

KAZAKHSTAN:

9th – 21st May, 2004

Tour Report

Participants:

Leaders:

Peter Kennerley & Victoria Kovshar

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with

Limosa's 2004 tour to this exciting region in Central Asia far exceeded our most hoped-for expectations. In just 12 days, we explored the exciting, snow-covered mountains of the mighty Tian Shan, the remote deserts of the deep south, and the endless steppe grasslands of the north. Bordering the eastern limits of the Western Palearctic, Kazakhstan is home to a wealth of exciting and highly sought-after birds, some of which it is simply not possible to see anywhere else, while for others, some of the races that occur here are so different to those that we are familiar with in the west, that it is difficult to believe they belong within the same species. For those who seek the special birds of the central Palearctic, and to do so in comfort, this tour is simply the very best available.

Commencing in the snow-covered mountains of the mighty Tian Shan to the south of Almaty, we spent the best part of three days in search of some of the most sought-after of all Palearctic birds; those species for which this region represents their sole toe-hold within the Palearctic. Here amongst the spruce forests and juniper-clad slopes, we quickly found colourful Eversmann's and Blue-capped Redstarts flitting through the low scrub, often accompanied by Black-throated Accentors and Red-fronted Serins, while Songar Tits nested close-by. At higher elevations, gorgeous Himalayan (White-tailed) Rubythroats vied for our attention with huge White-winged Grosbeaks and the somewhat dowdy Red-mantled Rosefinches. The snow covered summits were home to some very special birds, and here we delighted at the sight of a male Gldenstdt's Redstart courting his female, Himalayan Snowcocks stalking across the snowfields and Altai Accentors flitting amongst scree-covered slopes, allowing everyone great views. At Big Almaty Lake, set amidst a winter wonderland of snow-covered forests, we managed to locate a pair of that most highly sought-after shorebird of the high Himalaya – Ibisbill; here furtively feeding along the shore of a boulder-strewn river. A more superb setting would be hard to imagine.

Our days in the desert were spent under canvas, 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 Himalayan Griffon Vulture, enigmatic Pallas's Sandgrouse and delightful Mongolian and Desert Finches all occurred nearby, and all add to this exciting and unique experience. At the time of our visit, migrants abounded, and in this vast, treeless region, any patches of small trees or water seepages acted like magnets to a wealth of transients ranging from Terek Sandpiper and Black-throated Thrush to Sykes's Warbler and Nightingales – but what Nightingales, these eastern birds of the race *hafizi* have to be seen to be believed! An

excursion to the Turanga forest bordering the Ili River yielded Saxaul Sparrow, White-winged Woodpecker, Turkestan Tit and Yellow-eyed Stock Dove, a localised rapidly declining species which still remains numerous here. Nearby pools held good numbers of wetlands birds but it was the seriously cute Azure Tits that everyone wanted to take home as a pet.

Our last few days in the steppe grasslands of the north brought a substantial change in the birds. Set in vast and seemingly endless grasslands, we were soon delighting at the sight of abundant White-winged and Black Larks, endangered Sociable Plovers, stunning Great Black-headed Gulls, ethereal Pallid Harriers and dainty Red-footed Falcons. Occasional reed-fringed pools and scrub-covered hollows brought us White-headed Duck, Pine Buntings, numerous Booted Warblers and everyone's favourites, those skulking *Locustella* warblers.

All too soon, we had to tear ourselves away from this wonderful country. We had experienced the very best of Central Asia and had a wonderful adventure, with so many memories that will long linger with us.

Tour diary & annotated checklist

Sunday, 9th May

Our Lufthansa flight to Almaty proceeded with typical German efficiency, and we arrived at the newly opened airport just before midnight. The former red-tape and bureaucracy that had dogged entry into this outpost of the former Soviet empire was long gone. In its place, the welcoming smiles of helpful staff and efficient management made entry a simple and straightforward affair. We were met by Dan from our ground agent and whisked away to the Otrar Hotel in downtown Almaty amidst a torrential downpour.

Monday, 10th May

Our plans for an early start in the adjacent park were thwarted by continuing rain, which was to dog us for much of the day. We eventually emerged into a damp and dreary Almaty morning at 07.00 hrs, and managed views of Hume's Leaf, Greenish and Blyth's Leaf Warblers in the dull half-light. Kan Tengri manager Dauren, our local leader Victoria, and Yuliya charged with fixing everything, met us in the hotel at 09.00 hrs, and shortly after we were off to the mountains. Almaty proved to be a delightfully green and well-wooded city and as we drive through the outer suburbs, Victoria told us something about the history and background of Almaty, as well as what we could expect during the coming two weeks. Our first stop was at a ranging torrent, a stake out for Dippers, and we soon had White-bellied Dipper, of white-bellied race *leucogaster*, safely on the list. Our next stop brought outstanding views of Blue Whistling Thrush, a widespread bird in the Oriental region, but which extends into the Palearctic in the Tian Shan Mountains of southern Kazakhstan. Although it was still raining, we opted for a walk near the hotel, but saw little except during a brief, fifteen minute, period when the rain ceased and the sun appeared. As if by magic, birds appeared. A male Eversmann's Redstart, followed by several Black-throated Accentors, three or four Blue-capped Redstarts and a female Stonechat, an unlikely migrant at these elevations, and Oriental Turtle Doves were the stars, along with lesser fare such as Coal Tits and a rather damp Sparrowhawk. Given the

low cloud and snowy conditions, a revised strategy was called for. Ibisbills. Why not? We had to try for these some time, so why not now, a great bird to raise the spirits, and as these were on the Big Almaty Lake, our chances seemed fair if the cloud cleared. After lunch we put the plan into action; the rain stopped, the mist lifted (just) and we were set. The path skirted the shore of the lake and after walking for a kilometre or so, we arrived at some likely-looking gravel. Being covered in snow, this actually helped us to pick out this boulder-coloured bird which, at times, can be a nightmare to find. Soon, an Ibisbill flew in and another was spotted running across the snow-covered gravel. Everyone enjoyed prolonged, if rather distant, views of this enigmatic shorebird of the Asian mountains. A Northern Wheatear looked lost, but was probably fine, but our hopes for Songar Tits were not using their preferred box this year. A good start, but we needed the weather to improve. That evening, I went out for a short walk and the sky was a myriad of stars. This boded well for the morrow.

Tuesday, 11th May

We awoke to glorious sunshine and our worst fears had evaporated. A stroll up the road from the hotel quickly produced Songar Tit at the nest, several Red-fronted Serins and a couple of Goldfinches of the distinctive form *caniceps*, which lacks the black band around the face. Given the superb weather, we opted for an assault on the summit. Our trusty bus reached the Observatory in 45 minutes then set about ascending the summit road. Here the going became interesting for some, a white-knuckle ride for others as our driver, Nikolai, coaxed his machine up the ice-bound road. On a couple of occasions we thought it better to get out while Nikolai worked his magic, but on we went, climbing steadily higher. Victoria, ever alert, soon spotted a couple of Himalayan Snowcocks wandering across a distant snowfield, which showed well. Eventually, however, yesterdays snow defeated Nikolai, and we had no choice but to climb the last kilometre or so to the Cosmic Ray Station at the top of the pass. As we climbed, an ancient Russian bulldozer came clanking down the road, clearing a huge pile of snow before it. Perhaps our bus would make it after all. Victoria thought not. Our strategy worked well and long before we got there, we had been able to 'scope a male Gldenstdt's Redstart on the most distant buildings. Within the hour, we were at the top watching the male courting his female while, nearby, Red and Yellow-billed Choughs cavorted and the tinkling song of a Brown Accentor drifted across the snow. Then Nikolai appeared, complete with trusty bus; yes there is a god. Unfortunately, some had missed Altai Accentor on the climb up but, a fortunate roadside stop saw us stop next to a feeding bird by the roadside. A highly successful morning and so it was back to the hotel for lunch. The afternoon was spent back up the hill near the Observatory. Try as we might, we could not find any Himalayan Rubythroats, but this was more than made up for by the relative abundance of Severtsov's Tit Warblers. Often, these gems can be quite tricky to find, but today, they were positively throwing themselves at us, and we saw no less than five birds, mostly males and mostly for prolonged periods. With these came White-winged Grosbeaks and Eversmann's Redstarts. A superb day.

