ananuri, and one on the road up to the Sameba Church.

Eurasian Magpie - *Pica pica* - Abundant in Armenia. Fewer sightings in Georgia, mostly in the drier areas.

Red-billed Chough - *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax* - Many flocks in the Stepantsminda area.

Yellow-billed Chough - *Pyrrhocorax graculus* - Scattered sightings in the Stepantsminda area.

Eurasian Jackdaw - *Corvus monedula* - A flock in Victory Park in Yerevan and a few seen from the train on the way to Tbilisi from Yerevan.

Rook - *Corvus frugilegus* - One seen in Yerevan below the Genocide Memorial.

Hooded Crow - *Corvus cornix* - Common in all areas except Vedi Gorge.

Common Raven - *Corvus corax* - Scattered sightings in all mountain areas in both countries.

Coal Tit - *Periparus ater* - One seen below Haghartsin Monastery near Dilijan and another in the tree grove at Gergeti.

Eurasian Blue Tit - *Cyanistes caeruleus* - Several in the woods near Ananuri.

Great Tit - *Parus major* - Fairly common in all wooded areas including city parks.

Bearded Reedling - *Panurus biarmicus* - Many at Armash though very few seen.

Crested Lark - *Galerida cristata* - The common lark in the semi-desert areas of both countries.

Eurasian Skylark - *Alauda arvensis* - A few seen in the alpine areas of Mount Aragats.

Horned Lark - *Eremophila alpestris* - Many seen in the alpine areas of Mount Aragats. Ssp. *penicillata* is the one found in the Caucasus.

Bank Swallow - *Riparia riparia* - Large flocks at Armash and the Chorokhi Delta.

Eurasian Crag-Martin - *Ptyonoprogne rupestris* - A few around Garni temple and a some in Stepantsminda.

Barn Swallow - *Hirundo rustica* - Common.

Common House-Martin - *Delichon urbicum* - A few at Davit Gareji, in Stepantsminda and in Batumi (nesting at the train station).

Cetti's Warbler - *Cettia cetti* - Many at Armash (one seen) and a few at Davit Gareji.
Long-tailed Tit - *Aegithalos caudatus* - A couple in the woods near Ananuri.

Krüper's Nuthatch - *Sitta krueperi* - Lifer. One above the Botanical Gardens in Batumi.

Western Rock Nuthatch - *Sitta neumayer* - Lifer. One below Garni Temple and one at Davit Gareji.

Eastern Rock Nuthatch - *Sitta tephronota* - A few in Vedi Gorge.

Mountain Chiffchaff - *Phylloscopus sindianus* - Lifer. One heard along the shore of Lake Sevan, and several in the scrub in Stepantsminda.

Green Warbler - *Phylloscopus nitidus* - Lifer. A few in the canopy in the woods near Ananuri and one at eye level above the Botanical Gardens in Batumi.

Booted Warbler - *Iduna caligata* - One at the Chorokhi Delta.

Sedge Warbler - *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus* - One seen and several heard at Lisi Lake.

Marsh Warbler - *Acrocephalus palustris* - One at the Chorokhi Delta.

Great Reed-Warbler - *Acrocephalus arundinaceus* - Common at Armash. A few at Lisi Lake and in the Chorokhi Delta.

Eurasian Blackcap - *Sylvia atricapilla* - Just a few. One below Goshavank Monastery (Dilijan), one in Stepantsminda, and one at Mtirala NP.

Garden Warbler - *Sylvia borin* - A couple in the woods near Ananuri.

Barred Warbler - *Sylvia nisoria* - A few in the river flats near Stepantsminda and a few more in the Chorokhi Delta.

Lesser Whitethroat - *Sylvia curruca* - A couple in the parks in Yerevan.

Menetries' Warbler - *Sylvia mystacea* - One migrant at Armash.

Common Whitethroat - *Sylvia communis* - One on the way to Mount Aragats, one in Gergeti (Stepantsminda), and one in the Chorokhi Delta.

Eurasian Wren - *Troglodytes troglodytes* - Only one seen in Mtirala NP, but a couple heard in Stepantsminda.

Wallcreeper - *Tichodroma muraria* - One along the highway near the town of Kobi, Georgia.

Eurasian Treecreeper - *Certhia familiaris* - One seen in the tree grove at Gergeti.

Ring Ouzel - *Turdus torquatus* - A few at Mount Aragats and several at Stepantsminda.
Eurasian Blackbird - *Turdus merula* - Common, especially in city parks.

