Short trip report on a 3 days birding trip from Khujand (Northern Tajikistan) to Artuch and the Kuli Kalon Lakes in the Fann mountains.

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Logistics

I was in Northern Tajikistan for work and did a short birding trip to the Fann mountains, which is a beautiful mountain range roughly half way between Khujand and Dushanbe. There is basically zero information available on birding in Tajikistan. I choose the location of the Kuli Kalon lakes in the Fanns because it was possible to arrange a trip there, because it promised to be a beautiful location even without birds, and because Raffael Ayé, one of the authors of the region’s field guide, mentioned this a possibly interesting site.

While the main point of arrival for Tajikistan is Dushanbe, I was flying directly to Khujand in Northern Tajikistan with Turkish Airlines. Turkish has currently two flights from Istanbul per week to Khujand, other international connections are mainly from Russia. Khujand can be reached overland from Tashkent in Uzbekistan in about 3 hours plus time at the border.

Although there is some tourism in the summer months in the Fanns, mainly for trekking and mountaineering, tourist infrastructure is very sparse; most tours include camping where everything is arranged by local operators. My trip was organized by my colleagues in Khujand via the agency Zerafshan Majestic Travel in Penjikent (www.travel-zerafshan.tj). The arrangement included a 4-wheel-drive car (needed for the mountains), driver, English speaking guide and accommodation in Artuch for two nights. The whole thing was pretty expensive, which is mainly due to the costs for the car. Sharing with 3-4 people would make costs more reasonable.

Accommodation was in the “Mountaineering & Tourism Base Artuch” (http://artuch.tj/lc-artuch), which was established as a holiday camp during Soviet times and is still used by Russian alpinists and increasingly as base for trekking tours. It has a main building with restaurant and rooms and smaller buildings with different types of accommodation. The best ones are two buildings with bathroom and toilet indoors (luxury!) for 8 people at maximum I guess. Other simpler accommodation here can certainly host larger groups. I was the only guest and last of the season, which lasts from May to September.

The guide was a nice chap and very helpful for logistics and knew the trekking paths. However, finding the paths is pretty straight forward with the map mentioned below or google satellite maps and a guide is not really needed for day hikes from the camp. If you know some Russian or Tajik, a car with driver would be sufficient to do this trip. Even with public transport, this trip should be doable. I don’t think that there are any bird guides in Tajikistan.
Access from Khujand is via the main road to Dushanbe passing the Shaharistan tunnel, then turning west, following the Zerashan (or Zarafshan) river towards Penjikent, before leaving the main road in the village of Dastikazy for going up the mountains. Until here the road is excellent, but then gets increasingly rough and the last bit beyond the village of Artuch is only feasible in a 4wd or by foot. Artuch is also the last point that can be reached by public transportation, from there it’s about 7 km to the camp. The whole trip from Khujand took 5-6 hours.

Accessing the area from Dushanbe would probably take a little more time. However, coming from Dushanbe, going to the Alaudin lakes (apparently there is also accommodation on that side) instead of Kuli Kalon would probably provide equal birding opportunities and be closer.

The border crossing from Penjikent to Samarkand in Uzbekistan is closed unfortunately, but if ever this changes in future, a trip to the Fanns would be a great option for anyone visiting Samarkand.

Resources


Birdlife Data Zone, Fact Sheet for Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBAs) for the Kuli Kalon Lakes: [http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/sitefactsheet.php?id=21988](http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/sitefactsheet.php?id=21988). Not overly useful for the visit but gives a rough idea what to expect.

Travel guide: Tajikistan and the High Pamirs by Robert Middleton and Huw Thomas, Odyssey, 2012. Excellent book and THE guide for the country, gives a lot of interesting background info on this little-known country.


Topographical map: Map and Guide to the Fann Mountains, 1:100.000, EWP, 1994. Basic cartography but includes contour lines, main trekking paths and all major mountain passes, which makes it a very useful map (excerpt below).
Birding sites

1. Compound of the Artuch tourist camp (39.272498 N, 68.136348 E, 2200 m)

The compound of the camp is fenced and has some smaller meadow, a source of a larger stream and drier slopes with the typical Juniper vegetation of the slopes in the valleys. I birded the closer area of the compound in the mornings and evenings before or after the hikes. There were no other guests and only a few staff, so it was rather quiet. With more people around, it’s probably not so interesting here.

The stream had Brown and White-throated Dipper, Blue Whistling Thrush and White-crowned Water Redstart. In the bushes and trees I found Turkestan, Rufous-naped and Yellow-breasted Tit, Pied Bushchat, White-browed Tit-warbler and a Rosefinch Sp.

2. Chukurak Lake (39.262639 N, 68.134466 E, 2440 m)

Chukurak Lake is a short 1 hour walk up from the camp. The way up goes through a Juniper forest first (more Tits and White-browed Tit-warbler), then through some rubble, before reaching the beautifully located lakes. I saw Bearded Vulture hear and many Sparrowhawks, Hobby and Goshawk. Chukar were calling from the slopes.

3. Kuli Kalon Lakes (39.257017 N, 68.173228 E, 2840 m)

The walk from the camp to the lakes takes about 3-4 hours. In the first bit in the valley bottom there are bits of lusher vegetation with willow trees and similar, which had a lot of warbler activity, mainly Siberian Chiffchaff and Hume’s Whitethroat. During the steeper parts that are mainly rubble with sparse Juniper or other low bushes, I saw Daurian Shrike and Sulphur-bellied Warbler.