Wednesday, 12th May

Our strategy of an early start up the mountain to the Observatory and into the adjacent Marble Valley proved to be sound move. Our trusty old bus got us most of the way there, but we still had a km or so to walk, mostly on frost-hardened snow, to the

accompaniment of yodelling snowcocks. Soon, we reached a patch of really attractive, open spruce forest with a thick juniper understorey and within minutes were watching a male White-winged Grosbeak picking at the newly emerging juniper shoots. A subdued song soon had us onto a cracking male Himalayan Rubythroat, one of the star birds of the tour, while a few minutes later a female then a male Red-mantled Rosefinch popped into view and allows prolonged views as they perched on top of the spruces. The morning had gone well and we had managed to see almost everything we had hoped for. With these birds seen and seen well, we could now devote time to searching for Brown Dipper on the lower slopes. We didn't have to wait long for, shortly after leaving the hotel, one was spotted on a rock in a small stream. It flew as we came to a halt, so Victoria and I went off after it. Knowing that dippers turn back on themselves when they reach the limit of their territories, this could have been a long walk but fortunately, we didn't have far to go, and we soon relocated it, persuaded it to retreat, and it obligingly then sat on a rock for all to enjoy. It then flew for miles downstream. Lucky! A couple of Blue Whistling Thrushes and a flock of distant Bactrian Camels were the highlight of the descent. In Almaty, we switched transport, changing from our solid Russian backbreaker to an altogether more feeble construction of German manufacture... hmmm. Travelling east on good roads, our first stop revealed Lesser Grey the only Long-tailed Shrike of the tour. We took lunch by a peaceful arboretum where Greenfinches wheezed, an Azure Tit showed briefly to a fortunate few, a White-crowned Penduline Tit fed from a *Phragmites* head, and we enjoyed our first looks at Nightingale of the eastern form, *hafizi*. What amazing birds these are, they neither look like, sound like, or behave like Nightingales in my local woodland! One wonders why the Russian taxonomists have not worked their dark arts on this beast? A dark morph Booted Eagle soaring over the road quickly lead to singing Corn Buntings, both lifers for Lois. Next on the menu were the White-crowned Penduline Tits. Victoria knew of two nests. At the first, no birds were in attendance in mid-afternoon, but at the second, a partially complete affair eight metres above the ground in a roadside Russian Olive, there was considerably more activity. Nest construction was in full flow with both birds in attendance, and we enjoyed watching these birds delicately weave and shape their hanging nest, oblivious to the pair of Hobbies nesting just two trees away. By the time we returned to the bus, the other pair were active again, so we stayed a little longer. We still had a long way to drive so we were soon ushered back into the bus. We continued east towards the Kokpek Pass, a reliable stake out for White-capped and Rock Buntings, but not when the sun is going down. Better luck tomorrow. As we drove across the vast Sogeti Plain, numerous kestrels, many we thought probably Lessers hovered by the roadside and Isabelline Wheatears flicked up from the roadside. With our camp in sight, we had our first puncture of the tour, something that we were to become accustomed to over the next couple of days until we had a complete change of tyres. This in itself was not a concern for us as we strolled across the desert to our camp to the accompaniment of singing Tawny Pipits, Isabelline Wheatears, Linnets and Grey-necked Buntings. We were extremely pleased by the camp; large roomy tents that it was possible to stand in, a large dining tent and showers for those who wanted one. With a supply of cold beers from Almaty, we retired happily to our tents this evening.

Thursday, 13th May

Situated close to the shores of Bartogoy Lake, our camp held great potential despite a lack of suitable cover to hold migrants. We were drawn from our tents by the delicate wheezing song of a couple of Grey-necked Buntings competing against each other from adjacent hill tops. A brief walk in scrub near the tents produced several Isabelline Shrikes, a couple of Pied Wheatears, a Tawny Pipit in song flight, two Shore Larks of the white-faced form *brandti* and a Stonechat. The lake itself held several small parties of duck, mostly Garganey, but also Wigeon, Shoveler and Goosander. Following breakfast, we drove to the upper reaches of the Charyn River, stopping en-route to enjoy a fine male Rock Sparrow, plus a couple of Steppe Eagles and Red-billed Choughs. As our intended quarry, Himalayan Griffon Vulture was not on show when we arrived, we took lunch at this delightful spot overlooking the deep gorge. Several Eurasian Griffons appeared, as did a pair of Black Vultures, four Alpine Swifts and a couple of Crag Martins, but it was only as we were packing up to leave that the first Himalayan Griffon appeared. Soon another put in an appearance, then another, all appearing crisply pied against an azure sky. An immature then appeared, much darker than any of the Eurasian Griffons and seemingly dwarfing them when seen alongside. Several stops later and we had seen most of our target birds so we opted to visit the Charyn Red Gorge, one of Kazakhstan's more spectacularly scenic tourist honeypots. A small flock of birds drinking in pools in the track left by recent rains proved to be Mongolian Finches, always a tricky bird to see and one that is frequently overlooked. Again the photographers leapt into gear and managed a few shots, although they were surprisingly wary, and with several pools to choose from, picking the best pool was not easy. Our second puncture of the day followed shortly after this. That evening, the views of a crescent Venus were outstanding in the clean, crisp, desert air!

Friday, 14th May

An early start, complete with packed breakfast, was called for, as today would be our best chance to see Pallas's Sandgrouse, a near mythical species endemic to the deserts of Central Asia, and a bird that was high on the list of priorities for just about everyone on the tour. The drive to the now-deserted research station at Nurly went without a hitch and we arrived shortly after 08.15 hrs. Sandgrouse regularly come in to drink at the artesian well here, and we were soon watching a party of three Black-bellied Sandgrouse circling over the pool and later dropping in to drink. Desert Finches, and House Sparrows of the distinctive migratory form *P. d. bactrianus* were also here in abundance. These birds are so unlike the resident House Sparrows that the Russian authorities treat these birds as a full species, distinct from House Sparrow. After waiting for an hour or so, a single Pallas's Sandgrouse flew over calling, giving good but brief views, but continued on into the desert. A short walk through the surrounding scrub revealed a pair of Sykes's Warblers, a first-summer male Montagu's Harrier and another two Pallas's Sandgrouse, but again only in flight. Returning to camp, we stopped briefly at a roadside colony of Pale Martins, a distinctive hirundine that is becoming increasingly recognised as being a species distinct from Sand Martin. Watching these birds at ranges down to 20 metres as they entered and left their breeding burrows, and in flight overhead, the differences between these birds and Sand Martins were readily appreciated. A brief stop at the Kokpek Pass produced a singing male Rock Bunting and a Golden Eagle but little else of interest, so we returned early to camp for lunch. That done, all too soon it was time to

return to Almaty, but we did investigate another valley in the Kokpek Pass which, at last, produced four singing male White-capped Buntings plus a Red-headed Bunting. The drive to Almaty was an uneventful affair, enlivened only by a brief stop where a pair of Golden Orioles and a singing Nightingale held the star billing.

Saturday, 15th May

A brief stroll around the Panfilov Guards Park, dedicated to the memory of a brigade of martyrs from Almaty who gave their lives resisting the German advance on Moscow, produced a pair of Hobbies along with Hume's Leaf, Greenish and Blyth's Reed Warblers. Cuckoos called and Common Rosefinches were pleased to meet us. Driving east, we had planned to stop at Lake Sorbulak, home to a wealth of wetland birds including a large breeding colony of Dalmatian Pelicans. As we neared Sorbulak, the wind started to increase and by the time we reached the dam, a gale blowing that would not have been out of place in the North Atlantic in the middle of winter. By crouching down behind the wall we managed decent views of pelicans and Caspian Gulls, but not much else, and the prospects of seeing anything on the far side were placed between slim and zero. Cutting our losses, we continued on towards our camp at Konshengol, but stopped when we met the camp crew returning to Almaty. Yes, the tents were up, albeit an hour ago, and the cook and his assistants were still there. Would the tents still be up when we got there? Would the cook be lashed to a tent heading for Mongolia? Only time would tell. Still the wind increased and a darkening of the sky indicated that a sandstorm was heading our way. Before long we were immersed within it, but fortunately this was not the stuff from Boy's Own, in fact it was a pretty insignificant event, and once through, the wind had lessened significantly. Arriving in Konshengol, we were amazed to find fifty or more Black Kites taking refuge from the wind in the lee of the trees surrounding a small farm. A closer look revealed a plethora of small passerines also feeding along this relatively sheltered belt of trees. By approaching carefully, we spent the next hour enjoyed Greenish and Hume's Leaf Warblers, Lesser Whitethroats, Red-backed Shrikes, Great Reed Warblers, Golden Orioles and Nightingales (when did you ever see a Nightingale pump and cock its tail like a Rufous Bush Robin?), while a Black-throated Thrush was, briefly, the star of the afternoon, at least for Charles. By the time we reached our camp in late afternoon, the wind had abated, the tents were largely intact and the cook wasn't in Mongolia. A quick cup of tea was followed by a pair of Brown-necked Ravens at the artesian well, never easy birds to see well. Although they didn't stay long, one returned a few minutes later carrying an Agamid lizard, which it tenderly washed in the pool before flying into the desert to consume. A couple of nearby marshy pools held both European and Oriental Turtle Doves alongside several *beema* Yellow Wagtails and a collection of small shorebirds that included Wood, Green, Terek and Common Sandpipers, Temminck's Stint and a Sanderling. Finally, as evening approached, we awaited developments by the well. A Macqueen's Bustard flew low overhead and landed in the desert, unfortunately rather too distant to fully appreciate its subtle beauty, while three Demoiselle Cranes were even more distant. Small birds, including diminutive Greater and Lesser Short-toed Larks, alongside the more hulking Calandra and Bimaculated Larks, came and went but the hoped for Greater Sand and Caspian Plovers didn't materialise.

