

**KAZAKHSTAN:
CELESTIAL MOUNTAINS, DESERT &
STEPPE
May 7th ~ 20th 2005**

Tour Report

Participants:

Leaders:

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with

Bordering the eastern limits of the Western Palearctic, Kazakhstan is home to a wealth of exciting and highly sought-after birds. This remote region brings together a mixture of European and Asian birds, along with a sprinkling of Himalayan specialities that just make their way into the southeastern corner of the country by way of the mighty Tien Shan mountains. For some species, it is simply not possible to see them anywhere else. For others, they are more readily seen here than elsewhere in their range and often in rarely seen breeding plumages. In addition, there are all those interesting races that occur here, which are so different to those we are familiar with in the west, that are the special draw. But, here in the middle of the Eurasian landmass, just about as far from the ocean as it is possible to be, the birds are simply outstanding. For anyone who seeks the special birds of the central Palearctic, and to do so in comfort, this tour is simply the very best available. For those who just want to enjoy a special place, far from the crowds of home, few places can better Kazakhstan for the sheer splendor of its magnificent scenery and remote places. Even camping in the desert is great fun. Not small two-person tents but large, walk-in tents complete with beds! Camping could not be a more pleasant experience, and with our highly capable ground crews to look after us, we enjoyed some of the best meals of the entire tour, right amongst some of the very special birds. Where else can you eat breakfast accompanied by Macqueen's Bustard, Demoiselle Crane, Desert Warbler, Grey-necked Bunting and a plethora of larks? Mighty Lammergeiers, Himalayan Griffon Vultures, enigmatic Pallas's Sandgrouse and delightful Crimson-winged, Mongolian and Desert Finches all occurred nearby, and all add to this exciting and unique experience.

Tour summary

Arriving in the early hours of the morning at Almaty, we were met by Yuliya and taken directly to our hotel in Almaty for a good night's sleep, followed by a filling breakfast. All too soon, we were on our way, accompanied by our local leader, Victoria Kovshar, and driver Alexei. We travelled east until we reached 'the arboretum', a pleasant roadside halt with numerous Golden Orioles, Rollers and Nightingales. Soon, a pair of delightfully cute Azure Tits was discovered, breeding in a hole in a building, and they gave great

views while we waited. As we travelled further east, we paused to watch White-crowned Penduline Tits at their nest, and a colony of the recently split Pale Martins nesting in a roadside cutting. A prolonged halt at the Kokpek Pass enabled everyone to savour their first White-capped Buntings, along with a distant Eurasian Griffon. As we pulled into our camp located beside Lake Bartogoy, we heard Grey-necked Buntings singing from the adjacent hills, and Tawny Pipits displaying overhead. After sitting down to the first of many cups of tea, served up by our capable camp crew, we set off in search of those special birds which we had travelled so far to enjoy. A walk down to the lakeshore produced a nesting pair of Long-legged Buzzards and a scattering of familiar shorebirds. A quiet pool was attracting smaller birds into drink. Initially it was just Linnets that dropped in, but soon a larger bird arrived, a stunning male Crimson-winged Finch. Soon others appeared, as did a small group of Mongolian Finches. Two of Central Asia's special birds seen well. We were off to a cracking start.

The spectacular Charyn Gorge is often billed as Asia's answer to the Grand Canyon. Clearly this is an exaggeration, but impressive it certainly is. But with its breeding Lammergeiers, Himalayan Griffons and Eurasian Black Vultures, personally I'd go for it every time. We enjoyed cracking views of all these vultures this year, many passing really low overhead, with the majestic Lammergeiers being particularly impressive. A singing Pine Bunting was unexpected, although this is, apparently, a regular breeding area. The gorge itself held both Rock Thrush and Blue Rock Thrush, while nearby hills were home to Rock Sparrows, Pied Wheatears and a wonderfully pallid Little Owl.

On our return to Almaty we paused to explore the side valleys of the Kokpek Pass. Again White-capped and Rock Buntings showed well, as did our first Red-headed Bunting. A singing male Hume's Whitethroat played cat-and-mouse with us for several minutes until he finally gave himself up and showed well. Next came our visit to Nurly, accompanied by all those old favourites – are we nurly there yet, I nurly saw it, but it got away, and many more! Lesser Grey Shrikes adorned the roadside wires and small parties of Demoiselle Cranes foraged in roadside fields. As we approached Nurly, three sandgrouse were drinking at a roadside pool. Pallas's says I, others pronounced them to be Black-bellied, and there we agreed to disagree until better views were had in similar circumstances. The artesian well held several delightful Desert Finches, while Sykes's Warblers abounded in the tamarisk. Overhead, a single Pallas's Sandgrouse called and we were treated to great views almost directly overhead, complete with long tail, restricted black belly patch and diagnostic call. No problems with this bird. The journey into Almaty went without a hitch, although those who missed a roadside party of *caniceps* Goldfinches continued to be tormented by this glaring omission until almost the last day of the tour

It is difficult to say which is the best region we visit in Kazakhstan, but the desert camp at Konshengol remains a personal favourite. Situated in the middle of nowhere, 3+ hours to the west of Almaty, this remote camp offers real luxury, and some very special birds. However, the main reason for siting the camp here is the abundance of Macqueen's Bustards that occur nearby. On our first morning, a quick scan of the desert scrub

revealed a male in the distance. As we watched, he convulsed and transformed himself into a headless powder puff – then began running in figure-of-eight loops, before looking around to see who had been watching. A brilliant display and one captured on video. Nearby, Bimaculated Larks joined with Short-toed and Lesser Short-toed Larks to bring a continuous cacophony of song to our ears, while at our feet, Asian Desert Warblers flitted from bush to bush, but were reluctant to show themselves well until our final morning. Being located near an artesian well, there was a constant coming and going of birds coming into drink, and we took several opportunities to watch the antics of drinking bird here. Amongst the numerous larks, we picked up a steady stream of less usual visitors, including Black-bellied and Pallas's Sandgrouse, Greater Sand Plovers, Temminck's Stints, Grey-headed Wagtails and many more. Nearby, Brown-necked Ravens scoured the roadside and Rufous Bush Robins lead us on a merry dance before showing well. Then there were the migrants at the camel station, so many to mention with Bohemian Waxing being the most unexpected; a great way to spend an hour.

Our visit to the unique Turanga *Populus diversifolia* woodland produced the expected Turkestan Tits, White-winged Woodpeckers and Yellow-eyed Stock Doves in quick succession, while overhead a procession of raptors, including Steppe and Eastern Imperial Eagles, and a European Honey-buzzard enlivened the lunch break. Nearby, Saxaul Sparrows entertained us in the *Halimodendron hallodendron* scrub, while Azure Tits, Sykes's Warblers and *halimodendri* Lesser Whitethroats all performed well. In this unique area, the desert sands enable the waters of the Ili River permeate inland to form semi-permanent pools of fresh water. In places, stands of *Phragmites* reed have become established, and are home to the *caspius* form of Penduline Tit, Paddyfield Warbler, Little Bittern and many other waterbirds, including the locally threatened Ferruginous Duck, of which we saw several this year. Perhaps the highlight of our stay at Konshengol this year, however, were the Caspian Plovers. Having missed them in 2004, the 2005 tour became a return match, a real grudge game. We pressed Victoria where we could find them. She uttered something about needing to find the correct biotope. We drove for miles. Was this the correct biotope? Almost she said. How about this? Nearly she replied. And on we went; this was becoming a rerun of Goldilocks and the three bears! Then, at last, we found it, the correct biotope. Ah, you mean the habitat says Peter W, no, no, no, says Victoria, it's the correct biotope, ah then it's all about the substrate then, that's what's critical! Warning, never, ever, mix you biotopes with your substrates or you'll get more than a bit of habitat wrapped around the back of your head. In no time at all, a female Caspian Plover was running beside the bus, clearly off its nest. We stopped and savoured the moment. Scanning around, two more females were picked up, followed by a simply stunning male. Oh yes, and as we watched, he ran and sat on a nest. Could we have done better? We doubted it, but as we approached, he treated us to the most wonderful views as he circled our group, urging us to leave him in peace. What a wonderful moment.

The grasslands of the north are an essential component of any tour to Kazakhstan, and our time here was extremely productive. High on everyone's list of target birds here was that dynamic duo of the *Melanocorypha* world: Black and White-winged Larks. Both are common here, with Black being locally abundant, and so both fell without a struggle.

This year, however, we found a Black Lark's nest with three eggs and a newly hatched chick. Sociable Lapwing is altogether another kettle of fish. Declining rapidly, and with a world population perhaps numbering just a few hundred individuals, this was without doubt the rarest and most critically endangered species we had set our sights on. Fortunately, they still breed near Astana, and although we had to endure a long drive to reach their preferred area, we eventually located no less than 16 of these delightfully elegant shorebirds. Just how much longer we will be able to continue to treat *Limosa* clients to this privilege remains unknown, for if current predictions are correct, Sociable Lapwings may go the way of the Great Auk in the next few years. The cause of their demise remains unknown, but it is believed that the planting of shelterbelts on the previously treeless steppes has enabled huge numbers of corvids to invade what was, until recently, an inhospitable region for them. We all felt extremely privileged and humbled to have witnessed so many Sociable Lapwings. And nearby, ethereal Pallid Harriers floated on delicate wings and dainty Red-footed Falcons hawked from roadside wires.

Nearby lakes held huge numbers of waterbirds, including everything from Dalmatian Pelicans to Great Black-headed Gulls. Colossal numbers of White-winged Black Terns hawked insects above the lakes, masses of Ruff and other waders thronged the shorelines, while the open water held four species of grebe and a wealth of duck including several threatened White-headed Ducks. One secluded bay held a breeding colony of 30 or more pairs of Black-winged Pratincoles, and we were treated to respectable views of these odd shorebirds as they went about their nuptials, and hawked for insects overhead. It was also here that we found our two great rarities of the tour; a breeding plumage Red-necked Stint in a flock of Little Stints, and a Long-billed Dowitcher in breeding plumage feeding along the shoreline with Redshank and Marsh Sandpipers. Although both were unexpected, both do breed in northern Siberia to the east to the Taimyr peninsula, so their appearance in Kazakhstan was, perhaps, not quite as unexpected as they may appear at first sight.

