

**KAZAKHSTAN:  
CELESTIAL MOUNTAINS, DESERT &  
STEPPE  
May 6th ~ 19th 2007**

**Tour Report**

*Participants:*

*Leaders:*

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## *Limosa Holidays*

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*with*

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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 splendour 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, enigmatic Pallas's Sandgrouse and delightful Caspian Plovers all occurred nearby, and all add to this exciting and unique experience.

#### ***Tour summary***

Never let it be said that Kazakhstan is a routine tour. We may follow the same itinerary on broadly similar dates but no two years are ever the same. 2007 proved to be one of the most interesting yet. First there was the weather. We had it all, from howling gales, torrential rain and heavy snow to delightfully balmy days in clear skies. Clearly this was an exceptional year as far as the weather was concerned, but this brought with it a very different birding experience. Muddy roads at Bartogay and deep snow in the Tien Shan prevented us reaching some sites, a problem for all groups in Kazakhstan this year, and

even as I write this in summary in early June, I hear that the weather is still causing serious disruption to the plans of groups travelling later in the season. Global warming or just an unusual spring, only time will tell. But even the weather provided us with some spectacular moments, with still dawns, stunning sunsets and memorable cloudscapes. More importantly, it delayed spring migration and brought us a wealth of migrants that surpassed that witnessed on previous tours. In the deserts, steppe, mountains and even in the centre of Almaty, migrants were everywhere, and our overall species total compared well with previous years.

On the first morning, accompanied as always by our local expert Victoria Kovshar and capable driver Alexei, we travelled east out of Almaty. Making occasional roadside halts until we reached 'the arboretum', where Azure Tits showed well by the canal and White-crowned Penduline Tits called as they flew overhead. Later, while we paused for lunch, we discovered two nests, both in Russian Olive trees, and we were treated to great views while the birds shaped and moulded their delicate construction. Nearby nests, still hanging from previous years, showed just how durable these constructions really are. Continuing east, we made a detour to the artesian well at Nurly, which in past years has been a reliable stakeout for the highly sought-after Pallas's Sandgrouse. The wet spring had resulted in many temporary pools being formed throughout the desert, and this much hoped-for and mythical species remained mythical, at least for today. Nearby, Desert Finches, Spanish Sparrows, Red-headed Buntings, Common Rosefinches and a solitary Grey-necked Bunting flocked to drink at the well, and Sykes's Warbler sang and showed well in the tamarisk. By late afternoon, we pressed on to our first campsite set in a delightful location near Lake Bartogay. As we arrived, singing Grey-necked Buntings and Tawny Pipits greeted us, as did the ground crew with refreshing cups of chai. The expected Long-legged Buzzard nest was again occupied and from our camp we could see the single chick in the nest. As the sun set, we were warned that we were in for a change in the weather. And change it did. By the early hours of the morning, our tents were being buffeted by wind and rain, and the camp crew were busily scurrying around the tents ensuring the pegs were securely fixed in the ground.

We awoke to a grey and windy morning, and the realisation that we probably were not going to reach the spectacular Charyn Gorge, home breeding Lammergeiers, Himalayan Griffons and Eurasian Black Vultures. Alexei made a valiant effort to get us there, but even he couldn't negotiate the slick tracks and glutinous mud. Where the roads were sealed, we did reach the more accessible parts of the gorge and realised just how impressive this scar across the landscape really is.

As weather conditions improved, so did the birding. From our camp we managed to find a good selection of raptors including Lammergeier, Golden Eagle and Saker, while over the nearby Sugaty Plain was home to many Lesser Kestrels, just recently arrived from their African wintering grounds. It's great to see this species here in good numbers, where it appears to holding its own, unlike Europe where the population is in decline. Overhead, a Black Vulture gave great views and Isabelline Wheatears called noisily as their recently fledged chicks got in harms way. On our return to Almaty we made a prolonged halt at

the Kokpek Pass, home to White-capped and Rock Buntings and a pair of Rock Thrushes. A Sulphur-bellied Warbler showed briefly, Chukars called from the top of the ridge, a migrant Long-tailed Shrike showed well and many Crag Martins hawked for insects through the pass. Lunch was taken in a roadside field near Nurly where Lesser Shrike Shrikes showed well, Quail and Scops Owls called, and nearby several Demoiselle Cranes got the pulses racing. Nurly again failed to produce Pallas's Sandgrouse, and as time was pressing, we didn't wait for them not to arrive. Otherwise, the grey-headed *caniceps* race of Goldfinch and masked *personata* form of White Wagtail were the birding highlights as we returned to Almaty.

Of all the places we visit in Kazakhstan, Konshengol camp is my personal favourite and today we were heading there for a three night stay. By now the weather had improved greatly, and we enjoyed beautifully sunny, but pleasantly cool conditions as we drove west from Almaty. Along the way we made occasional stops. The best being for a flock of Demoiselle Cranes that had dropped in to rest by the roadside. We counted 212! Nearby Calandra Larks sang in abundance. We took lunch at Tamgaly Tas, a World Heritage Site made famous by the ancient petroglyphs on the rock faces. Before eating, Victoria took us to see the nest of Eastern Rock Nuthatch, and we had only been waiting for a couple of minutes until the pair appeared and showed well on nearby rocks. It was clear that there were many migrants here, and we spent a pleasant hour watching the likes of Rock Thrushes, Isabelline Shrike, Common Rosefinches and Redstarts. The lure of the desert proved irresistible, and we all wanted to get to the camp. Horsfield's Tortoises were incredibly common along this section of the road, we counted no less than 22 in a stretch of road no more than 15 km in length. As there must have been many that we missed that weren't actually in the road, the numbers here must have been huge.

The desert camp at Konshengol is 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 locating the camp here is the abundance of Macqueen's Bustards that occur nearby. Even on our first evening, Victoria found a distant female, but the next morning, a quick scan of the desert scrub revealed no less than three males. Each was performing his mating dance in the hope of attracting a female. 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. Near the camp, Bimaculated, Short-toed and Lesser Short-toed Larks were numerous, and the artesian well proved to be a magnet for passing migrants. In addition to these larks, we picked up a steady stream of less usual visitors, including Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Temminck's Stints, Grey-headed Wagtails, White Wagtails of the east Siberian form *ocularis*, and many more.

Our visit to the unique Turanga *Populus diversifolia* at Zhelturanga woodland is always a great day out, peppered with many seriously good quality birds throughout. As usual, the drive to Topar produced the expected 'Desert' Grey Shrikes, the migratory *pallidirostris* form of the more widespread Southern Grey Shrike. Quite why this form has been shackled with the most unsuitable name of Steppe Grey Shrike is quite beyond me. It

occurs in deserts, not steppe grassland. Clearly the one who came up with this name has never seen them in the breeding season. Driving on, suddenly, the shout of 'Pallas's Sandgrouse' went up as a male, characterised by his long central tail feathers, shot up in front of our bus. We screeched to a halt, piled out of the bus and watched him disappearing into the distance, but then he seemed to turn and drop behind a hill. Ever hopefully, we walked back a few hundred metres and luck was with us; there he was, back in the road! What a bonus. Pallas's Sandgrouse has become increasingly hard to see in recent years, and here we were, watching one of Asia's most desired creatures just 100 metres from where we were standing. We watched until he'd had enough, then away he went and we pressed on, elated.

As we neared Topar, we saw that the desert sands enable the waters of the Ili River to permeate inland to form semi-permanent pools of fresh water which enable a wide range of birds to breed in an otherwise inhospitable region. Migrant Black and White-winged Black Terns hawked over roadside pools where Ferruginous Ducks were more numerous than in previous years. The small cemetery at Zhelturanga produced the usual Saxaul Sparrows and Sykes's Warblers. As always, the Lesser Whitethroats breeding provoked discussion. Claimed as being of the race *halimodendri* by some, their sandy-brown upperparts and contrasting grey heads clearly suggest something else. These are small, pale birds with a distinctive scratchy song, quite different to classic *blythi* race of Lesser Whitethroat that is a common migrant through this region. With good sound recordings and photographs perhaps the true identity of these birds will one day be resolved.

We took lunch in the Turanga forest where the expected Turkestan and Azure Tits, White-winged Woodpeckers and Yellow-eyed Pigeons appeared in quick succession. Stopping to check the reedbeds on our return, we were treated to views of Paddyfield Warbler and Bittern. The highlight of the day came when I played a blast of Penduline Tit song. Almost immediately, Victoria screamed, 'it's *macronyx*, it's real *macronyx*'. This could only mean one thing, we had found the holy grail of Central Asian birds, the rarely seen and little known Black-headed Penduline Tit. We watched, pretty stunned, as two entirely black headed Penduline Tits worked their way through the *Phragmites*, to be followed in quick succession by a pair of *caspius* type European Penduline Tits with their white throats and chocolate brown crowns. Black-headed Penduline Tit is a bird that all birders search for, yet nobody ever seems to see. In Kazakhstan, it is restricted to the Ili River where it enters Lake Balkhash, and the Aral Sea. It is uncertain whether it still occurs around the Aral Sea following its desiccation, and here in the Ili river, to the best of Victoria's knowledge, no birders, either Kazakh or foreign, have seen it for over 10 years. We watched as the pair of black-headed birds kept together, moved through the reeds, flew into a nearby tree, then vanished into an adjacent reedbed. Then the *caspius* European Penduline Tits did the same thing. Interesting to see they were keeping in pairs of their own species. We returned to our camp feeling pretty pleased with the day's birding.

Our main target for the next day was Caspian Plover which nests close to our camp but can be tricky to see as they rarely visit the artesian wells to drink. Setting out across the

desert, we paused by an artesian well we hadn't visited before where a Brown-necked Raven dropped in, nine Demoiselle Cranes displayed and a flock of Rose-coloured Starlings were bathing. Scanning the edges of the mud, we quickly realised that there were several migrants here including a male Ortolan Bunting, red-throated Pipit and best of all, a white headed Yellow Wagtail of the race *leucocephala* – apparently a rare migrant through eastern Kazakhstan. As we continued into the desert, we had good views of a Macqueen's Bustard and several Greater Sand Plover, which also nest here. It took a fair while and several false starts, but eventually a female Caspian Plover got up in front of the bus and ran, clearly off a nest. It wasn't long, though, before she was returning, and after a few minutes she returned and sat on the nest just metres from where we had stopped. Apparently, while females are incubating, the males go off to enjoy themselves in their bachelor parties. When the eggs hatch, however, they then play the lead role in caring for the chicks. Our males, it would seem, were still enjoying themselves.