Sunday, 16th May

We started the day at the artesian well adjacent to the camp where several Yellow Wagtails were feeding along with two rather nondescript pipits. Their plain, unmarked mantles and heavily streaked underparts placed them within the Water Pipit complex, but why did they still lack all trace of breeding plumage while their counterparts in the Tien Shan had been occupying breeding territories, and in breeding plumage, a week ago? It is these unresolved mysteries that form the real spice of birding. The distant male Macqueen's Bustard still sat on his sandy ridge, but in better light this morning, allowing everyone decent looks through the 'scope at 60x magnification. Had he been there all night? Today was a day we had long anticipated, a visit to the Turanga forest. But first, we had to get there, and this involved a two-hour drive through the desert, briefly turned glowing yellow and delicate shades of green following the winter rains. In just two weeks, all this colour would be lost as the desert bakes under an unrelenting sun. For us though, our timing was perfect and the botanists amongst us were in their element. We resisted most temptations to stop along the way, but a *pallidirostris* Southern Grey Shrike brought us to a halt. As the Ili River approaches Lake Balkhash, it broadens into a vast inland delta, and flowing largely over sand, water is able to diffuse easily to form a series of well vegetated pools that are a haven for wildlife in this otherwise inhospitable region. More of this later though, as the goal was to press on for our target birds. A male Shikra perched atop a roadside post called for another briefish halt, while a Stock Dove that we would have liked to have seen better simply insisted on flying in front of the bus. We eventually arrived at the small village of Zhelturanga, where Nightingales sang and Lesser Whitethroats of the race *S. c. halimodendri* were building a nest in a large clump of long-dead tumbleweed. A male Sykes's Warbler gave good views to all, but our target bird here, Saxaul Sparrow, lead us on a merry dance. Eventually we managed to pin down a pair nest building in a mausoleum, but as they arrived and departed quickly, it took quite some time before everyone had the views they desired. Fortunately, our remaining targets, Yellow-eyed Stock Dove, White-winged Woodpecker and Turkestan Tit presented no such problems. We had them all within five minutes of entering the open Turanga woodland. Turanga *Populus diversifolia* is an endemic poplar, restricted to inland river deltas of Central Asia and forms a narrow band of woodland that borders the river for several km inland. Its heavily knarled bark with numerous holes provides an essential refuge for these three highly localised species. Apart from Jackdaws, and an occasional Redstart or Nightingale, other birds were few and far between here. Following a short lunch, we started on the long drive back to camp, but with so much still to see, numerous stops were inevitable. Victoria heard a Penduline Tit calling from the moving bus. Screeching to a halt, we soon had managed to find the beast but getting decent views in the dense *Phragmites* proved to be something of a challenge. Fortunately, the male responded to a tape of the European bird and eventually sat out in the open – a most interesting individual with a rich chocolate crown, nape and mantle offset by a white chin and throat. Clearly not *macronyx* as we had hoped, but the form *R. p. caspius*, a bird that, in theory, should not be here, but since when did birds do what was expected of them? Nearby, Black Terns hawked over roadside pools and throughout, we were never far from the song of Cetti's Warblers, which seemed to occupy every patch of bushes. We still had one special bird to find, Azure Tit. Although some of the group had seen it earlier, most still needed to see it, and this region presented us with our best chance. A

couple of casual roadside stops drew a blank so Victoria and I started a systematic search along the roadside. After some 600 metres, we heard one, summoned the group, played the tape and out it popped. Easy. Back at camp, a brief scan of the pools by the artesian well produced a pair of Greater Sand Plovers and the mystery pipits were still here, but little else. As this was our last night, some opted to wander through the desert in search of Desert Warbler and Caspian Plover, two high profile species that had eluded us so far. We walked for what seemed like miles and still failed to turn up these two mythical species. Another Greater Sand Plover briefly got the old pulse racing, but in the end we had to concede defeat. Not Victoria though, she persisted, and just 400 metres from the camp walked us into a singing male Desert Warbler! Wonderful. One of Central Asia's more enigmatic species. We returned to camp somewhat chastened, being 45 minutes late for dinner but, what the heck, we can eat any time, Desert Warblers are special.

Monday, 17th May

The day started early with a churring European Nightjar in the pre-dawn gloom, followed by a Desert Warbler near the camp. A brief scan of the pool by the artesian well, which produced little of interest so an early breakfast was rapidly organised. Shortly after breakfast we set off for a distant artesian well, one that we had not previously visited, but which was reputedly the best for sandgrouse. By 09.00 hrs many Black-bellied Sandgrouse had appeared but the hoped-for Pin-tailed was not to be seen. While waiting, we enjoyed brief views of a couple of Mongolian Finches and an Ortolan Bunting. A particularly dull, drab and poorly marked female Greater Sand Plover, disturbed off a nest, necessitated a double take before we convinced ourselves that it was just another sand plover. An hour by the camel station at Konshengol produced a bevy of migrants including a showy Rufous Bush Robin, a couple of Barred Warblers, several Lesser Whitethroats, Greenish and Hume's Leaf Warblers, Temminck's Stint and an unexpected male Brambling. While waiting to refuel the bush at Konshengol, a roosting nightjar was discovered allowing the photographers an opportunity to use copious quantities of film. While watching this, a Long-eared Owl casually drifted in at knee height, narrowly missing myself and Cynthia, then sat up in the trees in full view for all to enjoy. Driving south through a desert ablaze with the flush from millions of poppies, Victoria soon brought the bus to a grinding halt when she spotted our first White-winged Lark. Piling out, we soon found three more, and savoured this most highly sought-after resident of the steppes of Central Asia. This was a bird we had expected to see near Astana, not here in the desert, but apparently numbers have increased dramatically in this region in the last two years, and from the moving bus, we found another fifteen or more in the next ten minutes. Next came a female Macqueen's Bustard walking down the middle of the road! As we slowly approached, it casually sauntered off to the side and walk past us just 25 metres away. Now those are the views we wanted, but not sure that we deserved such good fortune. What a superb bird! Driving onto Tamgaly Tas, a World Heritage Site renown for its ancient petroglyphs, we paused here to search for Eastern Rock Nuthatch. The first nest that Victoria knew of had been vandalised, while second had already been used this year and the chicks had departed. Being confident that there must still be birds in the area, we wandered along a narrow valley and out onto the upper slopes. While others waited, Victoria, Peter and I searched the rocky crags and within ten minutes had discovered a new nest where the female was feeding a brood of youngsters.

Coaxing the group another 250 metres up the valley was easy and all soon enjoyed 'scope views of the female as she repeatedly returned to the nest. Everyone took time out to photograph the petroglyphs and watch the Pied Wheatears, while Ian luckily walked into a male of the white-throated form, *vittata*. The drive to Almaty was an uneventful experience, although the large number of Rollers resting on overhead wires added spice to the otherwise mundane task of counting typically roadside species, including Rooks, Jackdaws, Magpies, Rose-coloured Starlings and Common Mynas.