The final leg of our great adventure saw us heading into the snow covered Tien Shan mountains, towering high above Almaty. We started out with a certain degree of trepidation, as we knew that late snows had caused problems for some groups which had preceded us. We were, however, incredibly fortunate with the weather. We awoke on our first day to a still and calm morning with glorious blue skies. Around the observatory, Black-throated Accentors, White-winged Grosbeaks and Plain Mountain Finches cavorted, White-tailed Rubythroats sang from atop the juniper scrub and Himalayan Snowcocks called from the nearby hills, although picking these out proved to be an unexpectedly arduous chore. The road to the Cosmic Ray Station, some 700 m above the Observatory, was clear of snow and even before we reached the high pass, at 3,300 m, we were enjoying our first male Guldenstadt's Redstart feeding by the roadside. His mate was quickly located, followed by another male. And what great and prolonged views they gave. These upper slopes were also home to both choughs, Brown Accentors and a huge flock of flighty Plain Mountain Finches, which took everything with them each time they erupted from the hillside, frustratingly including Altai Accentors. Overhead, a young Lammergeier floated effortlessly. By lunch, mist was rising from the valley, so we opted for the lower slopes and Big Almaty Lake, where we hoped to drop below the mist.

Flocks of Red-fronted Serins and Water Pipits drifted by the roadside, accompanied (at last!) by the distinctive *caniceps* race of Goldfinch. A Red-mantled Rosefinch briefly perched beside a White-winged Grosbeak, enabling all to appreciate the brutish size of this otherwise nondescript rosefinch. The track to the lake produced stunning eye-level views of a pair of Eversmann's Redstarts, doubtless enhanced by that intruding male which kept our resident bird on his toes. Nearby, a Sulphur-bellied Warbler grovelled across a grassy slope, and eventually stayed still long enough for everyone to enjoy decent 'scope views. With all these distractions, however, we hadn't noticed that the mist was descending. And so it was that as we started our systematic search for the ultimate Himalayan shorebird, waves of cloud rolled across the riverbed, and any Ibisbills present receded into a white mist. Still, there would always be tomorrow. And tomorrow there certainly was. White-tailed Rubythroats and a couple of Red-mantled Rosefinches cavorted around the Observatory, but this time the Snowcocks proved more obliging. Well, not really, we just needed to think outside the box. It was Ingo who took us there, by finding a party of four snowcocks, not on the crags where they should be, but barely above eye-level, feeding amongst juniper scrub. Once you knew where to look, they were pretty obvious, but that little lot cost us 15 man-hours of precious time. Still, with another delightful morning in store, and the birds of the upper elevations well and truly done and dusted, we could focus our efforts on the lower slopes. So, while some of our party remained around the Observatory to savour the 'Tien Shan experience', the remainder returned to Big Almaty Lake. This time, those who wanted Ibisbill had no mist to contend with. After a few false alarms with look-alike glacial boulders, Ibisbill took up residence on the list, as it performed so well, giving simply stunning views. Nearby, Blue-capped Redstarts sang from the tops of the endemic Tien Shan Spruces, and a pair of Songar Tits was located in the nearby village, where they showed to perfection. Perhaps the surprise of the morning came as we wandered lower, with the distant drumming of a woodpecker. Only Three-toed occurs in these forests, and a quick blast on the tape provoked a far-off response. Walking lower, the drumming became louder, and suddenly, there it was, a female Three-toed Woodpecker perched on a power pole directly in front of us. Not satisfied with allowing us just good views, the woodpecker hit the nuclear option, flew onto the pole just meters from where we were standing and drummed. Totally amazing, deafening and quite unexpected. With just about everything possible seen, we descended towards Almaty, stopping again to watch the Songar Tits. By the Big Almaty Gorge, Brown Dippers attended a hidden nest, while slight lower down the river, a White-bellied Dipper captured Ian's attention. This endemic form so different to the Dippers that inhabit Europe, can it really be the same species? Perhaps one day the molecular biologists will unzip its DNA and pronounce. Coincidentally, the White-bellied Dipper had chosen to reveal itself next to the Blue Whistling Thrush valley. A few minutes later, the thrush was located hopping up the narrow hillside stream, and with a little persuasion, was soon sitting in a bush above the road, singing his heart out.

And so White-bellied Dipper was to be our final bird. A fitting conclusion to a unsurpassed Kazakhstan tour. We had seen so many of the marvellous birds of this unique country, and seen them so well. By spending time to savour the many special moments, these birds will linger in our memories forever. But this tour was more than

just birds. It was a whole, rounded travel experience, with outstanding scenery, wonderful skylines and some truly special weather moments that combined to make this tour something rather special.

Everyone has their own favourite moments, so it would be egocentric of me to try to pick out those which I thought to be the best. So, never one to shirk a challenge, here goes. Birds obviously take a special place in these memories, whether it be those two Lammergeiers drifting low overhead at the upper Charyn Gorge; the Pallas's Sandgrouse rocketing overhead, giving their distinctive flight calls; the swirl of Demoiselle Cranes over our heads near Tamgaly Tas; the Macqueen's Bustard performing its 'headless chicken' display dance; the magical male Caspian Plover leading us away from its nest; the delightful Desert Warbler that just sat there and preened, and preened, and preened; the groups of elegant Sociable Lapwings on the steppes of the north; the abundance of Black and White-winged Larks - how can any bird go from 'most sought after' status to 'just another' in a matter of minutes? And then there were the mountains with so many extraordinary birds. But it was not just these outstanding birding moments which made this tour unique. For those who rose early to enjoy the pre-dawn at Konshengol, they will long remember listening to the dawn chorus of larks, before even the first glimmer of dawn, then marvelling at the ever-changing hues as the sun's morning rays illuminated the desert landscape. Remember also the amazing starscapes of the desert night, and those walnut-sized hailstones that pounded the steppes near Astana.

And finally, will we ever forget Victoria, whose charming personality, delightful English and boundless knowledge made her the real star of this tour? She managed our group, and our many helpers, so well, and knew just where to find those very special birds. In the mountains, Nazira's knowledge of the politics of Kazakhstan added a further dimension to this great group. Our thanks go to our drivers, Alexei around Almaty, Sergei and Sergei in Astana, and Nikolai with his go anywhere bus in the mountains. At the camps at Bartogoy and Konshengol, our ground crews looked after us so well, preparing great meals and keeping the beers cool. We must not forget Dauren and Yuliya, the backroom staff of Kan Tengri, who ensured that things ran smoothly. And finally, thanks go to the eight members of this group, who worked so hard to make this such an outstanding tour. It was a privilege to travel with you.

As for Ian and myself, we visited southern Kazakhstan after the main group departed, and that is another story, and one that Ian tells far better than I. Suffice it to say we saw some great birds here and Limosa hope to include this region in all future Kazakhstan tours.

Peter Kennerley
May 2005

Annotated checklist of the Birds

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*

In the south, one near Topar on 12th; at least eight at Lake Sorbulak on 14th. More numerous near Astana with one on 15th and at least 15 on and around Lake Sholak on 16th.

Red-necked Grebe *Podiceps grisegena*

Two on a lake to the southwest of Astana on 15th.

Slavonian Grebe *Podiceps auritus*

Three pairs on roadside lakes to the southwest of Astana on 15th.

Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis*

Four on pools near Topar on 12th, and one on a roadside pool near Astana on 15th.

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

Apart from a single bird on Bartogoy Lake on 9th, all other records came from the Astana region, with 15 on 14th; 10+ on 16th and 13 on 17th.

Dalmatian Pelican *Pelecanus crispus*

Five in flight near Topar on 12th, followed by 120+ at Lake Sorbulak on 14th. In the north, two to the southwest of Astana on 15th and at least 80 at Lake Sholak in the Kurgaldzinskiy Reserve on 16th.

Eurasian Bittern *Botaurus stellaris*

One in flight over reedbeds at Topar on 12th. In the north, booming birds heard in reedbeds to the southwest of Astana on 15th and 16th.

Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus*

A male in flight over reedbeds at Topar on 12th.

Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*

One flushed from roadside bushes, south of Koma, on 11th.

Great Egret *Ardea alba*

Apart from one near Topar on 12th, only noted in the north, with six on 15th and 16th, and two on 17th.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

Occasional singles or pairs noted on 10th, 12th, 14th, 15th, 16th and 17th.

Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*

At least 20 on pools to the southwest of Astana on 15th, and two in the Kurgaldzinskiy Reserve on 16th.

Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus*

A single on Lake Sholak in the Kurgaldzinskiy Reserve on 16th, and two at the lake near Mayshukur with the gull colony, also on 16th.

Greylag Goose *Anser anser*

Common in the north, with 20+ on 15th, 80+ on 16th and 20+ on 17th.

Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea*

Common throughout the south, where it was recorded daily between 8th and 14th. In addition, at least ten on lakes to the southwest of Astana on 15th, and up to six on Big Almaty Lake on 18th and 19th.

Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*

In the south, only noted at Lake Sorbulak where six were noted on 14th. More widespread in the north, with 15+ on 15th and 30+ on 16th.

Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope*

In the north, at least 12 on the lake with the gull colony, near Mayshukur, on 16th.

Gadwall *Anas strepera*

Four near Topar on 12th, followed by regular encounters in the north, with six on 15th, 50+ on 16th and six on 17th.

Eurasian (Common) Teal *Anas crecca*

Two males to the southwest of Astana on 15th, followed by a further two in the Kurgaldzinskiy Reserve the following day.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

Widespread in small numbers, with two on 12th, six on 14th, 10+ on 15th, 15+ on 16th and four on 17th.

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*

Only noted on the wetlands surrounding Astana, with six on 15th, 2 on 16th and 10+ on 17th.

Garganey *Anas querquedula*

One of the most numerous ducks, although scarce in the south this year, with just four on Lake Bartogoy on 19th and four near Topar on 12th. Numerous in the north, with 25+ on 14th, 30+ on 15th, 40+ on 16th and 20+ on 18th.

Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata*

Apart from two near Topar on 12th, only seen in the north, with three near Astana on 15th, 15 in the Kurgaldzinskiy Reserve on 16th, and a further 15 near Astana on 17th.

Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina*

Well over 100 on pools near Topar on 12th was the only record in the south. Scarce in the north, with six to the southwest of Astana on 15th and two pairs the following day.

Common Pochard *Aythya ferina*

Only noted in the north, with 50+ to the southwest of Astana on 15th, and 20+ in the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 16th.

Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca*

At least eight on pools near Topar was an unexpectedly high count.

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*

Two near Astan on 15th, followed by 20+ in the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 16th.

Goosander *Mergus merganser*

A pair on Lake Bartogoy on 9th, followed by a single male there the next day.

White-headed Duck *Oxyura leucocephala*

Four birds on roadside pools to the southwest of Astana on 15th showed well.

European Honey-buzzard *Pernis apivorus*

One in flight over the Turanga woodland at Zhelturanga on 12th, followed by two in flight over the desert near Konshengol the following day. All were presumably migrants, with the bird on 12th moving with Steppe and Eastern Imperial Eagles.

Black Kite *Milvus migrans*

Small numbers noted most days throughout the south, although most numerous in the desert near Konshengol, with 40+ noted here on 13th and 14th. Much scarcer in the north, with 15 on 15th, two on 16th and one on 17th. All birds showed characters associated with the eastern form *M. m. lineatus*, which is sometimes treated as a distinct species, Black-eared Kite.

Lammergeier *Gypaetus barbatus*

Two adults low over the upper Charyn gorge on 9th gave superb views. Later in the tour, an immature drifted slowly over the Cosmic Ray Station in the Tien Shan mountains on 18th.

Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*

A distant adult near the Kokpek pass on 10th, and a sub-adult on the ground near Konshengol on 13th.

Himalayan Griffon Vulture *Gyps himalayensis*

One of Kazakhstan's rarer breeding species, so we were fortunate to see eight birds near the breeding colony in the upper Charyn River gorge on 9th. Perhaps the bad weather of the previous day, combined with overcast conditions kept them low.

Eurasian Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus*

A single bird at the Kokpek Pass on 8th was the only sighting.

Eurasian Black Vulture *Aegypius monachus*

Four adults showed well above the upper Charyn River gorge on 9th. These were followed by a distant bird near Nurly on 10th, and two singles near Tamgaly Tass the following day.

Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*

Common over marshes in the north, with 10+ on 15th, six on 16th and four on 17th.

Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus*

Only seen in the north, where we enjoyed superb views of a displaying male to the southwest of Astana on 15th, along with at least three other birds during the day. The next day, in or near the Kurgaldzinskiy Reserve, a total of seven birds were found, including adult males, second summer males, and females.

Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus*

An adult male hunting the fields near Nurly on 10th. On 14th, an immature male and a female were quartering roadside fields to the east of Konshengol. In the north, at least four birds were noted, including a pair by the roadside which gave prolonged and simply stunning views.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*

A total of 13 single birds noted on seven dates throughout the country.

Shikra *Accipiter badius*

Common in the Ili River region between Topar and Zhelturanga on 12th, where we encountered at least 10 individuals, including several pairs hunting together. Most only seen in flight but great views of a male perched on a roadside power pole.

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

At least 12 birds between Astana and the Kurgaldzinskiy Reserve on 16th. All were of the migratory form *B. b. vulpines*, often referred to as Steppe Buzzard.

Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus*

Common in deserts and grasslands of the south, where it was seen daily between 8th and 14th. Maximum was 20+ between Almaty and Konshengol on 11th.

Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis*

A sub-adult by the roadside near the Kokpek Pass on 10th, an adult near Tamgaly Tass on 11th, and a movement of at least six birds, including adults and first-summer birds over Zhelturanga on 12th. One bird on 12th was actually resting on the forest floor. Heavy rain may have induced these birds to descend and temporarily suspend their migration.

Eastern Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca*

A first-summer bird over Zhelturanga on 12th.

Booted Eagle *Hieraaetus pennatus*

A dark morph bird in flight over the Charyn Gorge on 9th, was followed by a pair (one dark morph, one pale morph) over the upper Charyn Gorge later the same day.

Apparently, pale morph Booted Eagles are rather unusual in Kazakhstan.

Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni*

Only seen along the roadside leading to the Bartogoy Camp, with two on 8th and 9th, and one bird on 10th. Many kestrels were hunting in this region, but were too distant to allow positive identification. Of the birds on the roadside wires, most flew when approached but occasional birds allowed a close approach.

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*

Common, widespread and recorded daily in all habitats visited. Most numerous in the Lake Bartogoy region with up to 20 seen daily, possibly more, as many distant kestrels were not specifically identified to species. Up to 15 daily in the Konshengol area and 20+ daily in the Astana area.

Red-footed Falcon *Falco vespertinus*

Only recorded in the Astana region, where this delightful species breeds in disused corvid nests in low, roadside trees. At least 30 birds noted by the roadside on 15th, and 40+ between Astana and the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 16th. Just a distant female in flight near Astana on 17th.

Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo*

Common and widespread, with singles or pairs noted on six dates.

Himalayan Snowcock *Tetraogallus himalayensis*

At least three calling birds by the Astronomical Observatory on 18th and 19th. Thanks to a bit of brilliant spotting by Ingo, they were located on the lower slopes amidst juniper scrub, rather than on the crags, were we had expected them to be.

Chukar Partridge *Alectoris chukar*

The hard winter appears to have taken its toll on this delightful partridge. Only heard occasionally in the Kokpek Pass where it was common and readily found last year.

Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix*

Two single birds calling in desert to the northwest of Konshengol on 13th, one heard in roadside fields on 14th and another heard in the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 16th.

Ring-necked (Common) Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus*

Two males by the roadside near Topar on 12th.

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*

The first were heard near Topar on 12th. Subsequently, four singles seen on small roadside pools on the outskirts of Almaty on 14th, followed by singles near Astana on 15th and 17th.

Common Coot *Fulica atra*

Three on Bartogoy Lake on 9th, at least 15 on roadside pools near Topar on 12th, 20 at Lake Sorbulak on 14th. More numerous in the north, with 100+ daily in the Astana region on 15th-17th.

Demoiselle Crane *Anthropoides virgo*

This delightful crane was one of the most sought after species on this tour, and it fully lived up to all expectations as we enjoyed wonderful views at close range. Our first was a bird feeding near the roadside as we drove across the vast Sogeti Plain on 9th. This was followed by 12+ in fields near Nurly the next day, but the best encounter was reserved for a migrating party of 250+ individuals in roadside fields near Koma on 11th. Although resting when we found them, the entire flock circled low, directly overhead for several minutes before dropping in again. A very special and memorable experience. In the Astana area, 12 were noted on 15th and three the following day within the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve.

Macqueen's Bustard *Chlamydotis macqueenii*

Another highly desired species which exceeded all expectations. A displaying male near our camp at Konshengol on 12th and 13th regularly performed its 'headless chicken' display, running in figure-of-eight loops with its head hidden within a mass of extended neck feathering. A most extraordinary sight.

Ibisbill *Ibidorhyncha struthersii*

One on shingle by the small river flowing into Big Almaty Lake, below the Observatory, on 19th. A rare breeder in Kazakhstan with an estimate of just 75 pairs in the country.

Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*

One flew over our camp at Lake Bartogoy on 8th. In the north, two beside a small lake to the southwest of Astana on 15th.

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*

Noted daily between 12th and 17th. In the south, 13+ noted on pools near Topar, one by the artesian well near Konshengol on 13th, and at least 10 at Lake Sorbulak on 14th. In the north, at minimum of 30+ daily in the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve – in particular on Lake Sholak - and in the Astana region, on 16th and 17th.

Avocet *Recurvirostra avocetta*

Two on pools to the southwest of Astana on 15th, and at least four on Lake Sholak, on 16th.

Black-winged Pratincole *Glareola nordmanni*

Restricted to the north, where nine, mostly singles and pairs but including one group of four birds, were noted in flight in the region to the southwest of Astana on 15th. During the visit to the Kurgaldzlinский Reserve on 16th, at least 60 birds were breeding by Lake Sholak, allowing some outstanding views at close range. Near Astana, two overhead on 17th.

Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*

Seen daily between 8th and 16th wherever suitable wetlands occurred.

Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*

Two on a roadside pool to the southwest of Astana on 15th, followed by four on Lake Sholak, in the Kurgaldzlinский Reserve, 16th.

Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus*

A male by Sholak Lake in the Kurgaldzlinский Reserve on 16th was the only record.

Greater Sand Plover *Charadrius leschenaultii*

A pair came in to feed at the artesian well near our camp at Konshengol on 12th, followed by three there on 14th. On 13th, several pairs were breeding in the Konshengol region, probably totalling 18 birds in total. The extensive reddish wash to the breast and flanks of the males suggested these birds were of the race *C. l. crassirostris* and were certainly not of the nominate form.

Caspian Plover *Charadrius asiaticus*

A male and three females near our camp at Kongshengol on 13th. The behaviour of these birds suggested that breeding was occurring nearby, with at least two nests in the vicinity. A stunningly attractive species.

Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*

At least four birds in breeding plumage, feeding along the shore of Lake Sholak on 16th.

Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius*

On 16th, scanning the grasslands surrounding Kurldzhyno revealed a total of eight birds. Most were paired, but at one stage, five birds came together before dispersing again. Later the same day, were encountered a further eight birds in steppe grassland just outside the huge Kurgaldzlinский Reserve. Again, close views were enjoyed just meters from the minivans. The world population of this attractive plover is in sharp decline for, as yet, unknown reasons. This was undoubtedly the most threatened species we encountered during the tour.

Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*

Noted daily in small numbers in the south between 8th and 12th, with a maximum of six on 11th. More numerous in the Astana region, with up to 40 daily on 15th-17th.

Red-necked Stint *Calidris ruficollis*

An adult in breeding plumage, with five Little Stints, feeding along the shoreline of Sholak lake on the 16th May (correction by Peter Kennerly in litt).