One bird we had very much wanted to see was Desert Warbler. This ghostly sprite is usually quite an easy bird to find around our campsite. This year, however, the wet spring had resulted in a dramatic growth of grass, making it seem more like a prairie than a desert, and there were no Desert Warblers to be found. So as we left our camp for the last time, we made a slight detour along the Topar road. Very soon, we found what we were looking for, sandy desert and dunes with scattered scrub. Within minutes we had our quarry, Desert Warbler, together with Rufous Scrub Robin, Sykes's Warbler and Isabelline Shrike – all breeding birds of this most inhospitable of habitats. Before leaving Konshengol, we also checked for grounded migrants around the village, as we had done each day. As always, there was much to see; Barred Warblers, Spotted Flycatchers, Oriental Turtle Doves, Common Rosefinches, and a cracking *hafizi* Nightingale and much more.

Our roadside lunch break was surprisingly productive, with a black-backed *calcarata* Citrine Wagtail immediately grabbing our attention, as did 54 Demoiselle Cranes, again another flock of delayed migrants. A small pool, really little more than a rapidly drying puddle but with a small patch of reeds was alive with snakes. It was difficult to be sure just how many there were, some said four, others six. No matter, there were a lot. And as we watched them, a male Baillon's Crake appeared like an apparition, only to vanish as miraculously as he had appeared. Then, once again, he appeared to prove he wasn't a mirage, then vanished, never to be seen again.

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 widespread here, with Black being locally abundant, and so both fell without a struggle. Sociable Lapwing also proved to be surprisingly easy. In fact, they appear to be increasing in numbers and more new sites are being found each year. However, remains the rarest and most endangered species we encountered during the tour.

Our first day here was spent on the grasslands to the southwest of Astana, Kazakhstan's new steel and glass capital. With the traffic and dust well behind us, we enjoyed the first of two fantastic days birding. Our first stop was for dainty Red-footed Falcons that hawked from roadside wires. Clearly nesting nearby, they gave us some great views. Nearby, ethereal Pallid Harriers floated on delicate wings. Never before have we encountered such numbers. Whether this was a good vole year, or numbers are increasing we cannot be sure. But nice to see so many. On reaching our destination, the lakes held Red-necked, Black-necked, Slavonian and Great Crested Grebes but high water levels had swamped the reedbeds so many of the sought-after reedbed specialities, such as White-headed Duck, would need to be looked for elsewhere. We paused by a small orchard that was full of migrants. By carefully working our way through the trees we had great views of Bluethroats, a very approachable Paddyfield Warbler, our first Booted Warblers and much more. The following day we went further out onto the steppe grasslands to a superb area fringing the huge Kurgaldzliniski Reserve. The lakes here held huge numbers of waterbirds, including everything from Dalmatian Pelicans to Great Black-headed Gulls. Many White-winged Black Terns hawked insects above the lakes, masses of waders including thousands of Ruff in their smart breeding attire, together with lesser numbers of Little Stints, Red-necked Phalaropes, and Curlew, Marsh and Terek Sandpipers thronged the shorelines. Newly arrived Black-winged Pratincoles hawked for insects overhead and gave us great views. One lake held at least 12 of the threatened White-headed Ducks. We ate lunch overlooking a large gull colony where Great Black-headed, Steppe and Common Gulls were nesting, while many Slender-billed and a handful of Little Gulls distracted us.

On our last morning in the north we went in search of Pine Bunting, which proved to be successful, and while doing so, managed great views of Grasshopper Warblers and flushed a couple of Quail.

The final leg of our great adventure saw us heading into the snow covered Tien Shan mountains, towering high above Almaty. Here we were joined by Olga Kazenas, a botanist from the University in Almaty, and Alina Tuldabaeva who came along to help us with the language. We started out with a certain degree of trepidation, as we knew that poor weather had been a problem here and late snows could thwart our efforts. We awoke on our first morning to low cloud, but between the occasional breaks we saw many exciting birds around the Astronomical Observatory that was our home for two nights. Before breakfast we managed to knock up a respectable bird list including Brown and Black-throated Accentors, White-winged Grosbeaks and Red-mantled Rosefinches. The highlight though was the magnificent male White-tailed Rubythroat that sang from atop the juniper scrub. What a stunning bird! With his tail spread and ruby-red throat pulsating, how could his mate, looking on from the next bush, fail to be impressed? Following breakfast, and with mist still covering the tops, the lure of Ibisbill at Big Almaty Lake proved to be irresistible. So we headed down. Even here, the lake was frequently obscured by cloud, so we knew this wasn't going to be an easy task. Along the way we had great views of a pair of Eversmann's Redstarts and a more distant pair of Blue-capped Redstarts, Hume's Warblers sang everywhere and Mistle Thrushes brought with them a touch of home.

It took a while coming, but eventually a bird called, flew in and landed – behind a ridge and out of view. At least we knew where to look and very soon we found it feeding in one of the small rivulets. This is another of those highly sought after species that is such an important target for this tour. And again, we were lucky with the weather so everyone was able to soak up the special shorebird of Asia's highest hills.

That was to be it though, everything went downhill after this, including us. Following lunch, the mist thickened and the rain set in. We went down through the spruce forest in the hope of seeing something, and we did actually manage to dig out a Songar Tit which came in and showed well. Otherwise, it was a quiet afternoon and we were grateful for the warming drinks at the Alpine Rose Hotel. We hoped for better things tomorrow. Mistake! We awoke to 20 cms of snow! Now there was no hope of going up, although we did try, and with the visibility down to less than 100 m we had little chance of seeing much. As the snow continued to fall steadily, we reluctantly took the decision to leave early and drop below the snowline. In fact, we had to descend almost 500 m before we were out of the snow. As the weather began to improve, Tree Pipits began to sing overhead, Blue-headed Redstarts flitted along the road ahead of us, and Greenish, Hume's and Blyth's Reed Warblers all made appearances. As we descended we had good views of Blue Whistling Thrush and Brown Dipper, species that are largely Himalayan in their distribution and only extend into central Asia along the Tien Shan. Finally, at lunch, Azure Tits came in and showed well; a nice finale.

Over the last two weeks 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 skylscapes and some truly special weather moments that combined to make this tour something rather special.

Everyone has their own favourite moments, and being a birding tour, birds are obviously uppermost in most people's thoughts. Thinking back on some of the very special moments, whether it be watching the Penduline Tits constructing their nest, watching the flocks of graceful Demoiselle Cranes, listening to the cacophony of larks in the pre-dawn skies at Konshengol, the Pallas's Sandgrouse feeding by the roadside, Eastern Rock Nuthatches attending their huge nest, the Macqueen's Bustard performing its 'headless chicken' display dance; the Caspian Plover leading us away from its nest; the delightful Desert Warbler that just sat there 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? Stunning Great Black-headed Gulls at the breeding colony; the male Black-winged Pratincole delicately feeding his mate. And then there were the mountains with so many extraordinary birds; Ibisbill, White-tailed Rubythroat, Eversmann's Redstart – the list goes on. But it was not just these outstanding birding moments which made this tour unique. Remember also the amazing starscapes and spectacular sunsets of the desert



nights, the howling gales at Bartogay and the snows of the Tien Shan. There will be much to recall and reminisce on those long winter's nights.

As always, we took a vote for Bird of the Tour. Despite the atrocious weather we encountered, two of the birds we saw in the Tien Shan mountains tied for first place; Ibisbill and White-tailed Rubythroat, followed closely by Pallas's Sandgrouse. My personal highlight, Black-headed Penduline Tit, didn't even muster a single vote. Clearly, the mountains form an essential component to this tour and we hope for better weather next year.

This tour would not have been the success it was without Victoria, whose delightful English, charming personality and boundless knowledge made her indispensable. She managed our group, and our many helpers, so well, and knew just where to find those very special birds. In the mountains, Olga's knowledge of the plants proved to be a huge asset and Alina worked hard to answer our many questions. My thanks also go to our drivers, Alexei around Almaty, Sergei in Astana, and Nikolai with his go almost anywhere bus in the mountains. At the camps, Igor at Bartogay, and Bacha and Natalia (our cook) at Konshengol, together with their Kirghiz staff looked after us so well, preparing great meals and keeping the beers (and wine) cool. We must not forget Dauren and Yuliya, the backroom staff of Kan Tengri, who ensured that things ran as smoothly as possible. And finally, thanks go to the six members of this group, who worked so hard to make this such an outstanding tour. It was a privilege to travel with you.

*Peter Kennerley*  
*June 2007*

### **Annotated checklist of the Birds**

#### **Himalayan Snowcock** *Tetraogallus himalayensis*

At least two calling birds heard from the surrounding hills while we were searching for Ibisbill at Big Almaty Lake on 17th. This year, however, the combination of low cloud and heavy snow conspired to prevent us from seeing this highly sought-after species.

#### **Chukar** *Alectoris chukar*

One seen and at least one other heard at Tamgaly Tas on 10th.

#### **Common Quail** *Coturnix coturnix*

Three birds calling from crops while we ate lunch near Nurly on 9th. Later in the tour, at least four birds were calling from rough grassland near Volgodonovka, some 30 km to the southeast of Astana on 16th. They eventually came in to a tape and two birds were seen well in flight.

#### **Common Pheasant** *Phasianus colchicus*

Single birds heard on 7th near Almaty, and on 11th near Zhelturanga.

**Greylag Goose** *Anser anser*

Common in the north, with 60+ on 14th and 40+ on 15th.

**Mute Swan** *Cygnus olor*

One near Astana on 14th, followed by a pair on Zhumay lake near the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 15th.

**Whooper Swan** *Cygnus cygnus*

Two in roadside fields near the Nura river, southwest of Astana, on 14th.  
A further two seen near the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 15th.

**Common Shelduck** *Tadorna tadorna*

Quite scarce this year and noted on just two dates, both in the north. Two were on a small lake southwest of Astana on 14th and at least ten were seen near the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 15th.

**Ruddy Shelduck** *Tadorna ferruginea*

Common throughout the south from the desert regions to Big Almaty Lake, but absent from the Astana region. Noted daily between 7th and 13th, and again on 17th and 18th. The maximum daily count was 16 on 11th, on the lakes near Topar.

**Gadwall** *Anas strepera*

At least 10 near Topar on 11th and 20+ at Sorbulak Lake on 13th, followed by small numbers on most lakes visited in the Astana region on 14th and 15th.

**Eurasian Wigeon** *Anas penelope*

Four on Bartogay Lake on 7th and a male there the following day. Six on Sorbulak Lake on 13th, and two near Astana on 14th.