Tuesday, 18th May

Our early morning flight on Air Astana to Astana departed and arrived on time. Here we were met at the airport by Alexander (formerly know as Sasha), who whisked us away to our hotel for our third breakfast of the morning. Several cups of tea later and we were ready to leave. Driving to the southeast, Alexander soon had us disembarking by a small orchard where a pair of Long-eared Owls were nesting. As we had enjoyed such good looks at LEO's the previous day, these birds only received a cursory glance as we realised the orchard was heaving with migrants. Most proved to be Booted Warblers and Lesser Whitethroats but amongst them we found several Common Whitethroats and Greenish Warblers, a couple of Barred Warblers, Whinchat, Redstart, at least three Nightingales and a Bluethroat. One Nightingale seemed a shade darker than the others and soon the cry of 'Sprosser' echoed across the plains, being heard as far away as distant Omsk. Another personal ambition fulfilled. Amazingly, it then sat up in a tree for several minutes, allowing us all great 'scope views. We were surprised at just how grey and sullied the underparts were, being much darker than those of the birds breeding in Finland. While all this was going on, Victoria was having fun, playing cat-and-mouse with her own mystery *Phyllosc*, although, fortunately, one that is much commoner in Britain than Sprosser. With all this excitement, we had overlooked the booming Bitterns in the marshes and Black-winged Pratincoles flying overhead. Time to refocus our efforts. We were here in search of Sociable Plover and we visited a couple of likely looking spots but drew a blank. The next stop turned up trumps, when a pair were found by the shores of a bovine-infested pool, the male quite stunning in his breeding finery, while his dowdy mate was somewhat less appealing, at least to us. More Black-winged Pratincoles flew overhead and innumerable Ruff graced the grasslands and pools. Wanting more shorebirds, we headed off to a small salt lake that had held a Caspian Plover four days earlier. Alas, it there was no sign of it today, but the muddy shoreline was alive with waders; Little and Temminck's Stints, Curlew, Marsh, Terek and Wood Sandpipers, both godwits, and much more. By now it was getting rather warm, in fact the warmest day had experienced so far, and people were starting to wilt. It was, therefore, with some reluctance, that we started back to the hotel after such a short, but exciting, afternoon of birding. One final, brief stop produced more Ruff than most of us had ever seen before, as flight after flight flew in to the marshes to roost, numbering in the tens of thousands. With such a wonderful aperitif, we were all looking forward to a full and exciting day tomorrow.

Wednesday, 19th May

Although the long drive to the Kurgaldzinskiy Reserve, centred on Lake Tengis to the southwest of Astana, took up a good few hours of the morning, regular roadside stops

produced wonderful views of several male Pallid Harriers, drifting effortlessly over the steppe like ghostly apparitions, along with more prosaic fare including Montagu's and Western Marsh Harriers, Red-footed Falcons nesting in old crow nest by the roadside, Demoiselle Cranes and a passing European Honey-buzzard. As we turned off the main road onto the dusty track leading into the reserve, the density of Black Larks increased dramatically, with birds almost continuously flicking up from the roadside. As the vast majority were males, we assumed the females must be incubating. Not to be outdone, White-winged Larks were also present in fair numbers and getting close to these presented something of a challenge to our photographers. The Kurgaldzlin'skiy Reserve is a vast region of steppe and lake, bisected by numerous dirt tracks, all leading somewhere but only Alexander knew where. Our target was not Lake Tengis itself, but a few of the smaller lakes that Alexander knew would be more productive. Stopping at Lake Shalkar, we were soon surrounded by uncountable numbers of White-winged Black Terns flying around us like confetti blowing in the wind. Not to be outdone, huge swarms of Ruff, mostly males, surged up from the grasslands and dropped in again. With so many birds to look at, knowing where to start became something of a challenge. However, the lake itself looked very tempting and soon we were 'scoping Great Black-headed Gulls in their full breeding plumage alongside Caspian, Little and Common Terns, while many distant LWH Gulls were too far away to do justice to. Needless to say, we were reluctant to leave, but Alexander was becoming restless – only he knew just how vast this reserve really was and how far we had to travel. Next came Lake Sholak with yet more White-winged Black Terns and numerous shorebirds, and more reasons to stop. By now, lunch was beckoning so a strategic decision was made to burn rubber and make for a 'small' salt lake where we could expect to find Greater Flamingoes. Separating flamingoes from Mute Swans (yes, real ones!) was something I had not thought of as being a potential challenge! Fortunately, not all were distant and everyone appreciated the tranquillity of this peaceful spot. As we rested, an adult Slender-billed Gull flew in, rested on the water for a couple of minutes then departed directly over our heads. A few minutes later, another ten or so appeared. At this point, the option of an early return to the hotel was offered but, surprisingly, was declined by all, such was the magic of this landscape. The highlight of the afternoon was to be a visit to a breeding colony of Great Black-headed Gulls, and now there was mounting anticipation as we set off in search of this final quest. Making our way through yet more Black Larks, we passed an area of burnt grassland that held four Steppe Eagles on the look out for easy pickings, and a pair of Grey Partridges (a good Asia tick), while a small roadside pool produced stunning views of yet more Slender-billed Gulls alongside adult Little Gulls in breeding plumage. On reaching the lake, near the small village of Zhumay, the gulls were immediately obvious on their breeding island. When in breeding plumage, Great Black-headed Gulls are gorgeous beasts, and here there were more than you could shake a stick at. Alongside them were even more LWH Gulls, and their dark mantles and bright yellow legs established them as being of the taxon *barabensis*. I'm not going any further down this road, those who saw them can decide for themselves what to do with these birds. Interestingly, many gulls had recently hatched chicks, those of *barabensis* being typically dark and resembling gull chicks of many other species, while those of Great Black-headed Gull were much paler, almost white. In only two gull species do the chicks have a white downy plumage – Great Black-headed Gull and Relict Gull, and both evolved in this region bounded by the

former Tethys Sea. This must clearly be a throwback to an earlier era when such a plumage adaptation served them well. Could this be why both are now so localised and possibly declining? Time was now running out, and with a two hour drive back to the hotel, we had to reluctantly tear ourselves away from this once in a lifetime experience.

Thursday, 20th May

Having enjoyed two great days soaking up the shorebirds, waterbirds and raptors of northern Kazakhstan amidst vast, endless, rolling landscapes, today there was to be a change of pace as we set about trying to see some of the smaller, rather skulking, denizens that inhabit the reedbeds and damp woodlands of this region. Our first stop was at Volgodonovka, some 30 km to the southeast of Astana. Almost as soon as we disembarked from the bus, a familiarly simple, but slightly odd, Yellowhammer-type song was heard and very quickly, a male Pine Bunting was found perched atop a nearby bush, allowing everyone good 'scope views. While this was happening, the reeling song of a Grasshopper Warbler indicated this too was nearby. Quickly taping and playing back the song brought the bird into full view. Nearby bushes and scrub held singing Booted Warblers, Azure Tits, Bluethroats and Common Rosefinches, while a frustratingly elusive *Locustella* failed to reveal itself to anyone other than Peter, who pronounced it to be just another Grasshopper Warbler. Moving onto Lake Bashan, on the outskirts of Astana, this magnificent lake is threatened with development as Astana rapidly expands beyond its former boundaries. The lake itself was alive with duck, mostly Pochard and Tufted Duck, but scanning through these soon revealed a dozen or so Goldeneye and a male Long-tailed Duck as well as our main target, three White-headed Ducks, plus several Red-necked, Black-necked and Great Crested Grebes. Following lunch, some of the group returned to the hotel to start their packing, while the rest of us went onto search for more exciting LBJ's. Quite surprisingly, birds remained active here throughout the day, and Alexander took us to a reedbed where he thought we would have a good chance of seeing Savi's Warbler. In no time at all, Savi's was seen well as it reeled from the top of a *Phragmites* stem, while numerous Great Reed, Paddyfield and a single Blyth's Reed Warbler vied for our attention. Bluethroats, Bearded Tits plus the, by now, familiar swarms of White-winged Black Terns and Ruff distracted us further, but Moustached Warbler failed to show. All too soon, it was time to tear ourselves away from this marvellous spot and think about returning home. Following a quick dinner back at the hotel, we had an uneventful flight down to Almaty where Dauren and Yuliya from Kan Tengri were on hand to whisk us away to a restaurant for a light meal and a few beers while we waited for the check-in desk to open.

Friday, 21st May

We continued eating, drinking and reminiscing in the restaurant until shortly before 02.00 hrs when we made our way to the airport. Passage through immigration went smoothly, although Yuliya stayed until the bitter end, just in case there should be any last minute hitches. Our Lufthansa flight to Frankfurt departed and arrived on time, and the connection went smoothly, seeing us appearing at Heathrow just before 09.00 hrs, after stacking over London for 30 minutes. All too soon, bags appeared and we all headed of home.

Bird of the Tour

In a rather complex voting system that could have result in a monkey being elected as your next Member of the European Parliament, Sociable Plover was voted 'Bird of the Tour', closely followed by Himalayan Snowcock and Himalayan Rubythroat; three remarkable experiences from the many great birds we encountered during this tour.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, thanks must go to Victoria Kovshar. Without her detailed knowledge of the wonderful birds of her remarkable country, this tour would not have been the great success that it ultimately was. Thanks also go to Alexander Pivovarov, our local guide in Astana who knew just where to find the special birds of his region, and to his daughter Tatiana, who worked as his interpreter on the last day. Next are our drivers, Nikolai with his 4x4 go-anywhere, or almost anywhere, mountain bus. Alexi – a good man to have with you when the going gets tough, and a bit of a whizz at changing flat tyres, who took us into the deserts in the south...and brought us back again! In Astana, Johnny Bek and Sergei got us where we needed to be. Thanks also go to the ground crew at Bartogoy and Konshengol camps who prepared some outstanding meals and even produced a birthday cake for Peter. Finally, a big thank you to the staff of Kan Tengri, in particular Dauren and Yuliya, who worked relentlessly to ensure our tour stayed together and were always there when needed.