Little Stint *Calidris minuta*

Three by Lake Bartogoy on 9th. In the north, five feeding along the shoreline of Sholak lake on 16th (correction by Peter Kennerly in litt).

Temminck's Stint *Calidris temminckii*

Three by Lake Bartogoy on 9th, followed by 18 at the artesian well by the Konshengol camp in the early morning of 13th. This figure fell to 12 later in the day, and 10+ the following day. Two by another artesian well near Konshengol, also on 14th. Two feeding along the shoreline of a large lake, to the southwest of Astana, on 15th.

Dunlin *Calidris alpina*

A minimum of five to the southwest of Astana, on 15th, and 12 by Lake Sholak the next day.

Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*

Uncountable thousands of birds were present throughout the Astana region wherever suitable wetlands occurred. Between 15th and 17th, we must have seen in excess of 5,000 birds, all of which were in breeding plumage and some starting to display. This region must represent one of the most important staging areas for birds heading towards their breeding areas on the tundra of northern Siberia. Here, males greatly outnumbered females, which is the opposite of the sex bias in Africa, where females outnumber males by approximately 7:1. A truly memorable spectacle.

Long-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus scolopaceus*

An adult in breeding plumage feeding along the shoreline of Lake Sholak on 16th. Apparently not recorded in Kazakhstan previously.

Details of Long-billed Dowitcher Limnodromus scolopaceus at Lake Sholak, Kazakhstan, 16th May 2005

While leading a Limosa Holidays birdwatching tour to Kazakhstan, I discovered a Long-billed Dowitcher at Lake Sholak, near the Kurgaldzinskiy Reserve, close to Astana.

When first noted, the bird was feeding alongside Redshank and Marsh Sandpipers at a distance of c. 50 metres. Here we watched it for approximately 2 minutes before it flew into the distance and landed in an inaccessible corner of the lake.

The bird was in breeding plumage with deep reddish-brown underparts that extended from the upper breast down to the belly and through the legs to the undertail-coverts. The flanks were distinctly barred darker brown, most obviously in front of wing bend and on lower flanks. The sides of the head were similar in colour but the crown was darker, browner and seemed to lack the reddish tones. An indistinct supercilium extended from

bill base to rear of ear-coverts. Mantle and scapulars darker brown, conspicuously fringes whitish or light buff. Tertiaries uniform brown and unmarked and appeared to still be the non-breeding feathers.

Bill long, c. 2x head length with slightly paler, greenish base and dark tip. Legs seen to be greenish when bird walked into shallow water, but most of time was walking in water up to belly, and feeding with characteristic vertical feeding action of a dowitcher.

When it flew with Redshank, similar in size, not larger. Isolated white patch on lower back and uniform wings noted.

I am familiar with all three dowitcher species. It was thought not to be Short-billed as the bill appeared to be too long, the reddish underparts extended to the undertail-coverts and the flanks were conspicuously barred.

Asian Dowitcher was easily eliminated. This species is much larger than Long-billed, similar in size to Bar-tailed Godwit, with an entirely black, and proportionately longer and thicker bill, black legs, no supercilium behind the eye, no flank barring. I know Asian Dowitcher very well from Hong Kong, where I lived for 10 years and have seen it there on many subsequent occasions. I am also used to seeing Long-billed and Asian Dowitchers together in Hong Kong, where they both occur on passage in April, in breeding plumage, most recently in April 2007.

I have no doubt whatsoever that this bird was a Long-billed Dowitcher. Also seen by all participants and local leaders.

Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*

Only seen on wetlands in the north, with one on 15th, 20+ on 16th and six on 17th. All birds were of the nominate form, characterised by their large size, disproportionately long, orange-based bills and poorly marked breeding plumage.

Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*

Three over Lake Bartogoy on 10th, and 18 at Lake Sholak, in the Kurgaldzinskiy Reserve, on 16th.

Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus*

At least 15 adults in breeding plumage at a small lake to the southwest of Astana on 15th, and six at Lake Sholak in the Kurgaldzinskiy Reserve on 16th.

Common Redshank *Tringa totanus*

Another species largely restricted to the wetlands of the north, apart from Lake Sorbulak, where where displaying birds suggested breeding was taking place. Daily counts included eight on 14th, six on 15th, 15+ on 16th and one on 17th. These birds, in breeding plumage, were much better marked than their European counterparts, in which many feathers from their non-breeding plumage are retained into the breeding season.

Marsh Sandpiper *Tringa stagnatilis*

Confined to the north, with displaying birds noted each day, and birds presumably breed in this region. Noted on three dates, with three near Astana on 15th, six at Lake Sholak in the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 16th, and 12+ near Astana on 17th.

Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*

Two in flight over Lake Bartogoy on 10th was the only record.

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*

Singles noted at Lake Bartogoy on 10th, at a roadside wetland on 14th, followed by one at Lake Sorbulak, also on 14th, and one near Astana on 17th.

Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*

One at Lake Sholak on 16th, followed by a minimum of eight birds on pools near Astana on 17th.

Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus*

Seven feeding along the shoreline of a large lake, to the southwest of Astana, on 15th.

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*

In the south, ones and twos recorded daily from 8th to 11th, mostly at Lake Bartogoy. In the north, one noted on 15th to the southwest of Astana, and one at Big Almaty Lake on 18th.

Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*

One feeding along the shoreline of Lake Sholak on 16th.

Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus*

Only found in the Astana region, where we recorded just three birds near Astana on 15th, followed by a flock of 400+ feeding in suitable habitat, near Lake Sholak, on 16th.

Great Black-headed Gull *Larus ichthyaetus*

Two on Lake Sholak in the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 16th, were followed by just five at the breeding colony on the island in the lake near Mayshukur were the only records. This compares with over 250 adults in breeding plumage and several recently hatched chicks at the same site the previous year.

Little Gull *Larus minutus*

Restricted to lakes in the north, where a minimum of 30+ were feeding over a large lake to the southwest of Astana on 15th, and 40+ feeding over Lake Sholak and other lakes in the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 16th.

Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus*

A minimum of 30 birds over lakes near Topar on 12th, followed by 60+ at Lake Sorbulak on 14th. Numerous in the north, with 100+ noted on 15th and 16th, and 50+ on 17th.

Common Gull *Larus canus*

In the north, at least 150 pairs breeding on the island in the lake near Mayshukur on 16th, plus a further 60+ individuals feeding in nearby fields. During the visit the previous year, no breeding birds were noted here.

Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans*

At Lake Sorbulak, a minimum of 12 birds noted on 14th.

Steppe Gull *Larus [cachinnans] barabensis*.

In the Astana region, a minimum of 30 birds noted on lakes to the southwest of Astana on 15th, followed by at least 150 on 16th, and 20 near Astana on 17th. On 16th, many birds were present around Lake Sholak in the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve, while breeding birds were found on the small island in the lake near Mayshukur village. These birds in the Astana region differed significantly from *L. cachinnans* near Almaty, being slightly smaller with a smaller, and quite delicate structure. They were also distinctly darker on the mantle. There was some variation in bill tip pattern of the adults, with the majority showing a rich yellow bill and a red spot at the gonys, while others had a dark bill band and a paler tip to the upper mandible. These birds may be a race of the tundra breeding Heuglin's Gull *L. heuglini*.

Caspian Tern *Sterna caspia*

Three birds on the shore of Lake Sholar, in the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve, on 16th.

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*

At least eight noted over lakes near Topar on 12th, followed by two at Lake Sorbulak on 14th. More numerous in the Astana region, with 12+ on 15th, 16+ on 16th and 20+ on 17th. Although most birds showed characters associated with the nominate form, small numbers displayed an entirely dark bill and a delicate grey wash to the underparts. It seems probable that these birds must have been exceptionally dark individuals of the Central Asian breeding form *S. h. minusensis* which breeds in the Altai and throughout Mongolia. This form is quite variable, with some resembling nominate birds and others approaching *S. h. longipennis*, but most usually retain some red colouration at the base of the lower mandible.

Little Tern *Sterna albifrons*

Two at Lake Sholak on 16th was the only record.

Black Tern *Chlidonias niger*

Much scarcer than White-winged Black Tern, particularly in the south, with four over pools near Topar and one at Lake Sorbulak being the only records. More numerous in the north with 24+ on 15th, 10+ on 16th and 12 on 17th. Those on 17th were nesting on floating vegetation close to the track, allowing super views of this subtly attractive tern.

White-winged Black Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus*

This attractive tern was abundant throughout. In the south, at least 20 over lakes near Topar on 12th, 15 northwest over the desert to the west of Konshengol on 13th, and 1000s over Lake Sorbulak on 14th. Also widespread and numerous in the north, with 200+ on 15th, 1000s on 16th and 200+ on 17th.

Black-bellied Sandgrouse *Pterocles orientalis*

A total of 18 birds in flight at Nurly on 10th. Regularly seen at Konshengol, with a high of 87+ birds there on 13th, followed by 12+ between Konshengol and Lake Sorbulak the following day. The call of Black-bellied Sandgrouse is a bubbling ripple, quite distinct from the rapid, but well separated notes of Pallas's Sandgrouse.

Pallas's Sandgrouse *Syrrhaptes paradoxus*

Two birds drinking at a roadside pool at Nurly on 10th, followed by one in flight there an hour or so later. Singles flew overhead at Konshengol on 11th and 13th, and one was drinking at the artesian well near our camp, also on 13th.

Rock Dove *Columba livia*

Feral Pigeons were noted daily, but no obvious wild Rock Doves seen.

Stock Dove *Columba oenas*

One on roadside wires en route to Astana on 16th.

Yellow-eyed Stock Dove *Columba eversmanni*

At least six birds seen well in the Turanga forest near Zhelturanga on 12th.

Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus*

Occasionally noted in the south.

Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*

Occasionally seen in roadside villages in the south, and in Almaty, from 10th to 14th, but not numerous. One in Astana on 17th was the only sighting in the north.

European Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur*

Widespread in the south in small numbers but more numerous in the north. One on the outskirts of Almaty on 10th, at least six at Konshengol on 12th, with one there the next day. Near Astana, 15+ noted on 15th, 50+ on 16th, and two on 17th. At Konshengol, often seen feeding alongside Oriental Turtle Doves.