**Mallard** *Anas platyrhynchos*

In the south, just two on Bartogay Lake on 8th and a pair on Sorbulak Lake on 13th. Widespread in small numbers in the north, with 12 on 14th, 20+ on 15th and a single male on 16th.

**Northern Shoveler** *Anas clypeata*

A male on Bartogay Lake followed by a pair on Sorbulak Lake were the only sightings in the south. In the north, at least six on lakes southwest of Astana on 14th, and 40+ near the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 15th.

**Northern Pintail** *Anas acuta*

A male on Bartogay Lake on 8th and a pair there the following day. In the north, the wetlands around Astana held four on 14th and 10+ on 15th.

**Garganey** *Anas querquedula*

The most numerous duck we encountered during the tour. Lake Bartogay held 12 on 8th and two females on 9th. A pair was seen near Topar on 11th and at least eight on Sorbulak Lake on 13th. More numerous in the north, with 10+ on 14th and 60+ on 15th.

**Red-crested Pochard** *Netta rufina*

Scarce this year, with 12+ on pools near Topar on 11th followed by a further 12+ on Sorbulak Lake on 13th. Uncommon in the north, with eight to the southwest of Astana on 14th and 10+ near the Kurgaldzliniskiy Reserve on 15th.

**Common Pochard** *Aythya ferina*

In the south, single males noted near Topar on 11th and on Sorbulak Lake on 13th. More numerous around Astana, were several lakes held small flocks and scattered birds. During visits to lakes to the southwest of the city, we estimated 90+ on 14th and near the Kurgaldzliniskiy Reserve we estimated 70+ on 15th.

**Ferruginous Duck** *Aythya nyroca*

At least 15 on pools near Topar was an exceptionally good count for this region.

**Tufted Duck** *Aythya fuligula*

Only noted on lakes near Astana, where we saw 30+ birds on both 14th and 15th.

**Goosander** *Mergus merganser*

A pair on Lake Bartogay on 7th, followed four females and two males there the next day and two males on 9th.

**Red-breasted Merganser** *Mergus serrator*

A male in flight over Zhumay Lake near the Kurgaldzliniskiy Reserve on 15th was an unexpected bonus for Andy. The rest of us were looking in the opposite direction at the time.

**White-headed Duck** *Oxyura leucocephala*

A minimum of 12 birds on Zhumay Lake near the Kurgaldzliniskiy Reserve on 15th.

**Little Grebe** *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

Calling birds heard on the lakes near Topar on 13th.

**Red-necked Grebe** *Podiceps grisegena*

A minimum of 20 noted on various small lakes to the southwest of Astana on 14th, and a further six on 15th near the Kurgaldzliniskiy Reserve.

**Great Crested Grebe** *Podiceps cristatus*

In the south, only noted on Bartogay Lake, the lakes near Topar and Sorbulak Lake. More numerous on the lakes near Astana.

**Horned Grebe** *Podiceps auritus*

Just one on a roadside lake to the southwest of Astana on 14th. Also known as **Slavonian Grebe**.

**Black-necked Grebe** *Podiceps nigricollis*

Only seen in the north, where 15+ were seen on roadside lakes to the southwest of Astana on 14th, and a further six on 15th.

**Eurasian Bittern** *Botaurus stellaris*

Cracking views of a bird perched in the reeds near Topar on 11th. In addition, at least one further bird booming nearby. In the north, two in reedbeds to the southwest of Astana on 14th.

**Black-crowned Night Heron** *Nycticorax nycticorax*

A first-summer bird in flight over Konshengol on 13th, where it was being mercilessly harassed by corvids and was unable to land. One southwest of Astana on 15th.

**Grey Heron** *Ardea cinerea*

At least 12 near Topar on 11th and 20+ at Sorbulak Lake on 13th. Not seen in the north this year.

**Great Egret** *Ardea alba*

At least 12 near Topar on 11th and 15+ at Sorbulak Lake on 14th. Fairly numerous in the wetlands around Astana, with 15 counted on 14th, six on 15th and just one on 16th.

**Great White Pelican** *Pelecanus onocrotalus*

A sub-adult with Dalmatian Pelicans at Sorbulak Lake on 13th.

**Dalmatian Pelican** *Pelecanus crispus*

One in flight over the wetlands near Topar on 11th, and at least 25 at Sorbulak Lake on 13th. In the north, at least 30 at Lake Sholak near the Kurgaldzinskiy Reserve on 15th.

**Great Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax carbo*

Seven at Sorbulak Lake on 13th was the only sighting in the south. All other records came from the Astana region, with 12 on 14th and 100+ on 15th.

**Lesser Kestrel** *Falco naumanni*

Only seen to the southeast of Almaty. Initially scarce, but as the weather gradually improved, they seemed to appear from nowhere and proved to be quite numerous here, as usual. In poor weather on 8th, just four were seen near the Bartogay camp and six over the Sugaty Plain later the same day. The following day, in calm, dry conditions we estimated at least 50 positively identified Lesser Kestrels along the road between the campsite and the Kokpek Pass. Many were perching on roadside power poles giving great views, others were hovering and hunting close to the road, while many more were too distant to positively identify. In addition, there were some Common Kestrels with them, making it difficult to be certain just exactly how many birds were present. Later the same

day, we passed another party of 20+ birds hunting by the roadside near the village of Mailybay (which actually translates to good, fat cattle).

**Common Kestrel** *Falco tinnunculus*

Common, widespread and recorded daily in all habitats visited. Most numerous in the southeast, and in the Lake Bartogay region, with up to 15 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 12 birds noted by the roadside on 15th where the give great views, and 60+ between Astana and the Kurgaldzinskiy Reserve on 15th. At least six near Astana airport on 16th.

**Merlin** *Falco columbarius*

A male on the ground by the roadside between Astana and the Kurgaldzinskiy Reserve on 15th. Birds breeding in this region belong to the race *F. c. pallidus* which, as its name suggests, is an extremely pale form that breeds across Central Asia from the Ural valley east to the Altai mountains.

**Eurasian Hobby** *Falco subbuteo*

Common and widespread in the south, with singles or pairs noted daily between 7th and 11th. Just two or three seen in the north, with a pair giving good views while we ate lunch near the village of Pavlogradka, southwest of Astana, on 14th.

**Saker** *Falco cherrug*

One rather distant bird flew past our camp at Bartogay on 9th.

**Black Kite** *Milvus migrans*

Small numbers noted most days throughout the south, although most numerous in the desert near Konshengol, with 20+ noted here on 11th and at Sorbulak Lake where there was a minimum of at least 100 birds loafing around the main gull and pelican roost, and in nearby woodland. Much scarcer in the north near Astana, with just six birds noted on 14th and 15th. 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*

Poor weather conditions made 2007 a poor year to see large, soaring raptors in Kazakhstan. A distant adult seen from the camp at Bartogay on 9th was the only sighting this year.

**Eurasian Black Vulture** *Aegypius monachus*

An adult drifted over the road near Bartogay camp on 9th.

**Western Marsh Harrier** *Circus aeruginosus*

Common over marshes in the north, with 12+ on 14th and six on 15th.

**Pallid Harrier** *Circus macrourus*

A great year for this delightful species. In the south, where Pallid Harriers are migrants, we watched a male that flew past the camp at Konshengol on 12th, and later the same day a female was seen. Both were presumably migrants. In the north, Pallid Harriers were more numerous than in previous years, and we enjoyed superb views of many birds this year. On 14th, to the southwest of Astana, we saw eight birds including several displaying males. The following day, near the Kurgaldzinskiy Reserve, we saw a minimum of 25 individuals.

**Montagu's Harrier** *Circus pygargus*

Scattered singles noted on five dates. In the south, an adult male hunting the fields by the roadside near Nurly on 7th gave cracking views as he approached our bus, only to veer away when he realised what was happening. This male or another was again seen near Nurly on 9th. A first summer male was near Topar on 11th. Near Astana, a male plus a pair were seen to the southwest of Astana on 14th and a female was near the Kurgaldzinskiy Reserve on 15th.

**Shikra** *Accipiter badius*

Restricted as a breeding bird to the Ili River region between Topar and Zhelturanga, where we saw two males on 11th perched on roadside power poles and in flight. A male, presumably a migrant was seen near Konshengol on 12th and a pair were hunting small passerines over Konshengol village on 13th. These were presumably migrants as the available food supply would quickly disappear as migration tailed off towards the end of the month, making it unsuitable for breeding.

**Eurasian Sparrowhawk** *Accipiter nisus*

Noted on seven dates in all regions visited. Most would be migrants, particularly those seen near Konshengol, although birds seen in the Tien Shan above Almaty on 17th and 18th are likely to be breeding birds.

**Common Buzzard** *Buteo buteo*

In the north, singles seen on 15th and 16th near Astana. At least three singles seen on the lower slopes of the Tien Shan as we returned to Almaty on 18th. 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 7th and 13th. Maximum was 40+ between Almaty and Konshengol on 10th.

**Steppe Eagle** *Aquila nipalensis*

Just two sightings this year. Again the inclement weather made it poor year for large, soaring raptors. An adult over the road near Sorbulak Lake on 13th, followed by an adult to the southwest of Astana on 14th.

**Golden Eagle** *Aquila chrysaetos*

Two single birds noted on 9th. The first was seen from our camp at Bartogay, while later the same day one showed well over the Kokpek Pass.

**Booted Eagle** *Hieraaetus pennatus*

A pale morph bird in flight near Nurly on 7th, and a dark morph over grassland near the Kokpek Pass on 9th.

**Macqueen's Bustard** *Chlamydotis macqueenii*

This highly prized species performed well for us again while we were staying at the Konshengol camp. A rather distant female was found in the late evening of 10th, but this was soon bettered by two displaying males visible from our camp on the following three mornings. In addition, three were seen well, both at rest and in flight, while searching for Caspian Plovers on 12th. The displaying males near our camp regularly performed their 'headless chicken' display, running in figure-of-eight loops with head thrown back and hidden within a mass of extended neck feathering. A most extraordinary sight and one of the many highlights of this fantastic tour.

**Corn Crane** *Crex crex*

A bit of a surprise. A calling bird heard at dusk on 16th above the hydroelectric power plant above Almaty as we drove to the Astronomical observatory. Unfortunately, too dark to make it worthwhile trying to get the bird out into the open.