Peter Kennerley

May 2004

Annotated Checklist of the Birds

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*

Rather scarce in the south with two on 14th, three on 15th and six on 16th May. More numerous near Astana with three on 18th, at least 15 on 19th and 20+ on 20th May.

Red-necked Grebe *Podiceps grisegena*

Singles near Topar on 16th and on a lake near the Nura River to the southwest of Astana on 18th May. At least 15 on Bashan Lake, on the outskirts of Astana, on 20th May.

Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis*

Six on pools near Topar on 16th May, and at least 25 on various lakes and pools near Astana on 20th May, including 6+ on Bashan Lake.

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

Five on Lake Sorbulak on 15th May, and four on pools, or in flight, near Topar on 16th, while in the north, two on 19th in the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve, and 4+ on various lakes near Astana on 20th May

Dalmatian Pelican *Pelecanus crispus*

Ten on Lake Sorbulak on 15th May, three near Topar 16th, 20+ in the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 19th and three plus a single bird over Lake Bashan on 20th May.

Eurasian Bittern *Botaurus stellaris*

At least two booming males heard in reedbeds to the southwest of Astana on 18th and one booming at Lake Bashan on 20th May.

Great Egret *Ardea alba*

Singles noted on 12th, 14th and 16th May, while in the north, 15+ in the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 19th May.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

Occasional singles or pairs noted on 12th, 15th, 16th, 18th, 19th and 20th May.

Black Stork *Ciconia nigra*

One in flight over the upper reaches of the Charyn River gorge on 13th May was the only record.

Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus*

Only seen on 19th May, with at least 14 present on a salt lake in the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve, and two on the small lake near Zhumay village later the same day.

Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*

At least 30 on a salt lake in the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 19th May and two on Lake Bashan on 20th May.

Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus*

A single plus a pair in the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 19th May.

Greylag Goose *Anser anser*

Six feeding in a wet field by the roadside approximately 12 km to the southwest of Astana on 18th May, 30+ in the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 19th May and at least ten on various lakes around Astana on 20th May.

Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea*

Common throughout the south, where it was recorded on lakes in the mountains and grasslands, and around artesian wells in the desert. Recorded daily between 10th and 17th May, with a daily maximum of 12 on 16th May.

Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*

Only seen in the north, with at least 30 on 18th May and 40+ on 19th May.

Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope*

Four on the lake by the Bartogoy camp on 13th, a female on the small pool at the camel station at Konshengol on 15th, four to the southwest of Astana on 18th and two in the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 19th May.

Gadwall *Anas strepera*

Only recorded in the north, with at least 15 on 18th, 10 on 19th and 20+ on 20th May.

Eurasian (Common) Teal *Anas crecca*

A pair plus a female on 19th May in the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve, and two males near Lake Bashan on 20th May.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

At least 10 on 18th, 20 on 19th and 14 on 20th May.

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*

Only seen on the wetlands surrounding Astana, with six on 18th, 15 on 19th and one on 20th May.

Garganey *Anas querquedula*

One of the most numerous ducks, with at least 21 on Lake Bartogoy on 13th, followed by three there the next day, one on 15th May, two at Topar on 16th, eight on 18th May, 45+ in the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve, on 19th and 40+ on various pools near

Astana on 20th May.

Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata*

Lake Bartogoy held a flock of 12 on 13th May, with just two there the following day. In the north, six on 18th, 20+ on 19th in the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve, and a similar number on pools near Astana on 20th May.

Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina*

Four on Lake Sorbulak on 15th May and 15+ on pools near Topar on 16th May. In the north, one female on 18th, six birds in the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 19th and 12+ near Astana on 20th May.

Common Pochard *Aythya ferina*

Two females on Lake Bartogoy on 13th May, two near Topar on 16th, three pairs on 18th to the southwest of Astana, 12+ in the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve, on 19th and at least 250 on Lake Bashan, near Astana, on 20th May.

Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca*

Two pairs noted on roadside pools in the Ili River delta, near Topar, on 16th May.

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*

Only seen in the north, with three pairs on 18th, two on 19th and 60+ on Lake Bashan on 20th May.

Long-tailed Duck *Clangula hyemalis*

A first-summer male on Lake Bashan on 20th May.

Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula*

At least 12 on Lake Bashan on 20th May, including adult and first-summer males, along with females, although there was no suggestion of breeding here.

Goosander *Mergus merganser*

Two males on Lake Bartogoy on 13th May, followed by three males and a female there the following day.

European Honey-buzzard *Pernis apivorus*

One dark morph individual, disturbed from roadside bushes some 90 km to the southwest of Astana on 19th May, showed well as it circled directly overhead.

Black Kite *Milvus migrans*

Small numbers noted most days throughout the south, although most numerous in the desert near Konshengol, where migrants were moving to the north. On 15th May, during a day of strong winds, a minimum of 53 birds were sheltering in the lee of the trees surrounding a small farm/camel station at Konshengol, where they were perching in the trees, on the fence and on the ground. Much scarcer in the north, with just three birds noted on 19th May in the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve.

Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*

A near-adult in flight over the plain near the Kokpek Pass on 14th May.

Himalayan Griffon Vulture *Gyps himalayensis*

One of Kazakhstan's rarer breeding species, so we were fortunate to see four adults and at least one immature above the upper Charyn River gorge on 13th May.

Eurasian Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus*

A party of four, followed by a couple of single birds above the upper Charyn River gorge on 13th May. Seen well in flight alongside Himalayan Griffon Vulture, allowing the differences in size, structure and plumages to be compared and fully appreciated.

Eurasian Black Vulture *Aegyptius monachus*

Four adults above the upper Charyn River gorge on 13th May showed extremely well. These were followed the next day by a distant pair over the plain to the west of Nurly.

Short-toed Eagle *Circaetus gallicus*

The only record was of a single bird above the upper Charyn River gorge on 13th May.

Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*

Common over marshes in the north, with eight on 18th, 20+ on 19th and 10+ on 20th May.

Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus*

Only seen on 19th May, when at least ten birds, including adult and first-summer males, and females, were hunting over on steppe grassland to the southwest of Astana in or near the Kurgaldzliniskiy Reserve.

Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus*

An adult male and first-summer male hunting the fields near Nurly on 14th May followed by a first-summer male and a female on 16th May near Topar. In the north, a minimum of 12 noted on 19th May.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*

A female perched in a tree above the Alpine Rose hotel on 10th May was drying itself after a spell of torrential rain. This individual was seen again, in the same tree, the following day. Singles also noted on 13th, 14th and 15th May.

Shikra *Accipiter badius*

A male perched on a roadside post in the Ili River delta near Zhelturanga on 15th May showed extremely well, allowing all to enjoy prolonged telescope views. Later the same day, a pair in flight above the road in the same area.

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

A single bird of the migratory form *B. b. vulpines*, often referred to as Steppe Buzzard, near the Charyn River on 13th May.

Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus*

Common in deserts and grasslands of the south, where it was seen daily between 12th and 17th May, with a daily maximum of 12 on 13th and again on 17th May. Nests were found by Lake Bartogoy and at Tamgaly Tas, the latter containing four small chicks. A single bird in the Kurgaldzliniskiy Reserve on 19th May was the only record in the north.

Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis*

A first-summer bird above the Charyn River on 13th May was followed by an adult, or near-adult, in the same area later the same day. In the north, four perched in an area of recently burned steppe grassland near the Kurgaldzliniskiy Reserve were clearly looking for easy pickings.

Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*

A first-summer bird in the Tian Shan mountains above the Observatory on 11th May. To the east, an immature and adult showed well above the Kokpek Pass on 14th May.

Booted Eagle *Hieraaetus pennatus*

A dark morph bird in flight by the road some 80 km to the east of Almaty on 12th May was watched for several minutes, when it went into a steep dive and dropped onto a prey item just 50 metres from where we were standing. It eventually flew off

carrying a small mammal.

Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni*

Only seen along the roadside leading to the Bartogoy Camp, with six on 12th, four on 13th and an adult male on 14th May. These birds were watched dismembering insects in flight and regularly observed perching on roadside posts and overhead wires. Most flew when approached but occasional birds allowed a close approach.

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*

Common, widespread and recorded daily in all habitats visited. Most numerous in the Lake Bartogoy region with up to 14 seen daily, possibly more, as many distant kestrels were not specifically identified to species. Up to 12 daily in the Konshengol area and eight daily in the Astana area.