The lakes and surrounding mountains are simply stunning. Bearded Vultures are here, I saw also Common Quail, Red-billed Chough and a Rubythroat sp.

I moved up the slope a bit (until about 39.256730 N, 68.164935 E, 2950 m) and found more White-throated Tit-Warblers. That way further up would cross the towards Chukurak pass (3150 m), connect to the Chukurak Lakes and make for a nice round back to the camp, with perhaps some other birds on the ridge or the sparsely vegetated slopes. However, we went back the same way.
4. Not visited: Alaudin Pass (39.249213 N, 68.227724 E, 3780 m)

I think this is the easiest place here to access elevations of above 3800 and could be good for Himalayan Snowcock. I asked the guide and he said he saw birds here that should be Snowcocks, judging from his descriptions. To get here early in the day, camping at the Kuli Kalon lakes or on the other side at the Alaudin lakes and a very early start would be needed.

5. Zerafshan River near Koshana village (39.451937 N, 68.072547 E, 1150 m)

On the way back to Khujand, I stopped at a place where the Zerafshan river was accessible, to look for birds in a dense growth of reed and willows on flood plain next to the river. The place was on the river bank opposite to the village of Koshana. The turn from the main road is here: 39.455979 N, 68.075566 E.

On the drier parts above the river, there was Crested Lark, Tawny Pipit, Finch’s Wheatear and Turkestan Shrike. Near the river, there were many Paddyfield Warblers, Lesser Whitethroat and Siberian Stonechat.

6. Shaharistan Tunnel (39.586104 N, 68.607605 E, 2440 m)

I made another short stop on the northern side of the tunnel, just north of a large restaurant. I just birded the area near the road on the other side of the stream, there was Grey-hooded Bunting, Lesser Whitethroat and another Bearded Vulture overhead.

I probably did not pick the best spot around here. Looking at google maps, the former road over the pass on the northern side still looks accessible and could be more interesting. Not sure if the road is still passable all the way to the pass though, but probably better than on the southern side, where it did not seem passable at all. The pass is at 3400 m and could be interesting for high altitude birds and also migration.
Maps

Route from Khujand (Sughd Province, Northern Tajikistan) to Artuch and Kuli Kalon lakes

Excerpt from “Map and Guide to the Fann Mountains” with Kuli Kalon lakes at the centre
Bird list

Common Quail  Kuli Kalon Lakes
Chukar  Heard from rubble slopes near Artuch camp and Chukurak Lake
Bearded Vulture  Chukurak Lake, Kuli Kalon Lakes, Shaharistan Tunnel
Egyptian Vulture  Zerafashan River near Koshana
Eurasian Sparrowhawk  Artuch camp, Chukurak Lake, Kuli Kalon Lakes
Northern Goshawk  Chukurak Lake
Black Kite  Shaharistan Tunnel
Rock Pigeon  Artuch camp
Common Wood-Pigeon  Shaharistan Tunnel
Oriental Turtle-Dove  Artuch camp
Laughing Dove  around Khujand
European Bee-eater  around Khujand
European Roller  around Khujand
Eurasian Kestrel  Artuch camp
Eurasian Hobby  Chukurak Lake
Red-tailed Shrike Zerafashan River near Koshana
Isabelline Shrike  On the way to Kuli Kalon lakes
Eurasian Magpie  Artuch camp
Red-billed Chough  Kuli Kalon lakes
Yellow-billed Chough  Common in Artuch camp and the lakes
Eurasian Jackdaw Zerafashan River near Koshana
Carroon Crow  Common
Crested Lark  Zerafashan River near Koshana
Black-breasted Tit  Common in Artuch camp and the lakes
Azure Tit (Yellow-breasted)  Artuch camp
Great Tit (Turkestan)  Artuch camp and the lakes
White-browed Tit-Warbler  Artuch camp, along the path to Chukurak Lake, above Kuli Kalon lakes
White-throated Dipper  Artuch camp
Brown Dipper  Artuch camp
Cetti's Warbler  Artuch camp
Common Chiffchaff (Siberian)  Artuch camp, Zerafashan River near Koshana, Shaharistan Tunnel
Sulphur-bellied Warbler  On the way to Kuli Kalon lakes
Hume's Warbler  Artuch camp
Paddyfield Warbler Zerafashan River near Koshana
Hume's Whitethroat  Artuch camp
Lesser Whitethroat Zerafashan River near Koshana, Shaharistan Tunnel
Greater Whitethroat  Artuch camp
Blue Whistling-Thrush  Artuch camp and Chukurak Lake
White-capped Redstart  Artuch camp
Black Redstart  Kuli Kalon lakes
Little Forktail  From the car between Artuch village and the camp
Siberian Stonechat Zerafashan River near Koshana
Pied Bushchat  Artuch camp
Rubythroat sp. Kuli Kalon lakes
Finsch's Wheatear  Zerafashan River near Koshana
Eurasian Blackbird  Artuch camp
Mistle Thrush  Artuch camp
Common Myna  Artuch camp and Khujand
Western Yellow Wagtail  Artuch camp and Kuli Kalon lakes
Gray Wagtail Zerafashan River near Koshana
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