Oriental Turtle Dove *Streptopelia orientalis*

Widespread in small numbers, and a common migrant in the desert at Konshengol, with 30+ on 11th, 15+ on 12th and 20+ on 13th. In the north, a minimum of 70 counted along roadside wires between Astana and the Kurgaldzinskiy Reserve on 16th. The bright

plumage and white tips to the outer rectrices marked these birds as being of the race *S. o. meena*.

Laughing Dove *Streptopelia senegalensis*

Two at Birlik, on the outskirts of Almaty, on 10th, followed by three in villages to the west of Almaty the following day.

Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*

Common and recorded daily throughout Kazakhstan. Peak daily estimate was 30+ on 12th.

Eurasian Scops Owl *Otus scops*

One heard at the arboretum to the east of Almaty on 8th.

Little Owl *Athene noctua*

One in the Toraygy Hills, to the east of the Songety plain, on 8th May. Based upon distribution, this distinctively pale, sandy coloured individual was of the race *A. n. bactriana*.

Long-eared Owl *Asio otus*

One of a nesting pair in a small orchard to the southwest of Astana, gave brief flight views.

Common Swift *Apus apus*

At least 60 between Chilik and Nurly on 10th, 12+ over Konshengol camp in the evening of 13th, and three the following morning. Those seen well differed from European birds in exhibiting a larger, paler throat patch, pale forehead and, overall, a slightly browner plumage; all features associated with the Chinese breeding form *A. a. pekinensis*.

European Bee-eater *Merops apiaster*

Small numbers recorded daily between 8th and 14th, with the highest numbers being 15+ on 14th as we approached Almaty. Usually seen on roadside wires. Breeding sites visited in 2004 were not yet occupied in 2005.

European Roller *Coracias garrulus*

Common and widespread in the south, where it was noted daily between 8th and 14th. Highest count was 65+ on 11th.

Hoopoe *Upupa epops*

Recorded daily between 9th and 14th, with daily peaks of 15 on 11th, 35+ on 12th, 20+ on 13th and 15+ on 14th.

White-winged Woodpecker *Dendrocopos leucopterus*

Only recorded from the Turanga forest near Zhelturanga on 12th, where several were seen, although heavy rain prevented us exploring this interesting woodland.

Three-toed Woodpecker *Picoides tridactylus*

A bird showed superbly as it drummed on wooden power poles between Big Almaty Lake and the Alpine Rose hotel, on 19th. When just 6 m from us, the noise was quite deafening. Interestingly, no yellow was visible on the crown of this individual, even at close range. Do females drum? Another bird was also drumming in the distance, but was not seen. Birds breeding in the Tien Shan range are of the form *P. t. tianschanicus*.

Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra*

Noted daily between 8th and 14th. Scarce to the east of Almaty, but abundant to the west, with 100+ noted in roadside fields on 11th between Almaty and Konshengol camp. Common in the desert near Konshengol, with 60+ noted on 13th. Several hundred again on 14th, as we returned from Konshengol to Almaty.

Bimaculated Lark *Melanocorypha bimaculata*

First recorded at Tamgaly Tas on 11th. Thereafter, numerous in drier and desert areas around Konshengol camp until 14th. Often occurred alongside Calandra Lark, and usually in greater numbers, preferring drier, more stony areas, while Calandra appeared to prefer fields prepared for agriculture. Estimates included 40+ on 11th, 50+ on 12th, 80+ on 13th and 40+ on 14th.

White-winged Lark *Melanocorypha leucoptera*

Only noted in the Astana region, with 15+ on 15th, and 40+ on 16th. Most numerous in the Kurgaldzlinский Reserve.

Black Lark *Melanocorypha yeltoniensis*

Very common on the steppe grassland in the Astana region, with 50+ noted on 15th, and 100+ on 16th. A nest containing four eggs and a newly hatched chick was discovered on 16th. As males greatly outnumbered females, it was suspected that their absence could be attributed to the fact that most were incubating.

Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla*

Between Almaty and Konshengol camp, at least 30 birds noted, most being flushed from the roadside as we passed. Frequently seen near Konshengol camp and adjacent artesian well, with at least 12 on 12th, 13th and 14th. Based upon their pale sandy-brown upperpart colouration, these birds were most probably of the form *C. b. longipennis*.

Lesser Short-toed Lark *Calandrella rufescens*

Fairly common in the desert near the camp at Konshengol, where eight were seen on 12th, 12+ on 13th and 14th. The upperpart colour of these birds was almost identical to that of the Greater Short-toed Larks breeding in the same area. It seems likely that these distinctive birds were of the form *C. r. leucophaea* or *C. r. heinei*. Despite searching, we were unable to locate any birds that resembled Asian Short-toed Lark *C. cheleensis*, and it appears that this species has disappeared from previously favoured haunts in recent years.

Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*

At least 10 birds near the artesian well at Nurly on 10th. Elsewhere, two west of Almaty on 11th, one near Zhelturanga on 12th, and 10+ near Lake Sorbulak on 14th. In the north, just one bird noted, in the Kurgaldzlinский Reserve, on 16th. These warm, sandy-brown birds were presumably of the form *G. c. magna*.

Eurasian Sky Lark *Alauda arvensis*

Common on the grasslands of the Sogeti Plain and bordering the upper Charyn River gorge. The most numerous lark in the Astana region, where we were rarely unable to hear its distinctive song. Estimates included 200+ on 15th, 300+ on 16th and 200+ on 17th. The warm sandy-brown plumage of these birds corresponded with the form *A. a. dulcivox*.

Sand Martin *Riparia riparia*

Quite large numbers, presumably migrants, noted daily in the Konshengol region, and in the north, from 12th to 17th. Counts near Konshengol included 30+ on 12th and 20+ on 13th, while at Lake Sorbulak and several 100s present on 14th. In the north, 20+ seen on 15th and 17th, and a minimum of 100 around the Kurgaldzlinский Reserve on 16th.

Pale Martin *Riparia diluta*

At a roadside breeding colony not far from the Kokpek Pass, an estimated 180 birds were present on 8th, allowing the prolonged views at close range necessary to appreciate the subtle differences between this newly recognised species and the widespread Sand Martin.

Eurasian Crag Martin *Ptyonoprogne rupestris*

Two at the Kokpek Pass on 10th.

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*

Common, widespread and noted daily throughout except in the mountains. Up to 100 birds recorded daily.

Red-rumped Swallow *Hirundo daurica*

Two over Malovodnoye village, near Almaty, on 10th, and at least eight over Almaty on 9th.

House Martin *Delichon urbica*

Recorded daily between 9th and 11th, with a maximum of 20+ over the Charyn gorge on 9th.

Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris*

Up to ten daily, including displaying and song-fighting birds, near the Bartogoy camp between 8th and 10th. Also noted in the north, with four or more near Astana on 15th and six in the Kurgaldzlinский Reserve on 16th.

Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis*

Three singing males above the treeline below the Observatory on 19th. Birds breeding in the Tien Shan will be of the form *A. t. haringtoni*.

Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta*

Still in flocks of up to 20 birds on 18th and 19th around the Observatory in the Tien Shan mountains. Absent from higher elevations. These exceptionally pale, delicately coloured birds were in breeding plumage, and were presumably of the form *A. s. blakistoni* which breeds in the Tien Shan.

Sykes's Wagtail *Motacilla [flava] beema*

Birds showing the characters associated with the central Asian breeding form *M. f. beema*, were numerous in the north. Estimates included 100+ birds present on 15th and 16th, followed by 30+ on 17th. A pair near Konshengol on 13th was the only sighting of this taxon in the south. Treated by some authorities as a species distinct from nominate *flava*.

Grey-headed Wagtail *Motacilla [flava] thunbergi*

A male by the artesian well at Konshengol camp on 14th. Treated by some authorities as a distinct species.

Black-headed Wagtail *Motacilla [flava] feldegg*

A pair nesting in wet grassland near Topar on 12th showed the characters associated with the taxon *melanogrisea*. These features include a dull rather than glossy black head and ear-covert feathering, a white chin and narrow white line separating the black ear-coverts from the yellow throat. Generally accepted as a distinct species, *Motacilla feldegg*, although it is uncertain whether *melanogrisea* represents a distinct race, or forms part of a cline in which these characters predominate towards the east of the species range.

Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola*

Four, including a male, to the southwest of Astana on 15th, and at least six by roadside pools and reedbeds near Astana on 17th. All birds were of the form *M. c. werae*, which is sometimes treated as synonymous with the nominate form.

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*

Up to four daily around the artesian wells and camel stations at Konshengol from 11th to 13th. Elsewhere, only noted in the foothills of the Tien Shan, with one by the stream on 17th and two there on 19th.

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*

Ones and twos noted daily between 11th and 18th, with a peak of three around Konshengol on 12th. All showed characters associated with the nominate form.

Masked Wagtail *Motacilla [alba] personata*

Common and widespread in the south, where it was recorded daily from 8th until 14th. Maximum daily counts included 20+ on 10th, and 12+ around Konshengol village on

12th. This form was not seen in the north. Russian ornithologists generally treat Masked Wagtail as a distinct species, separate from White Wagtail of Europe.

Bohemian Waxwing *Bombycilla garrulus*

One at Konshengol camel station on 13th looked strangely out of place in the desert.

White-throated Dipper *Cinclus cinclus*

One on a mountain stream on the lower slopes of the Tien Shan on 19th showed an entirely white belly; a feature associated with the form *C. c. leucogaster*.

Brown Dipper *Cinclus pallasi*

One on a fast-flowing mountain stream on the lower slopes of the Tien Shan on 17th, with three there on 19th, and one on the stream flowing into Big Almaty Lake on 18th.

Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*

Several birds heard daily in the mountains between 17th and 19th; the song closely resembling that of European birds. Occasionally glimpsed, but one did show well, albeit briefly, on 19th. Birds inhabiting the Tien Shan mountains belong with the form *T. t. tianschanicus*.

Brown Accentor *Prunella fulvescens*

Singles noted at the Observatory and Cosmic Ray Station on 18th. Birds in this region belong with the nominate form.