**Baillon's Crane** *Porzana pusilla*

This was also a bit of a surprise. A cracking male appeared between the reeds on a small pool during our lunch stop between Konshengol and Sorbulak on 13th. Initially elusive, it soon reappeared and gave good views before vanishing into the reeds again, not to reappear, at least while we waited. Undoubtedly a migrant, but how do migrants find such tiny pools when flying over otherwise dry, semi-desert landscapes?

**Common Moorhen** *Gallinula chloropus*

Six near Topar on 11th and one at Sorbulak lake on 13th were the only sightings.

**Common Coot** *Fulica atra*

Common near Topar and at Sorbulak Lake, with up to 20 birds at each site. More numerous in the north, with 60+ on 14th, 150+ on 15th and just a couple on 16th, all the Astana region.

**Demoiselle Crane** *Anthropoides virgo*

An excellent year for this delightful crane, which is always one of the most sought after species on this tour. This year we encountered it on no less than eight dates in all regions

visited except the Tien Shan. Our first was in the fields near Nurly on 7th, followed by a further six or more here on 9th. On 10th, between Koma and Tamgaly, a migrant flock comprising 212 birds was watched in roadside fields, with a couple of single birds noted nearby. One of the joys of the Konshengol camp is listening to the cranes calling after sunset, when all other birds are silent. Small numbers breed near the camp, and the flock of nine seen at an artesian near our camp on 12th were possible the local breeders. During our lunch stop between Konshengol and Sorbulak, a flock of 54 birds was watched as they fed in a small valley. In the Astana area, 20 were noted on 14th, two on 15th and two on 16th.

**Eurasian Oystercatcher** *Haematopus ostralegus*

Two at Lake Sholak on 15th. Birds breeding this region belong to the race *H. o. longipes*, which breeds across the steppe zone of Central Asia.

**Ibisbill** *Ibidorhyncha struthersii*

After waiting for about an hour, a bird called, flew in and landed out of view at Big Almaty Lake, below the Observatory, on 17th. Although it was only seen briefly, it soon reappeared on the shingle by the small rivulet and well all were able to watch it for several minutes before the cloud rolled in. This is rare breeding bird in Kazakhstan, restricted to the Tien Shan mountains, with an estimate of just 75 pairs in the country.

**Black-winged Stilt** *Himantopus himantopus*

One seen daily at the artesian well by our camp at Konshengol, and 15+ on pools near Topar on 11th. Elsewhere in the south, at least 10 at Lake Sorbulak on 13th. In the north, 20+ on pools to the southwest of Astana on 14th, and 40+ near the Kurgaldzinskiy Reserve, in particular on Lake Sholak, on 15th.

**Pied Avocet** *Recurvirostra avocetta*

Two on pools to the southwest of Astana on 14th, and at least 20 on Lake Sholak and nearby lakes on 15th.

**Northern Lapwing** *Vanellus vanellus*

In the south, one by the artesian well at Nurly on 7th and 9th and another by Bartogay Lake. One near Topar on 11th and six at Sorbulak on 13th. More numerous in the north, with 30+ on 14th, 50+ on 15th and 10+ on 16th.

**Sociable Lapwing** *Vanellus gregarius*

Another stunning bird and one of the main targets of this exceptional tour, where it breeds in small numbers on grasslands to the southwest of Astana. We initially encountered six rather distant birds on 14th, but the following day we found it to be slightly more numerous near the Kurgaldzinskiy Reserve, where we enjoyed good, prolonged views of 10+ on 15th. The world population of this attractive plover has been in sharp decline for, as yet, unknown reasons and is believed to number just a few thousand individuals. This was undoubtedly the most threatened species we encountered during the tour.

**Grey Plover** *Pluvialis squatarola*

An adult in breeding plumage at Lake Sholak on 15th.



**Common Ringed Plover** *Charadrius hiaticula*

A minimum of 40 birds on Lake Sholak, near the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve, on 15th.

**Little Ringed Plover** *Charadrius dubius*

Seen daily in the south between 7th and 13th wherever suitable wetlands occurred. In the north, one at Lake Sholak on 15th was the only record.

**Kentish Plover** *Charadrius alexandrinus*

A female by lake near Mayshukur village near the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 15th was the only record.

**Greater Sand Plover** *Charadrius leschenaultii*

With this being an exceptionally wet spring, no birds came in to the artesian well near our camp at Konshengol. However, during a drive through suitable breeding habitat on 12th, we encountered no less than 25 individuals, including nesting females and groups of males. It appears that the males gather in groups while the females incubate. The birds breeding in Kazakhstan are of the form *C. l. crassirostris* in which the males exhibit a fairly extensive dull reddish-orange wash across the breast that extends onto the flanks. These birds appear quite different to birds of the nominate race, in which breast colour is bright orange and is restricted to a fairly narrow collar across the neck and throat.

**Caspian Plover** *Charadrius asiaticus*

After much searching on 12th, we eventually found a female that we accidentally disturbed off its nest. It appears that males leave the breeding territory when females are incubating, then return when the eggs hatch to take care of the young. Presumably this is the reason we struggled to find them this year. This remains a stunningly attractive and highly sought after species.

**Common Snipe** *Gallinago gallinago*

One at Bartogay Lake on 8th was the only sighting.

**Black-tailed Godwit** *Limosa limosa*

Only seen on wetlands in the north, with three on 14th, four on 15th and six on 16th. 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*

Four in flight over Topar on 11th, and one at Lake Sholak, near the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve, on 15th.

**Eurasian Curlew** *Numenius arquata*

One flew over the artesian well at Konshengol on 13th.

**Spotted Redshank** *Tringa erythropus*

Single birds noted on a small lake to the southwest of Astana on 14th, and at Lake Sholak near the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 15th.

**Common Redshank** *Tringa totanus*

Quite scarce this year, and another species largely restricted to the wetlands of the north, apart from Lake Sorbulak, where six displaying birds on 13th suggested breeding was taking place. Near Astana, two seen on 14th and three on 15th. 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. Four near Astana on 14th, and two at Lake Sholak near the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 15th.

**Common Greenshank** *Tringa nebularia*

Eight near Astana on 14th and two at Lake Sholak near the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 15th.

**Green Sandpiper** *Tringa ochropus*

One daily at the artesian well near our camp at Konshengol from 10th to 13th, and another on the pool near Konshengol village.

**Wood Sandpiper** *Tringa glareola*

One near our camp at Konshengol on 10th and one at Sorbulak on 13th. Near Astana, single birds seen on 14th and 15th.

**Terek Sandpiper** *Xenus cinereus*

At least 14 birds noted on 15th. One was on Sholak lake while the remainder were on the lake near Mayshukur village near the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 15th.

**Common Sandpiper** *Actitis hypoleucos*

Widespread in small numbers, with up to eight recorded daily from 7th to 15th.

**Ruddy Turnstone** *Arenaria interpres*

Six feeding along the shoreline of Lake Sholak on 15th.

**Little Stint** *Calidris minuta*

A minimum of 50 birds feeding along the shoreline of Lake Sholak and other nearby lakes on 15th.

**Temminck's Stint** *Calidris temminckii*

Up to nine birds visiting the artesian well near our camp at Konshengol between 10th and 13th, and with others on the pools near Konshengol village we estimated 25+ birds in the area on 12th. Elsewhere, two at Sorbulak Lake on 13th and six on pools to the southwest of Astana on 14th.

**Curlew Sandpiper** *Calidris ferruginea*

An adult in breeding plumage at Lake Sholak on 15th followed by another on the lake near Mayshukur village near the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve later the same day.

**Dunlin** *Calidris alpina*

A minimum of 15 by Lake Sholak on 15th.

**Ruff** *Philomachus pugnax*

Several thousand birds were present throughout the Astana region wherever suitable wetlands occurred. On 14th and 15th, we must have seen in excess of 5,000 birds, most of which were males in breeding plumage and some starting to display. Small numbers of females (or small males resembling females) were also present. This region must represent one of the most important staging areas for birds heading towards their breeding areas on the tundra of northern Siberia.

**Red-necked Phalarope** *Phalaropus lobatus*

At least 100 birds on the lake near Mayshukur village near the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 15th, with ones and twos noted on other nearby lakes.

**Collared Pratincole** *Glareola pratincola*

One hawking insects over the pool by Konshengol village on 13th. In addition, two unidentified pratincoles flew over our camp at Konshengol on 12th.

**Black-winged Pratincole** *Glareola nordmanni*

Four in flight over Sorbulak Lake on 13th would have been migrants. Otherwise, restricted to the north, where four birds were seen over hawking over small lakes and grasslands to the southwest of Astana on 14th. Our visit to the grassland near the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 15th produced in excess of 100 individuals. Clearly breeding was taking place here although few birds had settled down to lay yet. Courtship feeding and display was noted on several occasions. This is yet another species which has undergone a dramatic population decline in recent years.

**Common Gull** *Larus canus*

In the north, at least 60 birds breeding on the island in the lake near Mayshukur on 15th, plus others feeding in nearby fields.

**Caspian Gull** *Larus cachinnans*

One over our camp at Konshengol on 11th and another near Topar on 12th. Common at Sorbulak Lake with 60+ noted there on 13th.

**Steppe Gull** *Larus barabensis*.

In the Astana region, a minimum of 40 birds noted on lakes to the southwest of Astana on 14th, followed by at least 150 on 15th and ten near Astana on 16th. On 15th, several birds were present around Lake Sholak near 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 Caspian Gulls on Sorbulak Lake near Almaty, being slightly smaller with a smaller, and quite delicate structure. They were also distinctly darker on the mantle and showed a different primary tip pattern. There was also 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 – resembling Armenian Gull. Interestingly, and despite these differences, genetic studies have shown there to be no significant differences between these birds and Caspian Gulls breeding to the south.

**Great Black-headed Gull** *Larus ichthyaetus*

This magnificent gull is always one of the highlights of this tour, which is confined to the Astana region. Our first were two adults flying over the grassland at Lake Sholak near the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 15th. Later the same day we visited the lake near the village of Mayshukur where there were approximately 300 adults present in the breeding colony on the island.

**Black-headed Gull** *Larus ridibundus*

A minimum of 20 birds over lakes near Topar on 11th, followed by 80+ at Lake Sorbulak on 13th. Numerous in the north, with 40+ noted on 14th, 120+ on 15th and 60+ on 16th.

**Slender-billed Gull** *Larus genei*

Although we only saw these delightful gulls on 15th, we found them on many of the lakes we visited near the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve. During the day we encountered in excess of 250 individuals, making this an exceptional year for this attractive species

**Little Gull** *Larus minutus*

Restricted to lakes in the north, where we saw four adults to the southwest of Astana on 14th and 30+ feeding over Lake Sholak and other lakes near the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 15th.