Red-footed Falcon *Falco vespertinus*

Only recorded in the Astana region, where this delightful species breeds in disused crow nests in low, roadside trees. Three noted on 18th May, followed by at least 20 the following day and two on 20th May. Many of these birds gave superb views as they perched by their nests or on overhead wires. Birds even breed within Astana itself, with eight noted between the city and the airport on 19th May.

Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo*

Singles or pairs noted daily between 12th and 17th May. A pair nesting in roadside trees some 120 km to the southeast of Almaty gave wonderful views and seemed quite unconcerned by our presence.

Himalayan Snowcock *Tetraogallus himalayensis*

Thanks to a bit of brilliant spotting by Victoria, a pair was watched for over 20 minutes as they walking across a distant snowfield above the Observatory on 11th May. The haunting cries of a male were heard above the Observatory the following morning.

Chukar Partridge *Alectoris chukar*

Only seen in the Kokpek Pass where it was common and readily found, with four on 12th May and at least three in the same area on 14th May.

Grey Partridge *Perdix perdix*

A pair feeding in burnt steppe grassland in the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 19th May.

Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix*

Singles calling in fields to the southeast of Almaty on 12th May, and in the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 19th May. In addition, one flushed underfoot in the desert near our camp at Konshengol on 16th May.

Ring-necked (Common) Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus*

Singles heard in the Marble Valley above the Observatory on 12th May, in roadside fields to the southeast of Almaty later the same day and in the Topar area on 16th May. In addition, a female seen by the roadside en-route to Konshengol on 15th May.

Common Crane *Grus grus*

Two single birds noted to the southwest of Astana en-route to the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 19th May.

Demoiselle Crane *Anthropoides virgo*

This delightful crane was one of the most sought after species on this tour, and it fully lived up to all expectations, as we enjoyed wonderful views at close range. Two pairs feeding close to the roadside as we drove across the vast Sogeti Plain on 13th

May allowed photographers to film away to their heart's content. Two noted nearby the following day, and one as we approached Nurly on 15th May. Three distant birds seen in the desert at Konshengol in the evening of 16th May. In the Astana area, singles and small parties totalling at least 20 birds seen as we drove out to the southwest of the city on 18th May, and at least eight seen on 19th May, some within the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve, and others noted en-route.

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*

Singles on 16th May near Topar and on a small, reed-fringed pool outside Astana on 20th May.

Common Coot *Fulica atra*

Two on 15th May and at least 30 on roadside pools near Topar on 16th May. More numerous in the north, with at least ten on 18th, 20+ on 19th and 30+ on 20th May.

Macqueen's Bustard *Chlamydotis macqueenii*

Another highly desired species which fully lived up to all expectations. Shortly after our arrival at Konshengol camp on 15th May, one flew low over our heads but unfortunately landed some way off in the desert. Later that evening, a closer male was 'scoped on a nearby ridge. This male was seen again, in better light, the following morning. As we drove south from the village of Konshengol towards Tamgaly Tas on 17th May, a female was wandering along the road in front of the bus, and we were able to approach to within 30 metres as it casually walked off the road and back past the bus. One of the great memories of this tour.

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*

Noted daily between 15th and 20th May, with counts of 20+ on pools near Topar on 16th May and 15+ by Shalkar and Sholak Lakes in the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 19th May.

Pied Avocet *Recurvirostra avocetta*

Eight on Shalkar and Sholak Lakes in the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve 19th May.

Ibisbill *Ibidorhyncha struthersii*

A pair feeding on gravel-lined shores of the small river that entered the Big Almaty Lake, below the Observatory, on 10th May. Although views were somewhat distant and, at times, obscured by low cloud, we were eventually able to enjoy prolonged views as the birds fed, flew around, and ran at great speed across the sandy substrate and shingle ridges. The following day, one of this pair was found, at extreme range, by Peter and Sean, as they 'scoped the shingle banks from the dam wall. A rare breeder in Kazakhstan with an estimate of just 75 pairs in the country.

Black-winged Pratincole *Glareola nordmanni*

At least 15, mostly in flight and rather distant, to the southwest of Astana on 18th May, followed by 60+ by Sholak Lake in the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 19th May. Some of the birds seen on the latter date were clearly breeding and afforded us some wonderful views, both at rest and in flight.

Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*

Scarce in the south, with one bird, undoubtedly the same individual, seen on a roadside pool near our camp at Lake Bartogoy on 12th, 13th and 14th May. On 15th, en-route from Almaty to Konshengol, four were seen on roadside wetlands. More numerous in the north, with estimates of 12+ on 18th, 20+ on 19th and 15+ on 20th May.

Sociable Plover *Vanellus gregarius*

A pair of this most sought-after shorebird was eventually tracked down as they fed by a small lake some 70 km to the southwest of Astana on 18th May. The plumage and structural differences between the male and female was quite striking. The world population of this attractive plover is in sharp decline for, as yet, unknown reasons. This was, perhaps, the most threatened species we encountered during the tour.

Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*

Seen daily between 12th and 20th May wherever suitable wetlands occurred.

Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*

At least 15 by a salt lake near the Nura River on 18th May, and four at Lake Bashan on 20th May.

Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus*

A male by Sholak Lake in the Kurgaldzlinский Reserve on 19th May was the only record.

Greater Sand Plover *Charadrius leschenaultii*

A pair came in to feed at the artesian well near our camp at Konshengol on 16th May, and a different female was found later the same evening while walking in the desert. The following day, a poorly marked female, clearly disturbed from a nest and giving a broken wing distraction display, was seen to the south of our camp.

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*

One feeding by an artesian well near the Konshengol camp on 17th May.

Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*

Only seen on wetlands in the north where it was fairly common and possibly breeding. Counts included 12+ on 18th, 30+ on 19th and two on 20th May. All birds were of the nominate form, characterised by their large size, disproportionately long, orange-based bills and poorly marked breeding plumage.

Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*

Six adults in breeding plumage at a salt lake near the Nura River on 18th May.

Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus*

At least 12 adults in breeding plumage at a small salt lake near the Nura River on 18th May, followed by two at Sholak Lake in the Kurgaldzlinский Reserve on 19th May and two at Bashan Lake on 20th May.

Common Redshank *Tringa totanus*

Another species restricted to the wetlands of the north, where displaying birds suggested breeding was taking place. Daily counts were low, with four on 18th, two on 19th and six on 20th May. 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*

Eight on 18th May, six on 19th and at least 11 on 20th May. Displaying birds noted each day, and birds presumably breed in this region.

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*

Singles noted on a small pool, created by overspill from an artesian well, at a camel station near Konshengol on 15th and 17th May, and probably involved the same individual. In the north, one on 20th May near Astana. Considered rather later for this early breeder to be passing through with any hope of breeding this year, so likely these would be first-summer individuals.

Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*

Three on 15th May on pools near Konshengol, four by a small salt lake on 18th May and six on pools near Astana on 20th May

Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus*

One by an artesian well at Konshengol on 15th May. In the north, a minimum of 15 at a salt lake near the Nura River on 18th May and 11 by Lake Bashan on 20th May.

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*

Ones and twos recorded daily between 11th and 15th May.

Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*

One on 18th May and at least six along the shoreline of Lake Sholak on 19th May.

Sanderling *Calidris alba*

One by a small pool at the camel station at Konshengol on 15th May.

Little Stint *Calidris minuta*

A minimum of 150 at a small salt lake near the Nura River on 18th May, 40+ at Lake Sholak on 19th May and six at Lake Bashan on 20th May.

Temminck's Stint *Calidris temminckii*

Two on a roadside pool between Almaty and Konshengol on 15th May. Eight by an artesian well at Konshengol later the same day, followed by two in the same area on 16th and 17th May. Four on a small salt lake near the Nura River on 18th May.

Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*

At least eight feeding along the shore of a small salt lake near the Nura River on 18th May, followed by ten by Lake Sholak on 19th May.

Dunlin *Calidris alpina*

A minimum of 45 at a small salt lake near the Nura River on 18th May, followed by 12 at Lake Sholak on 19th May.

Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*

Uncountable thousands of birds were present throughout the Astana region wherever suitable wetlands occurred. Between 18th and 20th May, we must have seen in excess of 10,000 birds, all of which were in breeding plumage and some starting to display. This region must represent one of the most important staging areas for birds heading towards their breeding areas on the tundra of northern Siberia. Males greatly outnumbered females, which is the opposite of the sex bias in Africa, where females outnumber males by approximately 7:1. A truly memorable spectacle.

Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus*

Only found in the Astana region where we recorded a minimum of 250 on a small salt lake near the Nura River on 18th May, and 40+ on Lake Sholak the following day.