Black-throated Accentor *Prunella atrogularis*

Occurs at lower elevations than the previous two species, being found between the Alpine Rose Hotel and the Observatory. Singles seen well near the Observatory on 18th, and just above the Alpine Rose on 19th. These birds belong with the form *P. a. huttoni*, which is darker and more heavily streaked than the nominate form occurring in the Urals.

Altai (Himalayan) Accentor *Prunella himalayana*

Never an easy bird to find, and with so many flighty mountain finches to sift through, finding one was never going to be easy. Eventually, on 18th, one bird did pause on a boulder long enough for most to take in the relevant features that separate it from the similar Alpine Accentor.

Rufous Bush Robin *Certrichas galactotes*

At least two pairs in a well-vegetated wadi to the west of Konshengol on 13th. The pale, sandy-grey upperparts identified these birds as being of the Central Asian breeding form *C. g. familiaris*, which is both paler and greyer above than birds of the form *C. g. syriacus* breeding in the Middle East.

Thrush Nightingale *Luscinia luscinia*

A singing male showed well at Konshengol on 14th.

Common Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos*

A common and widespread breeding bird throughout the south, occurring wherever small patches of scrub and bushes occur throughout the lowlands, in both agricultural land and in small areas of trees and bushes in the desert. Many more heard than were seen, with an estimate of 30+ heard along the roadside on the drive into Almaty on 10th, and 50+ heard in the Zhelturanga - Ili river region on 12th. In the north, at least one in the orchard to the southwest of Astana on 15th. All birds were of the large, pale form *L. m. hafizi*, which is less retiring and easier to see than its European counterpart, and regularly feeds on the ground in the open. Contrary to reports from other observers, the song of this form differs significantly from that of the nominate race breeding in Europe.

Himalayan (White-tailed) Rubythroat *Luscinia pectoralis*

In the Tien Shan mountains, three singing males near the Observatory on 18th, and two pairs plus another male the following day. These birds were either of the nominate form or the very similar race *L. p. ballioni*, both of which lack the white moustachial stripe that characterises the Tibetan breeding form *L. p. tschebaiewi*. A stunningly beautiful bird.

Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica*

In the south, the only sighting concerned a migrant near the camp at Konshengol on 14th. Most numerous in the north, with several singles noted widely on 15th and 16th, plus at least six singing males in roadside reedbeds on the outskirts of Astana on 17th. All males exhibited a conspicuous red spot in the centre of the blue throat and, on range, these should be of the form *L. s. pallidogularis*, which is said to be paler than the nominate form, although this was not apparent during field observations.

Eversmann's Redstart *Phoenicurus erythronotus*

Two males and a female in juniper scrub along the track bordering Big Almaty Lake on 18th, showed extremely well.

Blue-capped Redstart *Phoenicurus caeruleocephalus*

Singing males showed well along the track bordering Big Almaty Lake, by the small houses near the Lake, and along the road through the Tien Shan Spruce forest between Big Almaty Lake and the Alpine Rose Hotel, all on 19th.

Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*

Seen daily from 11th to 15th, with several different individuals frequenting the Konshengol camel station and surrounding trees and scrub. Also two females in the small orchard to the southwest of Astana on 15th.

Güldenstädt's Redstart *Phoenicurus erythrogaster*

A pair plus an additional male by the roadside at the Cosmic Ray Station on 18th. This species only breeds at the higher elevations and, at 3,300 metres, the road does not get any higher than this.

Siberian Stonechat *Saxicola maurus*

In the south, migrants noted in small numbers on several days, with one on 9th, and up to five daily in the Konshengol camel stations, and along the road to Zhelturanga. More numerous in the north, with one noted on 15th, eight on 16th, and six on 17th. Males exhibited considerable individual variation, some showing an extensive orange wash across the entire breast and belly while, on others, this was restricted to an orange spot in the centre of the breast.

Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina*

Abundant on the grassland steppes and deserts where it was, by far, the most numerous species. Recorded daily between 8th and 14th with estimates exceeding 100 individuals on most days. Many pairs already had recently fledged, but still flightless, chicks.

Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*

A common bird on the grass steppes of the north, with 10+ southwest of Astana on 15th, 30+ in the Kurgaldzinskiy Reserve on 16th, and two near Astana on 17th. Also breeding in small numbers in the Tien Shan, with six on 18th and two on 19th.

Pied Wheatear *Oenanthe pleschanka*

A common bird in the rocky sandstone hills of the south including the Kokpek Pass, the hills near the camp at Bartogoy, and along the roadside towards the upper Charyn River. Elsewhere, numerous at Tamgaly Tas.

Rock Thrush *Monticola saxatilis*

Two males in the Charyn Gorge on 9th, and a male in the Kokpek Pass on 10th. In addition, a female, presumably a migrant, in the small wadi, west of Konshengol, on 13th.

Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius*

A male in the Charyn Gorge on 9th.

Blue Whistling Thrush *Myophonus caeruleus*

One by the roadside in the foothills of the Tien Shan on 17th, and at least three in the same area on 19th. This primarily Oriental-breeding thrush extends into the Palearctic only here in southeastern-most Kazakhstan and neighbouring states. Birds breeding here will be of the form *M. c. turcestanicus*.

Blackbird *Turdus merula*

Common in Almaty, with others heard or occasionally seen in the mountains on 18th and 19th. Although these birds belong to the form *T. m. intermedius*, they closely resemble European breeding birds, and the song is not recognisably different to that of birds breeding in Britain.

Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*

Confined to the forested mountains of the Tien Shan with several heard, and occasionally seen, on 18th and 19th. Breeding birds in the Tien Shan belong with the race *T. v.*

bonapartei. As with Blackbird, the song of this form does not differ significantly from that of the populations breeding in western Europe.

Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti*

Many heard, and one or two birds seen, in the wetlands near Topar on 12th. Others heard near Astana on 16th and 17th. The lack of rich, rufous tones to the upperparts, and conspicuous white undertail-coverts placed these birds with the migratory form *C. c. albiventris*.

Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella naevia*

A common breeding bird in the smaller reedbeds near Astana. Song was regularly heard, but a more thorough search on 17th produced good views of at least eight birds, with a further 20+ heard. These birds belong with the eastern breeding form *L. n. straminea*, and although most lacked all traces of spots or streaks on the upper throat or along the flanks, one individual exhibited a distinct gorget of fine streaks across the lower throat, a feature typically occurring on most European birds.

Savi's Warbler *Locustella luscinioides*

At least four seen and a further two heard in the larger reedbeds near Astana on 17th. Unlike its European counterpart, not a crepuscular singer. These birds were of the form *L. l. fusca* which breeds in Central Asia. The song sounded identical to that of European birds, but upperparts of these birds was paler, greyish-brown, and lacking the warmer rufous tones of European birds of the nominate form.

Paddyfield Warbler *Acrocephalus agricola*

In the south, one seen and a couple of others heard in the reedbeds at Topar on 12th. More numerous in the north, with 12+ singing and seen well in reedbeds to the southwest of Astana on 15th, and 40 near Astana on 17th.

Blyth's Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus dumetorum*

Surprisingly rare this year, perhaps as a consequence of the poor weather. Just a single bird noted at the camel station at Konshengol on 11th.

Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus*

Several singing in reedbeds near Astana on 17th.

Booted Warbler *Hippolais caligata*

Compared with 2004, numbers were well down. Not seen anywhere in the south, and all records in the north came from the small orchard to the southwest of Astana. This noted migrant trap held at least three individuals on 15th.

Sykes's Warbler *Hippolais rama*

A singing male showed well to the group at Nurly on 10th, while several other singing males were also present nearby but were rather more elusive. Thereafter, numerous in the

south, with 10+ at the camel stations at Konshengol on 11th and 12th, 10+ at Zhelturanga on 12th, and 6+ in the wadi west of Konshengol on 13th.

Barred Warbler *Sylvia nisoria*

Only seen in the trees at Konshengol, where one bird was noted on 11th and at least four on 14th.

Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca*

Migrants showing the characters of the Siberian breeding form *S. c. blythi* were noted near the arboretum on 8th, followed by at least eight daily at the camel stations at Konshengol from 11th to 14th. In the north, a minimum of at least 12 in the small orchard to the southwest of Astana on 15th.

In addition, birds seen in the desert near Zhelturanga on 12th, and in the drier wadis west of Konshengol, differed from the brighter *S. c. blythi* in being duller and rather drab in their overall appearance. Many of these birds were clearly breeding and presumably belonged with the form *S. c. halimodendri*. These birds differed from *S. c. blythi* in being plainer, more uniform sandy-brown in colour and lacking the contrastingly darker ear-coverts, while the song lacked the characteristic rattle of European birds of the nominate form.

Hume's Whitethroat *Sylvia althaea*

A singing male in a roadside valley at the Kokpek Pass on 10th, responded well to a recording of its song and showed well to the group.

Orphean Warbler *Sylvia hortensis*

A pair in a side valley of the Kokpek Pass on 10th. These birds would, presumably, be of the eastern form, *S. h. jerdoni*, which is sometimes treated as a distinct species, Eastern Orphean Warbler *Sylvia crassirostris*.

Asian Desert Warbler *Sylvia nana*

Single birds near the camp at Konshengol on 12th, 13th and 14th. Although they lead us on a merry dance, the bird on 14th finally allowed outstanding views.

Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis*

Two at Konshengol on 12th and, nearby, a further two the following day. In the north, at least six in the small orchard at to the southwest of Astana on 15th. These eastern birds would presumably be of the form *S. c. icterops*, which differ from European birds in being greyer above and whiter below than the nominate form, and show less conspicuous and paler chestnut fringes to the edges of the greater coverts, secondaries and tertials.

Greenish Warbler *Phylloscopus trochiloides*

Another common migrant that was notably scarce this year, presumably due to inclement weather holding back northbound migrants. Ones and twos, presumably migrants, noted most days in the south, but still absent from breeding areas in the Tien Shan mountains,

and no singing birds heard. The birds breeding in Kazakhstan are of the race *P. t. viridanus*, which extends west to breed in northern Europe.

Hume's Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus humei*

A common and widespread migrant and breeding bird, seen daily throughout the south but absent from the north. Many migrants present at Konshengol.