**Little Tern** *Sterna albifrons*

Three at Lake Sholak on 15th was the only record.

**Gull-billed Tern** *Gelochelidon nilotica*

One over Bartogay Lake on 8th, at another briefly over the pool by the artesian well near our camp at Konshengol on 12th were the only records in the south. Near Astana, we watched 20+ over Lake Sholak and other lakes near the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 15th.

**Caspian Tern** *Sterna caspia*

Two birds on the shore of Lake Sholak, near the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve, on 15th.

**Black Tern** *Chlidonias niger*

Much scarcer than White-winged Black Tern, particularly in the south. An adult feeding over the pool near Konshengol village on 10th, followed by 20+ over pools near Topar

the next day. More numerous near Astana, with 200+ over wetlands to the southwest of Astana on 14th, and 80+ near Lake Sholak and other lakes near the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve, on 15th.

**White-winged Black Tern** *Chlidonias leucopterus*

Common and widespread. Those birds seen in the south were undoubtedly migrants while birds in the north were probably a combination of breeding birds and migrants. In the south, our first were 15 hawking for insects over roadside pools near Topar on 10th, followed by three over the pool near Konshengol village on 11th. More numerous in the north, with 300+ over wetlands to the southwest of Astana on 14th, and 400+ near Lake Sholak and other lakes near the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve, on 15th.

**Common Tern** *Sterna hirundo*

Noted on three dates in the south, including 10+ on lakes near Topar on 11th and 30+ over Sorbulak Lake on 13th. Scarce in the north except at Lake Sholak where 80+ were counted on 15th. Although most birds showed characters associated with the nominate form, some were probably pale individuals of the Central Asian breeding form *S. h. minussensis* which breeds in the Altai and throughout Mongolia. In addition, 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 *minussensis*. This form is quite variable, with some resembling nominate birds and others approaching *S. h. longipennis*, but all retained some red colouration at the base of the lower mandible.

**Pallas's Sandgrouse** *Syrrhaptes paradoxus*

This is undoubtedly one of the most highly sought-after species on the Kazakhstan tour, and one which draws people to this remote region. In recent years, however, it has become increasingly difficult to find. After failing to find it at Nurly, and the artesian wells at Konshengol, this year we were extremely lucky to see the single male that was feeding by the roadside in the desert between Konshengol and Topar on 11th. The bird flew up directly in front of our bus and fortunately flew around and returned to land by the road a few hundred metres behind us. Fortunately it proved to be quite approachable and we enjoyed fantastic views of this Central Asian enigma.

**Pin-tailed Sandgrouse** *Pterocles alchata*

A single bird twice flew over the artesian well by our camp at Konshengol on 13th.

**Black-bellied Sandgrouse** *Pterocles orientalis*

By far the most numerous sandgrouse. Three near Nurly on 7th were followed by two en route to Konshengol on 10th, and a further four near the artesian well later the same day. Common around Konshengol, with four there the next day, 80+ coming in to drink on 12th and 30+ on 13th. Several also seen between Konshengol and Lake Sorbulak on 13th.

**Rock Dove** *Columba livia*

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

**Stock Dove** *Columba oenas*

Single birds seen by the village at Pavlogradka southwest of Astana on 14th, and another seen in flight to the southwest of Astana on 15th.

**Yellow-eyed Pigeon** *Columba eversmanni*

At least four birds seen well in the Turanga forest near Zhelturanga on 11th.

**Common Wood Pigeon** *Columba palumbus*

Noted on seven dates. Most were in the south, and just three seen near Astana.

**European Turtle Dove** *Streptopelia turtur*

Scarce this year. Perhaps the poor weather was holding them back? All sightings came from Konshengol where we saw six on 10th, followed by two on 12th.

**Oriental Turtle Dove** *Streptopelia orientalis*

Widespread in small numbers, and a particularly common migrant in the desert at Konshengol, with 35+ there on 10th, 12+ on 11th, 15+ on 12th and 20+ on 13th. In the north, eight to the southwest of Astana on 14th and 25 on 15th. The bright plumage and white tips to the outer rectrices marked these birds as being of the race *S. o. meena*.

**Eurasian Collared Dove** *Streptopelia decaocto*

Occasionally seen in roadside villages in the south, and in Almaty, from 10th to 14th, but not numerous. Not seen in the north.

**Laughing Dove** *Streptopelia senegalensis*

Occasionally seen in villages to the southeast of Almaty. The most surprising sighting was a juvenile sheltering from the sun underneath our bus in the desert between Konshengol and Topar on 11th.

**Common Cuckoo** *Cuculus canorus*

Common and recorded almost daily throughout Kazakhstan. Peak daily estimate was 12+ seen and many others heard between Topar and Zhelturanga on 11th.

**Eurasian Scops Owl** *Otus scops*

Two heard calling from poplars bordering agricultural fields near Nurly at midday while we ate lunch was the only encounter made by the entire group. However, a walk around the tree-lined streets of Almaty in the late evening of 18th revealed at least eight calling birds, but these were not heard by everyone.

**Long-eared Owl** *Asio otus*

One or two birds in a small orchard to the southwest of Astana, gave several flight views.

**Short-eared Owl** *Asio flammeus*

One hunting by the roadside to the southwest of Astana on 15th gave great views.

**Alpine Swift** *Tachymarptis melba*

One battling into the wind and rain over Bartogay Lake on 8th was a leader only bird, and the only sighting made turning the entire tour.

**Common Swift** *Apus apus*

Common, widespread and seen daily between 7th and 13th throughout the south. Most numerous on the afternoon of 8th when 70+ were noted. Near Astana, six on 15th was the only record. Those birds 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 Central and east Asian breeding form *A. a. pekinensis*.

**European Roller** *Coracias garrulus*

Common and widespread in the south, where it was noted daily between 7th and 13th. Highest count was 86+ on 13th.

**Common Kingfisher** *Alcedo atthis*

One by a small pool during our lunch stop between Konshengol and Sorbulak on 13th.

**European Bee-eater** *Merops apiaster*

Small numbers recorded on just three dates. Most numerous on 13th when 15+ seen on roadside wires between Konshengol and Almaty.

**Common Hoopoe** *Upupa epops*

Recorded daily between 7th and 13th, with daily peaks of 24 on 11th and 12 on 13th.

**White-winged Woodpecker** *Dendrocopos leucopterus*

Only recorded from the Turanga forest near Zhelturanga on 11th, where at least four were seen.

**Great Spotted Woodpecker** *Dendrocopos major*

A migrant in poplars near the village of Pavlogradka southwest of Astana on 14th.

**Red-backed Shrike** *Lanius collurio*

Very scarce this year, with just three sightings. The first was a female at Tamgaly Tas on 12th, followed by a male in the small orchard Pavlogradka, southwest of Astana on 14th, and a female near the Kurgaldzinskiy Reserve on 15th. All birds were assumed to be migrants.

**Isabelline Shrike** *Lanius isabellinus*

At least four distinct forms encountered this year.

*Lanius isabellinus phoenicuroides* often known as **Turkestan Shrike**

Widespread in small numbers throughout the south but absent from the desert region around Konshengol. Noted daily from 7th to 11th. At least three near the campsite at

Bartogay which were probably breeding, while 12 at Tamgaly Tas were almost certainly migrants. This form shows a distinctly rich rufous-brown crown and mantle, together with white underparts. Note the Russian authorities consider **Turkestan Shrike** to be a specifically distinct species *Lanius phoenicuroides*.

*Lanius isabellinus karelini*

A pair of an extremely distinctive form watched for several minutes in a small bush near the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 15th were quite unique in appearance. No other birds resembling these individuals, with delicate dove-grey upperparts, white underparts and a broad white supercilium, were seen elsewhere in Kazakhstan, and they seem to fit this form most closely. Taxonomists appear unsure what to make of this form, and even the Russians treat *karelini* as a race of Turkestan Shrike.

*Lanius isabellinus phoenicuroides* x *arenarius*?

This form appears to be a common breeding bird in the desert scrub between Konshengol and Topar, a habitat which it shares with Southern Grey Shrike, Rufous Scrub Robin, Sykes's and Desert Warbler. It is quite distinctive and is readily separable from the other three forms seen elsewhere in Kazakhstan during this tour. It shows grey-brown upperparts, conspicuous whitish fringes to the tertials and secondaries, a delicate peachy wash to the flanks and greyish-white underparts. In addition, the males only show the black mask over the ear-coverts, but it is missing between the eye and bill base. In addition, it shows a poorly defined supercilium. However, they differ from true *arenarius*, which breeds to the west in the Tarim Basin in western China, in being slightly more rufescent on the crown, showing a diffuse supercilium, more rufous mantle, very contrasting wings with dark primaries, too much rufous in the tail, the peachy wash to the flanks and the white at the base of the primaries. However, the shape and extent of the mask is correct for *arenarius*. Perhaps the most likely scenario is that these birds are intergrades between *phoenicuroides* and *arenarius*.

*Lanius isabellinus isabellinus* often known as **Daurian Shrike**

A male at Tamgaly Tas on 10th. This was a classic individual with rich buff underparts, grey-brown upperparts showing little contrast with the underparts, a white patch at the base of the primaries and no trace of a supercilium. Russian authorities consider this form to be specifically distinct.

**Long-tailed Shrike** *Lanius schach*

One heard by the roadside just east of Almaty on 7th, followed by a couple of single birds, one of which showed well in the Kokpek Pass, and the other was seen in the small villages during the return to Almaty, both on 9th. In addition, one at Konshengol on 10th showed extremely well. These birds would be of the migratory form *L. s. erythronotus*.

**Lesser Grey Shrike** *Lanius minor*

Widespread in small numbers throughout the south, where it was recorded almost daily from 7th to 13th. Most numerous along the Almaty-Koma-Konshengol route where 12+



were seen on 10th. A pair to the southwest of Astana on 14th was the only sighting in the north.

**Southern Grey Shrike** *Lanius meridionalis*

A pair in the desert between Konshengol camp and Topar on 11th May. Both showed the characters associated with the migratory form *L. m. pallidirostris*, which is sometimes treated as a distinct species *L. pallidirostris*, **Desert Grey Shrike**. Note that this form is a desert species and does not breed on the steppe grasslands of Central Asia.