Mistle Thrush - *Turdus viscivorus* - A couple around Stepantsminda.

Spotted Flycatcher - *Muscicapa striata* - Fairly common in lowland woods.

White-throated Robin - *Irania gutturalis* - One at the Armenian Alphabet Monument. According to Luba, they should have been more common.

Bluethroat - *Luscinia svecica* - One seen on Mount Aragats was the first of the year at altitude for Luba and Mamikon.

Thrush Nightingale - *Luscinia luscinia* - A few heard and one seen in the Chorokhi Delta.

Red-breasted Flycatcher - *Ficedula parva* - A couple in the woods around Ananuri and one at Stepantsminda.

Black Redstart - *Phoenicurus ochruros* - One on Mount Aragats and a couple at Stepantsminda.

Common Redstart - *Phoenicurus phoenicurus* - Scattered sightings. The subspecies in the Caucasus is *samamisicus* also known as Ehrenberg’s redstart.


Rufous-tailed Rock-Thrush - *Monticola saxatilis* - A few at Mount Aragats and another couple around Stepantsminda.

Whinchat - *Saxicola rubetra* - One on the way to Mount Aragats and another in Stepantsminda.

Siberian Stonechat - *Saxicola maurus* - One on the way to Mount Aragats and a few at Davit Gareji including an adult with a begging fledgling.

Northern Wheatear - *Oenanthe oenanthe* - Common in Vedi Gorge and at altitude in both countries.

Finsch’s Wheatear - *Oenanthe finschii* - Numerous at Vedi Gorge and a few at Davit Gareji.

Isabelline Wheatear - *Oenanthe isabellina* - A few at Vedi Gorge.

White-throated Dipper - *Cinclus cinclus* - One on Mount Aragats, a couple on the river at Stepantsminda, and another couple at Mtirala NP.

House Sparrow - *Passer domesticus* - Abundant around habitation.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow - *Passer montanus* - A few at Garni Temple and at Armash.

Rock Petronia - *Petronia petronia* - A flock near Lisi Lake.

European Starling - *Sturnus vulgaris* - A couple at Garni Temple and a flock at Lisi Lake.

Rosy Starling - *Pastor roseus* - A couple in the flock of Europeans at Lisi Lake and a flock of about 30 in the Chorokhi Delta.

Alpine Accentor - *Prunella collaris* - Two at Mount Aragats and another two at Jvari Pass.

Radde's Accentor - *Prunella ocularis* - Lifer. One on Mount Aragats. The wind kept us from seeing more of them.

Dunnock - *Prunella modularis* - Fairly common in the scrub at Stepantsminda.

Western Yellow Wagtail - *Motacilla flava* - Several at Armash were the black-headed *feldegg* subspecies. A few were also seen by the others at Lisi Lake (subspecies unknown).

Gray Wagtail - *Motacilla cinerea* - A few on the river in Stepantsminda and another at Mtirala NP.

White Wagtail - *Motacilla alba* - Fairly common. Subspecies is *dukhunensis*.

Tree Pipit - *Anthus trivialis* - One on the way to Mount Aragats, a few at Stepantsminda, and one at the Chorokhi Delta.

Water Pipit - *Anthus spinoletta* - The common pipit at altitude in both countries. The local subspecies is fairly plain and looks like a tawny pipit.

Common Chaffinch - *Fringilla coelebs* - Common in wooded areas in both countries.


Common Rosefinch - *Carpodacus erythrinus* - Common in the scrub in Stepantsminda.

Great Rosefinch - *Carpodacus rubicilla* - Lifer. Multiple sightings in Stepantsminda including a huge flock on one morning. We got lucky because the weather kept them at lower elevations.

European Greenfinch - *Chloris chloris* - Scattered sightings in the lowlands.

Twite - *Carduelis flavirostris* - Several flocks at the higher elevations on Mt. Aragats and in Stepantsminda. Ssp. *brevirostris*, suggested as a possible split by some authorities.

European Goldfinch - *Carduelis carduelis* - One at the Armenian Alphabet Monument, a flock in Stepantsminda, and a few in the parks in Batumi.

Eurasian Linnet - *Carduelis cannabina* - One seen near the Armenian Alphabet Monument.

Corn Bunting - *Emberiza calandra* - Common in semi-desert/scrub habitat in both countries.

Rock Bunting - *Emberiza cia* - One on Mount Aragats and a couple in Stepantsminda.

Ortolan Bunting - *Emberiza hortulana* - Seen in Vedi Gorge, on Mount Aragats, and at Lisi Lake.