Sulphur-bellied Warbler *Phylloscopus griseolus*

One showed well along the track bordering Big Almaty Lake, on 17th.

Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*

Rather scarce in the south. Up to three at the arboretum to the east of Astana on 8th, followed by two at Konshengol on 11th and 13th. In the north, at least eight birds in the small orchard to the southwest of Astana on 15th. The lack of yellow and green tones in the plumage, combined with the distinctive song, confirmed these birds as being of the eastern race *P. c. tristis*.

Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*

At least four birds, including a couple of singing males, in the small orchard to the southwest of Astana on 15th. Although the song closely resembled that of their European counterparts, the plumage was duller, with subdued yellow and green tones. These birds were presumably of the race *P. t. acredula*.

Severtzov's (White-browed) Tit Warbler *Leptopoecile sophiae*

Just two birds, found by Ian, in juniper scrub at the Observatory on 17th. This gem of a bird can, at times, be difficult to find in the Tian Shan.

Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*

A common migrant in the bushes and camel stations at Konshengol, where it was seen daily with a peak of 20+ on 13th. In addition, two were in the small orchard to the southwest of Astana area on 15th. These rather pale birds were probably of the race *M. s. sarudnyi*.

Bearded Tit *Panurus biarmicus*

Heard in *Phragmites* reedbeds to the southwest of Astana on 15th.

Songar Tit *Parus songarus*

A pair showed well in the small village below the dam at Big Almaty Lake on 19th.

Coal Tit *Parus ater*

At least two birds in the Tien Shan Spruce forest around the small village below the dam at Big Almaty Lake on 19th. Birds here believed to be of the race *P. a. rufipectus*.

Azure Tit *Parus cyanus*

A pair regularly returning to a nest hole in a building at the arboretum, to the east of Almaty, on 8th, and a pair in the Turanga forest at Zhelturanga on 12th. Birds at Zhelturanga would be of the form *P. c. koktalensis* which is restricted to the lower Ili River valley and Lake Balkhash, and has a distinctly larger bill than the other races, presumably as a adaptation feeding in willow beds and *Phragmites*. The other birds we saw were presumably of the form *P. c. tianschanicus*, which ranges widely throughout this region of Central Asia.

Great Tit *Parus major*

Usually associated with human habitation. Common in towns, gardens and parks in Almaty, Astana and many of the smaller roadside villages when we stopped.

Turkestan Tit *Parus bokharensis*

Common in the Turanga forest near Zhelturanga on 12th.

Eastern Rock Nuthatch *Sitta tephronata*

One seen well near the nest site at Tamgaly Tas on 11th. Birds breeding in Kazakhstan are of the nominate form.

Eurasian Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinus*

A pair in building a nest in a *Phragmites* reedbed near Topar on 12th. One bird, believed to be the male, was particularly distinctive, displaying a rich, uniform chocolate-brown colour to the entire fore-crown, crown, nape and mantle, while the mask was only slightly darker and barely contrasted with the crown. The chin and throat was white and sharply demarcated from the ear-coverts. In contrast, the presumed female more closely resembled a European bird, with a black mask contrasting with a whitish crown and nape, although some dark brown flecking was visible on the fore-crown. Unlike European birds, however, both birds showed broad whitish fringes to the tertials and secondaries, creating a whitish panel in the closed wing. Subsequent research has established that this combination of characters corresponds with Eurasian Penduline Tit of the form *R. p. caspius*. Although this form is quite variable, it seems that the presumed male was the most extreme form, which bears little resemblance to Eurasian Penduline Tits in Europe, while the female is more typical of this race (see Vaurie 1959 for discussion). Interestingly, however, *R. p. caspius* does not, apparently, occur at Lake Balkhash, and breeding birds here should actually be Black-headed Penduline Tits *R. macronyx*. Perhaps *caspius* is a recent arrival here? A fascinating subject worthy of further research.

White-crowned Penduline Tit *Remiz coronatus*

Two pairs attending nests in roadside Russian Olives to the east of Almaty on 8th. One nest was suspended from a low bush over a channel of water, and we enjoyed prolonged views of both birds at the nest, as they incorporated new material into the construction and shaped the structure. In contrast to the previous species, White-crowned Penduline Tit does not utilise *Phragmites* reedbeds during the breeding season.

Eurasian Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus*

At least six birds around the arboretum on 8th. Elsewhere, single birds heard near Almaty on 10th, and at Konshengol on 13th. The birds we saw corresponded to the race *O. o. kundoo*, in which the black loreal line extends a short way behind the eye, and the intensity of the yellow pigment in the plumage is slightly richer than that of the nominate form. Females also differ in being yellower both above and below, and exhibit reduced streaking on the underparts.

Isabelline Shrike *Lanius isabellinus*

Two extremely well marked individuals that resembled *L. i. phoenicuroides*, with a conspicuous white supercilium, but which lacked the chestnut tones to the crown and mantle were noted near Konshengol on 14th. It is believed these birds were of the race *L. i. karaleni*, rather than nominate *L. isabellinus*, which is an early migrant through this region, with most having moved through by late April.

Turkestan Shrike *Lanius [isabellinus] phoenicuroides*

Common, widespread and noted daily in the south from 8th to 14th. Most numerous in the desert near Konshengol, with a minimum of at least 40+ birds noted between the camp and Zhelturanga on 12th. Russian authorities consider Turkestan Shrike and Isabelline Shrike to be specifically distinct.

Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*

Two males in the wadi west of Konshengol on 13th, and a female at the Konshengol camel station on 14th. In the north, a male at a guest house to the southwest of Astana on 15th and another at the Kurgaldzlinский Reserve on 16th. All birds were assumed to be migrants.

Long-tailed Shrike *Lanius schach*

One near the arboretum east of Almaty on 8th, and one on roadside wires en-route to Almaty on 10th. At Konshengol, a migrant showed extremely well beside the bus on 13th. These birds would be of the migratory form *L. s. erythronotus*.

Lesser Grey Shrike *Lanius minor*

Common and widespread throughout the south, where it was recorded daily from 8th to 14th. Particularly numerous along roadside wires between Chilik and Nurly, with 15+ along a 5 km section of road, and 40+ noted west of Almaty on 11th.

Southern Grey Shrike *Lanius meridionalis*

Two birds in the desert between Konshengol camp and Topar on 12th May. Both showed the characters associated with the migratory form *L. m. pallidirostris*, which is sometimes treated as a distinct species *L. pallidirostris*.

Magpie *Pica pica*

Common and recorded daily throughout Kazakhstan from the mountains and deserts of the south to the steppes of the north. The birds we encountered in the south were of the race *P. p. bactriana*, characterised by the large amount of white in the primaries, this

being particularly noticeable in flight, and increased green iridescence on the closed wing when compared with European birds.

Nutcracker *Nucifraga caryocatactes*

Two in Tien Shan Spruce forest above the Alpine Rose hotel on 19th. Birds inhabiting the Tien Shan are of the form *N. c. rothschildi*, characterised by their dark plumage and larger size.

Yellow-billed (Alpine) Chough *Pyrrhorocorax graculus*

A single bird near the Observatory and a party of 10+ birds over the Cosmic Ray Station, all on 18th.

Red-billed Chough *Pyrrhorocorax pyrrhorocorax*

Two distant birds high over the upper Charyn River gorge on 9th. In the mountains, a pair breeding at the Cosmic Ray Station on 18th and a pair at Big Almaty Lake on 19th.

Western (Eurasian) Jackdaw *Corvus monedula*

A common roadside bird seen daily between 8th and 17th, but absent from the mountains. All birds exhibited a conspicuously pale, silvery-grey nape, and large silvery-white spot on each side of the neck; features associated with the race *C. m. soemmerringii*.

Rook *Corvus frugilegus*

Another common roadside species, seen daily from 8th to 17th, and more numerous than Jackdaw.

Carrion Crow *Corvus corone*

Widespread and recorded daily throughout the south, but absent in the Astana area. All birds were of the eastern form *C. c. orientalis*, which some authorities now treat as a distinct species, Oriental Crow *C. orientalis*.

Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix*

Singles by the roadside between Koma and Konshengol on 11th and near Konshengol camel station on 13th were presumably late migrants. A common roadside bird in the north. These birds differed from Hooded Crows in Europe in being paler and less ashy-grey, with the pale areas exhibiting a faint pinkish flush. These birds were of the form *C. c. sharpii*.

Brown-necked Raven *Corvus ruficollis*

At least six birds by the roadside to the west of Konshengol on 13th, at least two of which gave outstanding views, allowing the subtle brown wash on the neck to be fully savoured. Quite why these brutes of birds appear so different to the rather puny, delicate and slim-billed Brown-necked Ravens that breed in southern Morocco remains something of a mystery, as they are apparently of the same race.

Common Raven *Corvus corax*

At least four at the upper Charyn Gorge on 9th, followed by one north of Koma on 11th.

Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*

Scarce in the south, with 10 on 8th, three on 9th and 14 on 10th. Widespread and fairly common in the Astana region, with a high of 40+ on 15th. In the south, these distinctive birds were of the form *S. v. porphyronotus*, in which the pale spotting is largely absent except on the undertail-coverts, and the head has a green gloss, contrasting with the purple mantle gloss. In the north, the spotting to the upperparts and wing-coverts was more obvious, and these birds were probably of the Siberian breeding form *S. v. poltaratskyi*, which closely resembles European breeders, but differs from *S. v. porphyronotus* in having a purple gloss to the head.

Rose-coloured Starling *Sturnus roseus*

Very common to abundant throughout the south, with many flocks still moving through to breeding areas, although several 1000s nesting in the dam at Lake Sorbulak on 14th. Absent from the Tien Shan and just one bird noted in the Astana area, on 15th.

Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*

A recent colonist, being first recorded in Kazakhstan in 1964. Now a common and widespread bird, recorded almost daily throughout the south although closely associated with human activity. Still scarce in the north, with four near Astana on 17th being the only record.

Saxaul Sparrow *Passer ammodendri*

At least 12 in scrub around a small cemetery at Zhelturanga on 12th, plus a couple of birds in the nearby turanga woodland. The birds we saw were of the nominate form.