**Eurasian Golden Oriole** *Oriolus oriolus*

Extremely scarce this year, the main arrival having presumably been delayed by the cool and unseasonal weather. Several heard and seen in the small villages between Kokpek Pass and Almaty on 9th, and another at Konshengol village on 10th. The birds breeding in this region are of the form *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. Note that Rasmussen and Anderton (Birds of South Asia) treat this taxon as a distinct species, **Indian Golden Oriole** *O. kundoo*.

**Common 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, increased green iridescence on the closed wing, and proportionately longer tail, when compared with European birds.

**Eurasian Jackdaw** *Corvus monedula*

A common roadside bird seen daily between 7th and 18th, except on 8th and 17th. Absent from the mountain regions. 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 7th to 18th, 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*

A common roadside bird in the north with up to 50 seen daily. 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*

One bird by an artesian well near our camp at Konshengol on 12th showed extremely well. Another seen in flight over Konshengol village on 13th.

**Common Raven** *Corvus corax*

One near our campsite at Bartogay on 8th, and a pair by the roadside near Tamgaly Tas on 10th were the only sightings.

**Songar Tit** *Parus songarus*

One showed well in the Tien Shan Spruce forest below the small village near the dam at Big Almaty Lake on 17th.

**Coal Tit** *Parus ater*

At least six birds in the Tien Shan Spruce forest below the observatory on 17th and a further 15+ there on 18th. Birds breeding here are of the race *P. a. rufipectus*.

**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. Also seen in mixed forest in the Tien Shan.

**Turkestan Tit** *Parus bokharensis*

One in the village of Mailybay, to the east of Almaty was an unexpected surprise. It appeared to be paired with a typical Great Tit. All other sightings came from the Turanga forest near Zhelturanga on 11th.

**Azure Tit** *Parus cyanus*

A pair at the arboretum, to the east of Almaty, on 7th, and a few individuals seen in the various villages to the east of Almaty on 9th. In addition, a pair in the Turanga forest at Zhelturanga on 11th showed extremely well. 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 to the east of Almaty were presumably of the form *P. c. tianschanicus*, which ranges widely throughout this region of Central Asia.

**European Penduline Tit** *Remiz pendulinus*

A pair came into our tape in a *Phragmites* reedbed near Topar on 11th. Both birds were 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 were white and sharply demarcated from

the darker ear-coverts. Unlike European breeding 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 European Penduline Tit of the form *R. p. caspius*. Although this form is quite variable, it seems that these two individuals displayed the most extreme and distinctive characters, which bear little resemblance to European Penduline Tits in Europe. 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*. To further add to the confusion, Russian taxonomy treats these Ili delta birds as the race *ssaposhnikowi*. Harrap (Tits, Nuthatches and Treecreepers) also mentions this as the taxon occurring in the Ili delta and states it shows a head pattern mainly as *caspius* although some may be close to *macronyx*. He also mentions that Vaurie (Birds of the Palearctic fauna, Vol 1) treats this as a swarm hybrid between the *jaxarticus* race of European Penduline Tit and *macronyx* - possible if *jaxarticus* has moved south and east into the range of *macronyx* during the 20th century. However, this theory isn't proven. Victoria also mentioned that these *caspius/ssaposhnikowi* type birds are slightly larger than European Penduline Tits and approach *macronyx* in both overall size and length of hind claw. A fascinating subject worthy of further research.

**Black-headed Penduline Tit** *Remiz macronyx*

A pair of these stunning, black headed birds came into our tape of Eurasian Penduline Tit near Topar on 11th and showed well for several minutes in the *Phragmites* and then in nearby trees. An unexpected bonus and this is the first time we have recorded this distinctive species on any Limosa tour.

**White-crowned Penduline Tit** *Remiz coronatus*

At least four birds by the arboretum to the east of Almaty on 7th. Later the same day, two pairs attending nests in roadside Russian Olives, also to the east of Almaty, plus a further six or more birds in the general area. Here, the nests were suspended from the outer branches of low bushes 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. Several birds were also calling from roadside poplars near Nurly while we ate lunch on 9th. A pair plus the nest to the west of Almaty, near Koma on 10th. In contrast to the previous two species, White-crowned Penduline Tit does not utilise *Phragmites* reedbeds during the breeding season.

**Common Sand Martin** *Riparia riparia*

Four at Konshengol on 10th and 30+ over pools near Topar on 11th were the only sightings in the south. In the north, 20+ seen on 14th and a minimum of 60 over grassland and pools near the Kurgaldzinskiy Reserve on 15th.

**Eurasian Crag Martin** *Ptyonoprogne rupestris*

Eight at the Kokpek Pass on 9th.

**Barn Swallow** *Hirundo rustica*

Common, widespread and noted daily throughout except in the mountains. Up to 150 birds recorded daily.

**Northern House Martin** *Delichon urbica*

Scarce this year. Six at Konshengol on 10th and six near Almaty on 13th were the only sightings.

**Red-rumped Swallow** *Cecropis daurica*

Two near Almaty on 7th, and eight near the Otrar Hotel in Almaty on 18th.

**Calandra Lark** *Melanocorypha calandra*

Noted daily between 7th and 13th. Scarce to the east of Almaty, but abundant to the west, with several hundred noted in roadside fields on 10th between Almaty and Konshengol camp. Common in the desert near Konshengol, with 30+ noted on 12th. Several hundred again by the roadside on 13th, as we returned from Konshengol to Almaty.

**Bimaculated Lark** *Melanocorypha bimaculata*

First recorded near Tamgaly Tas on 10th. Thereafter, numerous in drier and desert areas around Konshengol camp until 13th. 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 90+ on 10th, 60+ on 11th, 80+ on 12th and 40+ on 13th.

**White-winged Lark** *Melanocorypha leucoptera*

Particularly scarce this year and only noted in the Astana region, with six on 14th, and four on 15th.

**Black Lark** *Melanocorypha yeltoniensis*

In contrast to the previous species, very common on the steppe grassland in the Astana region, with several hundred birds seen on 15th. Most were males, presumably females would be incubating at this time?

**Short-toed Lark** *Calandrella brachydactyla*

Between Almaty and Konshengol camp, at least 15 birds noted, most being flushed from the roadside as we passed. Frequently seen near Konshengol camp and adjacent artesian well, with at least eight on 11th, 30+ on 12th and 12+ on 13th. 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*

Common in the desert near the camp at Konshengol and along the road to Topar, where 40+ were seen on 11th. Around the camp, we estimated 20+ on 12th and 15+ on 13th, with many birds coming to drink at the nearby artesian well. 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. heinei*.

**Crested Lark** *Galerida cristata*

Two near the artesian well at Nurly on 7th and 15+ there and in the surrounding fields on 9th. Elsewhere, fairly common along the road between Koma and Konshengol with 20+ flushed from the roadside on 10th. Scarce in the drier desert regions though, with just one seen near Topar on 11th and 6+ near Konshengol on 12th. Heading west from Konshengol on 13th, it again became a numerous roadside bird as we entered moister agricultural land. Not recorded in the north this year. These warm, sandy-brown birds were presumably of the form *G. c. iwanowi*, which is the common form occurring across southern Kazakhstan.

**Eurasian Skylark** *Alauda arvensis*

Common on the grasslands of the Sugaty 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 14th, 100+ on 15th and 20+ on 16th. The warm sandy-brown plumage of these birds corresponded with the form *A. a. dulcivox*.

**Cetti's Warbler** *Cettia cetti*

A male showed well in roadside scrub while we ate lunch east of Almaty on 7th. Thereafter, occasionally seen and heard by the roadside, i.e. one while we paused by the roadside c 60 km west of Almaty on 10th. Many heard in the wetlands near Topar on 11th. Others heard near Astana on 14th and 16th. The lack of rich, rufous tones to the upperparts, which are replaced by a warmer, sandy brown. They also show conspicuous white undertail-coverts and belong with the migratory form *C. c. albiventris*.

**Grasshopper Warbler** *Locustella naevia*

Single birds flushed from scrub in the desert near our campsite at Konshengol on 11th and 13th. The distinctive song was heard in reedbeds near Astana on 13th and 14th. A male showed extremely well in scrub and bushes at Volgodonovka, some 30 km to the southeast of Astana on 16th, and a further three males were in song nearby. On the lower slopes of the Tien Shan, above the hydroelectric generating station, there were at least five singing males audible at dusk on 16th, and three in the same areas in song at midday on 18th. These birds belong with the eastern breeding form *L. n. straminea*, in which the spots or streaks on the upper throat and along the flanks are almost entirely absent.

**Great Reed Warbler** *Acrocephalus arundinaceus*

Several singing in reedbeds near Topar on 11th and Sorbulak Lake on 13th.

**Paddyfield Warbler** *Acrocephalus agricola*

In the south, one seen and a couple of others heard in the reedbeds at Topar on 11th. In the north, a migrant was seen extremely well in the small orchard near the village of Pavlogradka southwest of Astana on 14th. Otherwise, several heard in *Phragmites* reedbeds on the outskirts of Astana on 15th.

**Blyth's Reed Warbler** *Acrocephalus dumetorum*

Small numbers of migrants moving through although scarcer than usual, and seen on just six dates. Two in the park opposite the Otrar Hotel on 9th eventually showed well. Just a single bird noted at Konshengol village on 13th. Poor weather in the Tien Shan probably grounded passing migrants and were saw two or three below the Alpine Rose Hotel, which also gave good views.

**Eurasian Reed Warbler** *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*

Heard on the outskirts of Astana on 15th, but destruction of the tracks running into the reedbeds prevented us getting closer.

**Booted Warbler** *Hippolais caligata*

Great views of at least four birds, all migrants, in the small orchard near the village of Pavlogradka southwest of Astana on 14th. Singing males heard at Volgodonovka, some 30 km to the southeast of Astana on 16th,

**Sykes's Warbler** *Hippolais rama*

A singing male showed well to the group at Nurly on 7th, while several other singing males were also present nearby but were rather more elusive. Thereafter, one or two seen daily in the Konshengol and Zhelturanga region, where the males were in song and almost certainly breeding.

**Willow Warbler** *Phylloscopus trochilus*

At least 12 birds, to the southwest of Astana on 14th. Many were in the small orchard near the village of Pavlogradka. These birds were duller than their European counterparts, with subdued yellow and green tones, and were presumably of the race *P. t. acredula*, but some appeared to lack the yellow and green tones and may have been the northeast Siberian form *P. t. yakutensis*.

**Common Chiffchaff** *Phylloscopus collybita*

Two in song in the park opposite the Otrar Hotel on 10th. Thereafter, up to four birds seen daily between 10th and 13th at Konshengol village. In the north, one in song at Volgodonovka, on 16th. 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*.

**Sulphur-bellied Warbler** *Phylloscopus griseolus*

One heard and briefly seen at the Kokpek Pass on 9th.

**Hume's Leaf Warbler** *Phylloscopus humei*

A common and widespread migrant and breeding bird, seen daily throughout the south but only seen on one day in the north. Many migrants present at Konshengol.

**Greenish Warbler** *Phylloscopus trochiloides*

Another common migrant that was notably scarce this year, presumably due to inclement weather holding back northbound migrants. Up to four at Konshengol village on 10th, followed by one there on 12th and one in the small orchard at Pavlogradka on 14th were

the only migrants noted. Common in the Tien Shan where it breeds, with four seen on 17th and 20+ seen or heard on 18th. The birds breeding in Kazakhstan are of the race *P. t. viridanus*, which extends west to breed in northern Europe.

**Barred Warbler** *Sylvia nisoria*

Two at the camel station at Konshengol on 11th and three there on 13th.

**Lesser Whitethroat** *Sylvia curruca*

Two distinct races were recorded during this tour

*S. c. blythi*

Migrants showing the characters of the Siberian breeding form *S. c. blythi* were noted throughout at all major sites visited, on several dates. Seen daily between 10th and 13th at Konshengol village and nearby camel station with at least 12 present on 11th. In the north, a minimum of at least 20 in the small orchard at Pavlogradka to the southwest of Astana on 14th, and six or more at Volgodonovka on 16th. Just one grounded migrant noted in the Tien Shan on 18th. .

*S. c. halimodendri*

In addition, at least 15 birds, including many males in song, were in scrub in the desert near Zhelturanga on 11th, and along the road to Topar on 13th. These birds were breeding here and a nest containing five eggs was found at Zhelturanga on 11th. These birds differed in both appearance and size/structure from *S. c. blythi*, appearing duller and rather drab in their overall appearance, but with a fairly pale, sandy-brown mantle, and grey crown that showed little contrast with the ear-coverts. Furthermore, the song was quite different to that of *blythi* and lacked the characteristic rattle of European birds and Siberian breeding *blythi*. In the past it has generally been assumed that these birds belonged with the form *S. c. halimodendri*. For consistency with previous reports, they are retained here as *halimodendri*.

**Hume's Lesser Whitethroat** *Sylvia althaea*

A singing male in the park opposite to the Otrar Hotel in Almaty on 10th was a lucky find as we had missed it the previous day at the Kokpek Pass.

**Asian Desert Warbler** *Sylvia nana*

After much searching, we finally found one in the desert c.5 km north of Konshengol along the road to Topar on 13th.

**Common Whitethroat** *Sylvia communis*

Just two birds this year, and both at Konshengol, on 12th and 13th.

These eastern birds would presumably be of the form *S. c. icterops*, which differ from European birds in being darker and 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.

**Bearded Reedling** *Panurus biarmicus*

Two in *Phragmites* reedbeds to the southwest of Astana on 14th. These birds are distinctly paler than European breeding birds and will be of the Central Asian form *P. b. russicus*. More popularly known as **Bearded Tit**.

**Goldcrest** *Regulus regulus*

One in the Tien Shan on 17th and two there on 18th. Although they sound like European birds, they appear duller and rather poorly marked. These birds will be of the form *R. r. tristis*. A revision of the taxonomy of the goldcrest complex is currently in hand that may lead to a restructuring of the entire complex. It seems likely that several species will emerge as the study progresses.

**Northern Wren** *Troglodytes troglodytes*

Several birds heard daily in the mountains between 17th and 19th; the song closely resembling that of European birds. Birds inhabiting the Tien Shan mountains belong with the form *T. t. tianschanicus*.

**Eastern Rock Nuthatch** *Sitta tephronata*

A pair seen well near the nest site at Tamgaly Tas on 10th. Birds breeding in Kazakhstan are of the nominate form.

**Common Myna** *Acridotheres tristis*

A recent introduction, being released in Almaty in 1962. Now a common and widespread bird, recorded almost daily throughout the south, although still closely associated with human activity. Not seen in the north.

**Rosy Starling** *Sturnus roseus*

Very common to abundant throughout the south, with many flocks still moving through to reach their breeding areas. Several hundred at Konshengol where they were nesting in the camel station. Most abundant along the road from Konshengol to Sorbulak on 13th, where many migrants were moving and each power pole and the wires for up to 10 metres each side were adorned with hundreds of birds. This went on for mile after mile, and the total must have numbered several tens of thousands. Interestingly, however, no birds had yet returned to the breeding colony in the dam at Lake Sorbulak on 14th. Absent from the Tien Shan and the Astana region.

**European Starling** *Sturnus vulgaris*

Scarce in the Bartogay region, but to 20 daily around Konshengol village. south, Widespread and fairly common in the Astana region, with counts of 80+ on 14th and 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 violet gloss to the head, without any hint of green.



**Blue Whistling Thrush** *Myophonus caeruleus*

One by the roadside in the foothills of the Tien Shan on 18th. This primarily Oriental-region 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*.

**Eurasian Blackbird** *Turdus merula*

Common in Almaty, with others heard or occasionally seen in the mountains on 17th and 18th. 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 others seen, on 17th and 18th. 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.

**Common Nightingale** *Luscinia megarhynchos*

Another species whose main arrival was presumably delayed by the cool, inclement weather. Usually 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. This year, however, many more were heard than seen, and numbers were much lower than usual, with an estimate of just 10+ heard along the roadside on the drive into Almaty on 9th, and 15+ heard in the Zhelturanga - Ili river region on 11th. Amazingly, only one bird seen in the trees at Konshengol village, where they are often very numerous, although this individual did show exceptionally well. Not recorded from the Astana region this year.

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.

**Bluethroat** *Luscinia svecica*

In the south, two males, both migrants, seen well near the camp at Konshengol on 11th and one there on 12th. In contrast to the previous visit, it was rare in the north, with just two males seen to the southwest of Astana on 14th. Another species whose arrival was presumably delayed by the cool spring. 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.

**White-tailed Rubythroat** *Luscinia pectoralis*

In the Tien Shan mountains, a singing male together with a female sitting out on top of juniper scrub and showing superbly near the Observatory on 17th. These birds were of the

form *L. p. ballioni*, which lacks the white moustachial stripe that characterises the Tibetan breeding form *L. p. tschebaiewi*. A stunningly beautiful bird. Also known as **Himalayan Rubythroat**.

**Rufous Scrub Robin** *Certotrichas galactotes*

At four birds in the desert c.5 km north of Konshengol village along the Topar road 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.

**Rufous-backed Redstart** *Phoenicurus erythronotus*

A pair in a bare bush along the track bordering Big Almaty Lake on 17th, showed extremely well. Also more popularly known as **Eversmann's Redstart**.

**Blue-capped Redstart** *Phoenicurus caeruleocephalus*

A pair along the track bordering Big Almaty Lake on 17th proved to be rather elusive but were eventually seen well by all. The following day, as we dropped below the snow line, there were at least eight birds by the roadside, including at least four around the Alpine Rose Hotel, and these showed superbly. A cracking redstart even though it lacks the characteristic red tail.

**Common Redstart** *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*

Seen daily from 10th to 14th, with several different individuals frequenting the Konshengol camel station and surrounding trees and scrub. Also three birds in the small orchard to the southwest of Astana on 14th. Birds in eastern Kazakhstan are of the nominate form.

**Siberian Stonechat** *Saxicola maurus*

In the south, migrants noted daily in small numbers in the Konshengol and Zhelturanga regions, with four on 10th, two on 11th, three on 12th and one on 13th. Slightly more numerous in the north where it breeds, with one seen on 14th, and six on 15th. 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 7th and 13th with estimates exceeding 100 individuals on most days.

**Northern Wheatear** *Oenanthe oenanthe*

A female by the artesian well by our campsite at Konshengol on 10th, 12th and 13th was the only sighting in the south. A common bird on the grass steppes of the north, with six southwest of Astana on 14th, and 20+ near the Kurgaldzinskiy Reserve on 15th.

**Pied Wheatear** *Oenanthe pleschanka*

A fairly common bird in the rocky sandstone hills of the south including the Kokpek Pass. Elsewhere, numerous at Tamgaly Tas, a male at Konshengol on 11th and a male at our lunch stop between Konshengol and Sorbulak on 13th.

**Common Rock Thrush** *Monticola saxatilis*

A pair in a side valley in the Kokpek Pass on 9th were probably breeding birds. However, a male at Tamgaly Tas on 10th, and two females in the desert by our campsite at Konshengol on 12th would be migrants.

**Spotted Flycatcher** *Muscicapa striata*

A common migrant in the bushes and camel stations at Konshengol, where it was seen daily with a peak of 40+ on 12th. In addition, two were in the small orchard to the southwest of Astana area on 14th and another was in bushes near the Kurgaldzlnskiy Reserve on 15th. These rather pale birds were probably of the race *M. s. sarudnyi*.

**Brown Dipper** *Cinclus pallasi*

One on a fast-flowing mountain stream flowing into Big Almaty Lake on 17th and at least six on the lower slopes of the Tien Shan on 18th.

**Saxaul Sparrow** *Passer ammodendri*

At least 12 in scrub around a small cemetery at Zhelturanga on 12th. The birds we saw were probably of the race *P. a. nigricans*.

**House Sparrow** *Passer domesticus*

Two races recorded.

*P. d. domesticus*

Birds of the nominate form are resident throughout the year in the cities and towns of Kazakhstan, and lead a life commensally with man. Birds of this form were seen in Almaty, and occasionally in the Astana area.

*P. d. bactrianus*

In addition, birds of the migratory race *P. d. bactrianus* were common and often abundant throughout the south, being recorded daily from 7th to 13th. Many large flocks still migrating to breeding areas, with daily totals reaching several 100s on some days. Absent from the north. This attractive migratory sparrow is a summer visitor to Kazakhstan, and winters on the plains of northwest India and Pakistan. In spring, this is the most numerous species recorded on migration at the Chokpak Ringing Station in the western Tien Shan.

This form differs from the nominate form of House Sparrow 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. And, of course, it is migratory and is not known to hybridise

with the town dwelling birds of the nominate form. Consequently, this form is treated as a distinct species, **Indian Sparrow** *Passer indicus* by the Russian authorities.