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Birds of the nominate form are resident about the cities, towns and villages of Kazakhstan, and lead a life commensally with man. Birds of this form we seen in Almaty, near the arboretum to the east of Almaty, at the camel station at Konshengol, and widely throughout the Astana area in many of the small villages.

Indian Sparrow *Passer [domesticus] bactrianus*

Common and widely noted throughout the south, being recorded daily from 8th to 14th. Many large flocks still migrating to breeding areas, with daily totals reaching several 100s on some days. Absent from the north. This migratory sparrow is a summer visitor to Kazakhstan, wintering on the plains of northwest India and Pakistan during the winter months. It was widely recorded throughout the south and greatly outnumbered typical House Sparrows, from which it differs in being brighter, with white cheeks and the chestnut areas appearing richer and more extensive. It is also distinctly smaller than the nominate form and lives away from human habitation, building its nest as a hanging structure in a tree, or in a natural hole such as the burrow of a Pale Martin. This form is treated as a distinct species Indian Sparrow *Passer indicus* by the Russian authorities.

Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis*

A flock of at least 40 birds, with Indian Sparrows, in roadside scrub south of Koma on 11th. Many females must have been present but not identified.

Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*

In the south, small numbers seen daily from 8th to 11th, while in the Astana region, noted on 15th and 16th.

Rock Sparrow *Petronia petronia*

Four birds at the Toraygyr Hills to the east of the Sorgaty Plain, on 9th.

Red-fronted Serin *Serinus pusillus*

Restricted to the mountains, with flocks of 30+ near the Observatory on 18th, and 20+ in Tian Shan Spruce forest above the Alpine Rose hotel on 19th.

European Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris*

Two by the Astana International hotel in Almaty on 11th.

Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*

Two at the arboretum east of Almaty on 8th, two near Bartogoy on 9th, four in the village of Malovodnoye, just east of Almaty, on 10th and two in Almaty on 11th. Also noted in the mountains, with two on 18th and four on 19th. These distinctive birds lacked the black band around the face and were of the form *C. c. paropanisi*. These grey-headed birds are considered by Russian authorities to represent a distinct species, Grey-headed Goldfinch, *C. caniceps*.

Eurasian Linnet *Carduelis cannabina*

Up to 15 birds daily in the desert near the Bartogoy camp from 8th to 10th. These birds, of the form *A. c. bella*, are paler than birds of the nominate form in Europe, although the areas of pink on the breast and crown are deeper, richer and more intense.

Crimson-winged Finch *Rhodopechys sanguinea*

Four coming to drink at a small pool near our camp at Bartogoy on 8th, with seven appearing there the following day. Birds breeding in Kazakhstan are of the nominate race, but appear so very different to the birds of the form *R. s. aliena* breeding in the high Atlas mountains of Morocco that it is difficult to believe they are the same species.

Desert Finch *Rhodopechys obsoleta*

At least 25 birds at the artesian well near Nurly on 10th. In the Konshengol area, noted daily from 11th to 14th, with small parties frequenting the camel station, farms and fuel station here, with a maximum of 20+ on 11th.

Mongolian Finch *Bucanetes mongolica*

At least nine birds coming to drink at a pool near our camp at Lake Bartogoy on 8th May, and one there the following day.

Common Rosefinch *Carpodacus erythrinus*

Many migrants at the farm and camel station at Konshengol from 11th to 14th, with a maximum of 60+ on 11th. In the north, just two near Astana on 17th. Although the males were more intensely coloured than males breeding in Europe, it is not possible to establish which race these birds can be ascribed to.

Red-mantled Rosefinch *Carpodacus rhodochlamys*

A female in juniper scrub below the Observatory on 18th, and two in trees behind the Observatory on 19th.

Hodgson's (Plain) Mountain Finch *Leucosticte nemoricola*

Only found in the Tien Shan mountains, with a large flock, of at least 250 birds, was feeding by the roadside above the Observatory on 18th, with 60+ below the Observatory the following day.

White-winged Grosbeak *Mycerobas carnipes*

At least 20 birds in juniper scrub above the Observatory on 18th, and several between the Observatory and Big Almaty Lake the following day.

Pine Bunting *Emberiza leucocephalos*

A singing male at the upper Charyn Gorge on 9th showed well. The song closely resembled that of Yellowhammer *E. citrinella*, and was clearly recognizable as such, drawing attention to the bird.

Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia*

Three seen briefly in the Kokpek Pass on 8th, two glimpsed in the Charyn Gorge on 9th, and four eventually seen well in a side valley in the Kokpek Pass on 10th.

Ortolan Bunting *Emberiza hortulana*

A female in the wadi west of Konshengol on 13th was the only record.

Grey-necked Bunting *Emberiza buchanani*

Three singing males at the Bartogoy camp from 8th to 10th, at least 40 noted between the camp and the upper Charyn Gorge on 9th, and three at the Kokpek Pass on 10th. In addition, several at Tamgaly Tas on 11th.

White-capped (Chestnut-breasted) Bunting *Emberiza stewarti*

Four, including at least one female, at the Kokpek Pass on 8th, followed by an estimated eight birds here on 10th.

Common Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*

At least three in *Phragmites* reedbeds near Topar on 12th. In the north, one southwest of Astana on 15th, and at least 12 near Astana on 17th. The birds near Astana were darker

than those near Topar and displayed the large, deep-based bill structure characteristic of the form *E. s. pyrrhuloides*.

Red-headed Bunting *Emberiza bruniceps*

Surprisingly scarce away from the desert regions, with just two males at Kokpek Pass on 10th. Common, however, at Tamgaly Tas, Konshengol camp and surrounding areas, with 60+ noted daily between on 11th and 14th.

Corn Bunting *Emberiza calandra*

At least six singing males by the roadside east of Almaty on 8th.

Annotated Checklist of the Mammals

Suslik sp.

Regularly encountered. With so many species to choose from, it was not possible to establish which species we encountered. However, some were quite large and others considerably smaller.

Grey Marmot *Marmotta baibacina*

Noted only in the open grassy slopes above the tree line in the Tien Shan.

Bobak Marmot *Marmotta bobak*

Occasionally seen on steppe grasslands near Astana.

Jerboa sp.

Occasionally noted in the desert near the Charyn Red Canyon. With so many possible species, it is not possible to specifically identify these to the species

Giant Gerbil *Rhombomys opimus*

Common around the Bartogoy camp and Charyn River region.

Tolai Hare *Lepus tolai*

One near Topar on 12th.

European Hare *Lepus europaeus*

Several noted on the steppe grasslands near Astana

Turkestan Red Pika *Ochotona rutila*

Occasionally seen near the Observatory in the Tien Shan mountains.

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*

One near Topar on 12th.

Stoat *Mustela erminea*

Singles seen near Topar on 11th and in the Tien Shan mountains on 19th.

Annotated Checklist of the Butterflies

Compiled by Peter Wells

The following list of butterflies is incomplete, but includes all those that it was possible to identify. Many other species were seen, but without a detailed identification guide to the region, it has not been possible to include these.

Bath White
Black-veined White
Painted Lady
Peacock
Small Tortoiseshell
Swallowtail

Clouded Yellow (sp)

Appendix 1

**Birds recorded by Peter Kennerley and Ian Phillips
during visit to Aksu Dzhabagly, 21-22 May 2005**

Species highlighted in yellow were not recorded during the main part of the tour.

Great Crested Grebe
Black-necked Grebe
Great Cormorant
Pygmy Cormorant
White Pelican
Dalmatian Pelican
Little Bittern
Great Egret
Grey Heron
Purple Heron
Black Stork
Glossy Ibis
Eurasian Spoonbill
Ruddy Shelduck
Common Shelduck
Wigeon

Mallard
Northern Pintail
Garganey
Northern Shoveler
Red-crested Pochard
Common Pochard
Ferruginous Duck
White-headed Duck
Black Kite
Egyptian Vulture
Eurasian Griffon Vulture
Eurasian Black Vulture
Short-toed Eagle
Marsh Harrier
Montagu's Harrier
Eurasian Sparrowhawk
Common Kestrel
Hobby
Ring-necked Pheasant
Moorhen
Common Coot
Little Bustard
Black-winged Stilt
Avocet
Collared Pratincole
Little Ringed Plover
Kentish Plover
White-tailed Lapwing
Northern Lapwing
Temminck's Stint
Curlew Sandpiper
Broad-billed Sandpiper
Black-tailed Godwit
Common Redshank
Wood Sandpiper
Terek Sandpiper
Common Sandpiper
Red-necked Phalarope
Black-headed Gull
Slender-billed Gull
Caspian Gull
Common Tern
Little Tern
Black-bellied Sandgrouse
Wood Pigeon

Collared Dove
European Turtle Dove
Laughing Dove
Common Cuckoo
European Scops Owl
Eurasian Nightjar
Common Swift
Blue-cheeked Bee-eater
European Bee-eater
European Roller
Hoopoe
Calandra Lark
Short-toed Lark
Eurasian Skylark
Oriental Skylark
Sand Martin
Barn Swallow
Red-rumped Swallow
Tawny Pipit
Black-headed Wagtail
Grey Wagtail
Masked Wagtail
Rufous Bush Robin
Thrush Nightingale
Common Nightingale
Common Redstart
Siberian Stonechat
Northern Wheatear
Pied Wheatear
Blackbird
Cetti's Warbler
Blyth's Reed Warbler
Clamorous Reed Warbler
Sykes's Warbler
Barred Warbler
Lesser Whitethroat
Common Whitethroat
Greenish Warbler
Hume's Warbler
Spotted Flycatcher
Asian Paradise Flycatcher
Yellow-breasted Tit
Turkestan Tit
White-crowned Penduline Tit
Eurasian Golden Oriole

Red-backed Shrike
Turkestan Shrike
Long-tailed Shrike
Lesser Grey Shrike
Magpie
Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion Crow
Hooded Crow
European Starling
Rose-coloured Starling
Common Myna
House Sparrow
Indian Sparrow
Tree Sparrow
Common Rosefinch
Red-headed Bunting
Corn Bunting