**Spanish Sparrow** *Passer hispaniolensis*

At least 30 in the reeds and bushes by the artesian well at Nurly on 7th. Roadside stops on 10th produced 30+ birds which were probably breeding in bushes by the roadside. Also one at the Konshengol camel station. Many females were probably overlooked.

**Eurasian Tree Sparrow** *Passer montanus*

In the south, 20+ on 7th and 30+ on 9th. More numerous in the Astana region, with 30+ to the southwest of Astana on 14th and 60+ on 15th.

**Brown Accentor** *Prunella fulvescens*

One at the Observatory on 17th. A lucky find at this elevation. Birds in this region belong with the nominate form.

**Black-throated Accentor** *Prunella atrogularis*

Occurs at lower elevations than the previous species, being found between the Alpine Rose Hotel and the Observatory. At least six seen around and below the Observatory on 17th but just two in inclement weather the next day. These birds belong with the form *P. a. huttoni*, which is darker and more heavily streaked than the nominate form occurring in the Urals.

**Yellow Wagtail** *Motacilla flava*

At least five distinct forms encountered this year.

*M. f. beema*

Two males showing the characters of the central Asian breeding form *M. f. beema*, known as **Sykes's Wagtail**, were at Konshengol on 11th and again on 13th. This form is a common breeding bird in the Astana region, with 100+ birds seen on 15th around the lakes near the Kurgaldzlinский Reserve. Treated by some authorities as a species distinct from nominate *flava*.

*M. f. thunbergi*

Four males with dark grey heads and blackish ear-coverts, characteristic of the northern breeding form *M. f. thunbergi*, known as **Grey-headed Wagtail**, were feeding by the pool near Konshengol village on 11th. A further six were found here and on the artesian well near our campsite at Konshengol on 13th.

*M. f. leucocephala*

A stunning white-headed male of the race *M. f. leucocephala*, known as **White-headed Wagtail**, was seen well and photographed as it fed by an artesian well near our campsite at Konshengol on 12th. This exceptionally distinctive race breeds in western Mongolia, but is a rare migrant through southeastern Kazakhstan.

*M. f. lutea*

Two birds with green upperparts including the mantle, nape, crown and ear-coverts were feeding by the pool near Konshengol village on 11th. These birds closely resembled some British breeding Yellow Wagtails but the heads were not particularly yellow. However, the plumage of these birds falls within the variation shown by the west-central Asian breeding form *M. f. lutea*. No other yellow-headed forms occur in Central Asia. Note that the Russians treat this form as a distinct species, **Yellow-headed Wagtail** *M. lutea*.

*M. f. feldegg*

Two birds of the distinctive black-headed form were seen, a male in wet grassland near Topar on 11th and another male by the pool at Konshengol later the same day. Both showed 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, which are characters shown by **Black-headed Wagtail** *M. f. feldegg*. Note that the Russian authorities treat Black-headed Wagtail as a distinct species *M. feldegg*.

**Citrine Wagtail** *Motacilla citreola*

Both the grey-backed and black-backed forms were recorded during this tour.

*M. c. citreola*

In the south, grey-mantled birds of the nominate form (here including *M. c. werae* which is treated here as synonymous with the nominate form) were seen at Konshengol, with a male there on 10th and two females on 11th. In the north near Astana, single males seen on 14th and 15th.

*M. c. calcarata*

In addition, males of the black-mantled form *M. c. calcarata* were seen well at the artesian well near our campsite at Konshengol on 12th, and at our lunch stop between Konshengol and Sorbulak on 13th. Note that the Russian authorities treat this taxon as a distinct species, **Black-backed Citrine Wagtail**, *M. calcarata*.

**Grey Wagtail** *Motacilla cinerea*

In the south, seen daily between 8th and 13th. Particularly numerous on the pools at Konshengol, with c.30 there on 11th, 12+ on 12th and 8+ on 13th. Not recorded in the Astana region, but seen again in the foothills of the Tien Shan, with one by the stream on 17th and two there on 18th. Birds breeding in Kazakhstan belong to the form *M. c. melanope*.

**White Wagtail** *Motacilla alba*

At least three distinct forms seen during this tour

*M. a. alba*

Birds showing the characters of the nominate form, known as **White Wagtail**, were fairly common by the pools and artesian wells at Konshengol. Numbers here included

four on 10th, 10+ on 11th, 15+ on 12th and 20+ on 13th. In addition, at least six were seen to the southwest of Astana on 14th.

*M. a. ocularis*

Birds showing the dark line through the eye and considerable extent of white in the closed wing, typical of this form, were seen at the artesian well near our campsite at Konshengol. Here we saw a male in the evening of 11th, and a female the following morning.

*M. a. personata*

Common and widespread in the south, where it was recorded daily from 7th until 13th. Maximum daily counts included 12+ on 7th and 20+ on 9th, and it seems to be particularly common around the small towns and villages to the east of Almaty. Small numbers also seen at Konshengol, where they are presumably migrants. This form was not seen in the north. Russian ornithologists treat this taxon as a distinct species, **Masked Wagtail** *M. personata*.

**Tawny Pipit** *Anthus campestris*

Up to six birds seen or heard daily, including displaying and song-fighting individuals, near the Bartogay camp between 7th and 9th. On 10th, at least 12 birds in the hills at Tamgaly Tas. Not recorded in the north.

**Tree Pipit** *Anthus trivialis*

Four singing birds song-fighting over the Kokpek Pass on 9th. Common in the Tien Shan, with six seen on 17th and 12+ on 18th, where they ranged from the treeline near the Observatory to the lower slopes below the Alpine Rose Hotel. Birds breeding in the Tien Shan will be of the form *A. t. haringtoni*.

**Red-throated Pipit** *Anthus cervinus*

One by an artesian well near our campsite at Konshengol on 12th. Apparently a scarce migrant through southeast Kazakhstan.

**Chaffinch** *Fringilla coelebs*

A female at the arboretum to the east of Almaty on 7th.

**Red-fronted Serin** *Serinus pusillus*

Restricted to the mountains, where just one flock of 6+ birds was seen, on 17th. Adverse weather undoubtedly prevented us from seeing more.

**European Greenfinch** *Carduelis chloris*

Fairly widespread in the south but not seen in the north. A pair by the Otrar Hotel in Almaty on 7th and four in the nearby park on 10th. Fairly common and regularly seen in the villages to the east of Almaty on 9th.

**European Goldfinch** *Carduelis carduelis*

Two at the arboretum east of Almaty on 7th, and at least four the villages to the east of Almaty on 9th. Also noted in the mountains, with two on 17th and two 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 treated by the Russian authorities as a distinct species, **Grey-headed Goldfinch**, *C. caniceps*.

**Twite** *Carduelis flavirostris*

Two parties of three and six birds on the steppe grasslands near the Kurgaldzinskiy Reserve on 15th. These distinctive birds look and sound very different to European breeding birds and belong to the race *C. f. kirghizorum* which occurs widely across the semi-deserts and steppe grasslands of northern Kazakhstan.

**Common Linnet** *Carduelis cannabina*

Up to 12 birds daily in the desert near the Bartogay camp from 7th to 9th. 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.

**Desert Finch** *Rhodopechys obsoleta*

At least 25 birds at the artesian well near Nurly on 7th. In the Konshengol area, one on 11th, two on 12th and one on 13th.

**Common Rosefinch** *Carpodacus erythrinus*

At least 100 birds at Tamgaly Tas on 10th were part of an arrival of migrants of several species, attracted here by the availability of water. Also numerous at Konshengol village where seen daily and with a maximum of 50+ on 12th. In the north, one on 15th and 4+ on 15th.

**Red-mantled Rosefinch** *Carpodacus rhodochlamys*

A female in juniper scrub near the Observatory on 17th, and a male briefly later the same day.

**White-winged Grosbeak** *Mycerobas carnipes*

At least nine birds in juniper scrub near the Observatory on 17th, and one there the following day.

**Corn Bunting** *Emberiza calandra*

At least one singing male by the roadside east of Almaty on 7th.

**Pine Bunting** *Emberiza leucocephalos*

A singing male at Volgodonovka, some 30 km to the southeast of Astana on 16th was located at quite some distance thanks to its Yellowhammer-like song. This bird responded well to our tape and came in closely, accompanied by the female and we eventually watched them at distances down to less than 5 metres. At this distance, the fringes to the flight feathers of the male were seen to be dull yellow. In all other respects, the male was a classic Pine Bunting, and the female showed no traces of yellow, or other anomalies, in

her plumage. Males resembling this bird recorded in Europe, with yellow fringes but otherwise appearing as classic Pine Buntings, are accepted as Pine Buntings and here we do the same. Another more distant male seen nearby later that morning was too far away to establish whether it showed similar yellow fringes to the flight feathers. Two other males also heard but not seen.

**Rock Bunting** *Emberiza cia*

At least 12 birds in the Kokpek Pass on 9th and one below the hydroelectric plant on the lower slopes of the Tien Shan on 18th.

**White-capped Bunting** *Emberiza stewarti*

Four at the Kokpek Pass on 9th.

**Grey-necked Bunting** *Emberiza buchanani*

A male by the artesian well at Nurly on 7th must have been a migrant. Four singing males at the Bartogay camp from 7th to 9th.

**Ortolan Bunting** *Emberiza hortulana*

A male at an artesian well near our camp at Konshengol on 12th, followed by a pair by the pool at Konshengol village the following day.

**Red-headed Bunting** *Emberiza bruniceps*

Surprisingly scarce away from the desert regions. In the southeast, two at Nurly on 7th, two near our camp at Bartogay on 8th and one in the Kokpek Pass on 9th. Common, however, at Tamgaly Tas, Konshengol camp and surrounding areas, with 60+ noted daily between on 10th and 13th. Not recorded in the Astana region.

**Reed Bunting** *Emberiza schoeniclus*

At least two males in *Phragmites* reedbeds southwest of Astana on 14th, and one on 15th.

### **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.

**Bobak Marmot** *Marmotta bobak*

Two on steppe grasslands near Astana on 14th.

**Jerboa sp.**



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

**Giant Gerbil** *Rhombomys opimus*  
Common around the Bartogay camp.

**Tolai Hare** *Lepus tolai*  
One near Topar on 11th.

**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.

**Corsac Fox** *Vulpes corsac*  
One southwest of Astana on 15th.

**Stoat** *Mustela erminea*  
One in the Tien Shan mountains on 17th.

**Hedge Hog** *Erinaceus europaeus*  
One in the orchard to the southwest of Astana on 14th.

**Long-eared Hedge Hog** *Hemiechinus auritus*  
One in the road north of Tamgaly Tas on 10th.