Great Black-headed Gull *Larus ichthyaetus*

Small numbers recorded on several lakes in the Kurgaldzinskiy Reserve on 19th May. The highlight of this day was, however, the visit we made to the breeding site on the lake by Zhumay village. Here, a minimum of 250 adults in breeding plumage was observed on their breeding island, and several had recently hatched chicks.

Little Gull *Larus minutus*

Nine adults in breeding plumage resting on the shoreline of a small lake near Zhumay village on 19th May, and one in flight over Bashan Lake on 20th May.

Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus*

Two on the lake by Bartogoy camp on 14th May, followed by two in roadside fields en-route to Almaty later the same day. At least 10 from the dam at lake at Sorbulak, but the strong wind made it impossible to search the rest of the lake. A minimum of 150 birds at a breeding colony on a roadside lake near Topar on 16th May. In the north, estimates of 50 on 18th May, 200+ on 19th May and 250+ on 20th May.

Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei*

A single bird, followed by a group of ten which landed on a small lake while we were taking lunch on 19th May. Later the same day, eight were loafing along the shoreline of a small roadside lake near Zhumay village with Little and Black-headed Gulls.

Common Gull *Larus canus*

One by the roadside on 18th May and 15+ at the gull colony at Zhumay village on 19th May.

Yellow-legged Gull *Larus cachinnans*

Strong winds at Lake Sorbulak, near Almaty, prevented us getting to grips with the breeding birds at this site on 15th May. Of the six birds seen well here, all showed the characters associated with the nominate form *L. c. cachinnans*, often referred to as Caspian Gull. In the Astana region, a minimum of 40 birds noted on both 18th and 20th May, while on 19th May, we visited a large breeding colony near Zhumay village, where a minimum of 400 birds were present, and several had recently hatched chicks. The birds in the Astana region differed significantly from those near Almaty, being slightly smaller with a smaller, and quite delicate structure. They were also distinctly darker on the mantle. There was some variation in bill tip pattern of the adults, with the majority showing a rich yellow bill and a red spot at the gonys, while others had a dark bill band and a paler tip to the upper mandible. These birds were of the form *L. (c.) barabensis*, often referred to as Steppe Gull, and which may be a race of the tundra breeding Heuglin's Gull *L. heuglini*.

Gull-billed Tern *Sterna nilotica*

One in flight over pools at Topar on 16th May.

Caspian Tern *Sterna caspia*

A minimum of 35 birds roosting on the shore of Lake Shalkar in the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 19th May.

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*

One flew over the Bartogoy camp on 13th May, and at least 12 noted over the lakes near Topar on 16th May. More numerous in the Astana region, with one on 18th, 40+ on 19th May and 20+ on 20th May. Although most birds showed characters associated with the nominate form, small numbers displayed an entirely dark bill and a delicate grey wash to the underparts, and closely resembled the northeast Asian breeding form *S. h. longipennis*. As this race is not known to breed closer to Kazakhstan than the Amur river basin in the Russian Far East, their occurrence as breeding birds in Kazakhstan seems extremely unlikely. It seems probable that these birds must have been exceptionally dark individuals of the Central Asian breeding form *S. h. minussensis* which breeds in the Altai and throughout Mongolia. This form is quite variable, with some resembling nominate birds and others approaching *S. h. longipennis*, but most usually retain some red colouration at the base of the lower mandible.

Little Tern *Sterna albifrons*

One at Lake Shalkar on 18th May was the only record.

Black Tern *Chlidonias niger*

Much scarcer than White-winged Black Tern and the only records in the south concerned eight birds over pools near Topar on 16th May. More numerous in the north with 20+ on 18th May, nine on 19th May and two on 20th May, although some may have been overlooked amongst the huge numbers of White-winged Black Terns.

White-winged Black Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus*

A minimum of 150 birds on lakes to the southwest of Astana on 18th May. In the Kurgaldzliniskiy Reserve on 19th May, several thousand birds were seen, including hundreds feeding low over fields by Lake Shalkar, making a memorable spectacle. A further 350+ were seen on pools near Astana on 20th May.

Pallas's Sandgrouse *Syrrhaptes paradoxus*

Two birds seen in flight over the artesian well near Nurly on 14th May.

Black-bellied Sandgrouse *Pterocles orientalis*

Three at the artesian well near Nurly on 14th May. Small numbers regularly noted in the desert near the Konshengol camp between 15th and 17th May, with the artesian wells proving to be particularly popular. At one well, a count of 80+ was made when we made a deliberate effort to watch the comings and goings at the favoured, mid-morning, drinking time.

European Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur*

One at Konshengol on 15th May and two by the roadside near Topar on 16th May were the only records. On the first date, one was watched feeding alongside an Oriental Turtle Dove.

Oriental Turtle Dove *Streptopelia orientalis*

Widespread in small numbers, with six in the spruce forest near the Alpine Rose hotel on 10th May, followed by two there on 12th. A common migrant in the desert at Konshengol, with 11+ on 15th, six on 16th and eight on 17th May. In addition, at least 15 in the Kurgaldzliniskiy Reserve on 19th May. The bright plumage and white tips to the outer rectrices marked these birds as being of the race *S. o. meena*.

Laughing Dove *Streptopelia senegalensis*

One seen by Victoria from the bus as we drove through a small village to the west of Almaty on 15th May.

Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*

Occasionally seen in roadside villages, but not numerous, with two noted on 12th, and singles on 14th and 15th May being the only records.

Rock Dove *Columba livia*

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

Yellow-eyed Stock Dove *Columba eversmanni*

At least 12 birds seen well in the Turanga forest near Zhelturanga on 16th May.

Stock Dove *Columba oenas*

One watched on roadside wires between Topar and Zhelturanga on 16th May.

Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus*

Six birds noted between Almaty and the Kokpek Pass on 12th May and similar numbers in the same area during the return journey on 14th May. One near Konshengol on 15th May was presumably a migrant. In the north, two near Volgodonovka on 20th May was the only record.

Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*

One or two birds heard or seen daily throughout the tour. Peak count was 16+ on overhead wires between Almaty and Kokpek Pass on 12th May.

Eurasian Scops Owl *Otus scops*

One heard at the arboretum to the east of Almaty on 12th May.

Long-eared Owl *Asio otus*

While refuelling our bus at Konshengol on 17th May, one flew in low, narrowly missing a couple of the group, and landed in a small group of trees, giving outstanding views. To the southwest of Astana, a pair nesting in a small orchard on the grasslands on 18th May gave good views in flight before quickly returning to their nest.

European Nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus*

One churring in the early morning of 17th May at our camp at Konshengol and sounding extremely similar to birds heard in western Europe. Later the same day, while refuelling the bus at Konshengol, a roosting bird was found in a small patch of trees in the filling station forecourt, roosting on a horizontal branch approximately 0.6 metres above the ground. Everyone was able to enjoy unprecedented views of this difficult-to-see species out in the open. It was considerably paler and sandier in colour than the birds we are familiar with in western Europe, although apparently not sufficiently pale to be of the race *C. e. unwini*. Populations breeding in northern Kazakhstan are, apparently, quite variable, show considerable individual variation and, as a whole, are more or less intermediate between the nominate form and *C. e. unwini*. These intergrades birds have been named *C. e. sarudnyi* although this name is used to cover a wide variation, and is not generally recognised.

Alpine Swift *Apus melba*

Four over the upper Charyn River gorge on 13th May.

Common Swift *Apus apus*

Two on 12th May, 20+ migrating over Nurly on 14th, and two on 16th May near Topar. Those seen well on 14th May differed from European birds in exhibiting a larger, paler throat patch, a pale forehead and, overall, a slightly browner plumage, pointing to them being of the Chinese breeding form *A. a. pekinensis*.

European Bee-eater *Merops apiaster*

Apart from one near the arboretum on 12th May, seen daily between 14th and 17th May, with 30+ on 14th, 20+ on 15th and 17th May. Most would be local breeding birds. In the north, three on roadside wires on 19th May and four on 20th May.

European Roller *Coracias garrulus*

Recorded daily between 12th and 17th May. Numbers in the desert were particularly high, with 20+ on 15th, 40+ on 16th and 60+ on 17th May, suggesting many were still migrating to breeding areas.

Eurasian Hoopoe *Upupa epops*

Recorded daily between 12th and 17th May, with daily peaks of 11 on 15th, 12 on 16th and 15+ on 17th May.

White-winged Woodpecker *Dendrocopos leucopterus*

Only recorded from the Turanga forest near Zhelturanga on 16th May, where it was common, noisy, conspicuous and easily located. At least six birds seen here, although these were very close to the road, and we did not explore the woodland further.

Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra*

Common in the desert near Konshengol, with 15+ on 15th, 20+ on 16th and 40+ on 17th May. Also numerous in the north, with at least 10 on 18th May and 15+ on 19th May.

Bimaculated Lark *Melanocorypha bimaculata*

Only found in the desert near Konshengol, where it occurred alongside Calandra Lark in equal abundance. Estimates included 20+ on 15th and 16th May, and 10+ on 17th May.

White-winged Lark *Melanocorypha leucoptera*

In the last two or three years, this attractive species has established a breeding population to the south of Konshengol, possibly as a result of increased rainfall leading to a more abundant food supply becoming available. Numbers appear to be increasing rapidly and we were surprised to find at least 15 birds in this area on 17th May without trying, many being noted from the bus as we were driving towards Tamgaly Tas. In contrast, less numerous than expected on the steppe grassland in the Astana region, with 15+ noted on 18th May and 20+ on 19th May.

Black Lark *Melanocorypha yeltoniensis*

Very common on the steppe grassland in the Astana region, with 40+ on 18th May and 300+ on 19th May. Males greatly outnumbered females, although it was suspected that their absence could only be accounted for if the females were incubating.

Greater Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla*

At least 30 birds in the grasslands of the Sogeti Plain and Charyn Gorge on 13th May. Elsewhere, only seen in the Konshengol region, where up to 12 birds were frequently seen near the camp and adjacent artesian well on 16th and 17th May. The upperparts of these birds were pale sandy-brown, a character associated with birds of the race *C. b. longipennis*.

Lesser Short-toed Lark *Calandrella rufescens*

Common in the desert near the camp at Konshengol, where two were seen on 15th May, 30+ on 16th and eight on 17th. The upperpart colour of these birds was almost identical to that of the Greater Short-toed Larks breeding in the same area. It seems likely that these distinctive birds were of the form *C. r. leucophaea* or *C. r. heinei*. Despite searching, we were unable to locate any birds that resembled Asian Short-toed Lark *C. cheleensis*, and it appears that this species has disappeared from previously favoured haunts in recent years.

Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*

Four at the artesian well near Nurly on 14th May. Elsewhere, only noted in the deserts near Konshengol where six on 15th, two on 16th and four on 17th May. Fairly numerous along the road to the south of Konshengol, with at least 12 noted on 17th May. These warm, sandy-brown birds were presumably of the form *G. c. magna*.

Northern Skylark *Alauda arvensis*

Fairly common on the grasslands of the Sogeti Plain and bordering the upper Charyn River gorge. Not recorded elsewhere in the south, but the most numerous lark in the Astana region, with 50+ on 18th, 400+ on 19th and 8+ on 20th May. The warm sandy-brown plumage of these birds corresponded with the form *A. a. dulcivox*.

Shore Lark *Eremophila alpestris*

A pair near the Bartogoy camp on 13th and 14th May, and a female at the upper Charyn River gorge on 13th May were the only records. These birds lacked all traces of yellow on the head, and were believed to be of the form *E. a. brandti*.

Sand Martin *Riparia riparia*

Small numbers, presumably migrants, noted in the south, with four near Almaty on 14th, 10+ near Konshengol on 16th and two near Tamgaly Tas on 17th May. More numerous in the north, with 15+ to the southwest of Astana on 18th May and 200+ near Zhumay village near the Kurgaldzinskiy Reserve on 19th May.

Pale Martin *Riparia diluta*

At a roadside breeding colony on 14th May not far from the Kokpek Pass, an estimated 120 birds were present, allowing the prolonged views at close range necessary to appreciate the subtle differences between this newly recognised species and the widespread Sand Martin. Elsewhere, four near the camel station in the desert near Konshengol on 15th May.

Eurasian Crag Martin *Ptyonoprogne rupestris*

Confined to the dry hills of the southeast with one at the Kokpek Pass on 12th May and four there on 14th May, and at least two over the upper Charyn River gorge on 13th May.

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*

Common and widespread throughout except for the mountains. Up to 100 birds recorded daily.

Red-rumped Swallow *Hirundo daurica*

One over the Panfilov Guards Park in Almaty on 10th May, and three over the arboretum to the east of Almaty on 12th May were the only records.

Eurasian House Martin *Delichon urbica*

Recorded daily between 12th and 16th May with peaks of 30+ on 12th and 12+ on 15th May.

Pied Wagtail *Motacilla alba*

One or two birds showing the characteristics of *M. a. personata* were seen daily between 10th and 17th May, apart from in the mountains where it was absent. More numerous at Konshengol with six on 15th and three on 16th May, presumably migrants. This form was not seen in the north. Birds of this distinctive form, known as Masked Wagtail, were by far the most numerous race inhabiting in the south of the country. Russian ornithologists often treat Masked Wagtail as a distinct species, separate from Pied Wagtail of Europe and Black-backed Wagtail *M. lugens* of the Russian Far East. In addition, we also saw three birds showing the characteristics of the nominate form, known as White Wagtail, two at Konshengol on 15th May and near Astana on 18th May.

Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*

In the south, small numbers only noted near the camp at Konshengol area and, on 16th May, near Topar. All birds showed the characteristics of the form *M. f. beema* apart from singles at Konshengol on 15th and 16th May, which showed characters associated with the grey headed form *M. f. thunbergi*. Considerably more numerous in the north, with 20+ on 18th, 70+ on 19th and 50+ on 20th, all of which were believed to be of the form *M. f. beema*.

Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola*

Two males on 18th May and at least four at Zhalanash Lake, near Astana, on 20th May.

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*

Regularly noted on streams and smaller rivers in the mountains to the south of Almaty, with at least six on 10th, one on 11th and two on 12th May. Migrants also seen regularly at the artesian wells in the desert close to the Konshengol camp, with at least eight birds present on 15th and 16th May, and seven the following day.

Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris*

Up to four daily, including displaying and song-fighting birds, near the Bartogoy camp between 12th and 14th May. Elsewhere, one in the Kurgaldzliniski Reserve on 19th May was the only record.

Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis*

Several singing males in the forests below the Observatory on 11th and 12th May. Birds breeding in the Tian Shan will be of the form *A. t. haringtoni*.

Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta*

Common above the Observatory in the Tian Shan mountains on 11th May, with 50+ noted between the Observatory and the Cosmic Ray Station 600 metres higher, despite this area being covered in deep snow. In contrast, just one the following day at lower elevation near the Observatory. These exceptionally pale, delicately coloured birds were in breeding plumage, indulging in song flights and were presumably of the form *A. s. blakistoni* which breeds in the Tian Shan. By way of contrast, two birds at an artesian well in the desert near our camp at Konshengol on 16th May were considerably darker but still retained non-breeding plumage, despite the late date. It is uncertain which form these birds belonged with, but they appeared considerably darker on the upperparts than birds of the nominate form wintering in western Europe.

White-throated Dipper *Cinclus cinclus*

One on a mountain stream on the lower slopes of the Tian Shan on 10th May showed an entirely white belly, a feature associated with the form *C. c. leucogaster*.

Brown Dipper *Cinclus pallasi*

One on a fast-flowing mountain stream below the Alpine Rose on 12th May.

Northern Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*

Several birds heard daily in the mountains between 10th and 12th May, and one seen briefly on 11th May. Song closely resembled that of European birds. Birds inhabiting the Tian Shan mountains belong with the form *T. t. tianschanicus*.

Altai (Himalayan) Accentor *Prunella himalayana*

Never an easy bird to find, so the three birds that some saw on the climb to the Cosmic Ray Station on 11th May was thought a real bonus. During the descent, a brief roadside stop produced one more bird that everyone saw well. Prefers stony slopes at the higher elevations, well beyond the tree line.

Brown Accentor *Prunella fulvescens*

Fairly common above the Observatory with eight birds, either singles or in pairs, noted from the roadside right to up the Cosmic Ray Station. Birds in these region belong with the nominate form.

Black-throated Accentor *Prunella atrogularis*

Occurs at lower elevations than the previous two species, being found between the Alpine Rose Hotel and the Observatory, with four on 10th May, and singles on 11th

and 12th May. These birds were of the form *P. a. huttoni* which is darker and more heavily streaked than the nominate form of the Urals.

Blue Whistling Thrush *Myophonus caeruleus*

Several seen and heard near streams and waterfalls in the foothills of the Tian Shan on the drive to and from the mountains on 10th and 12th May. This primarily Oriental-breeding thrush extends into the Palearctic only here in southernmost Kazakhstan and neighbouring states. Birds breeding here will be of the form *M. c. turcestanicus*.

Blackbird *Turdus merula*

Common in the Panfilov Guards Park in Almaty where up to ten birds seen during brief visits on 10th and 15th May. Others seen or heard in the mountains above Almaty, at the Arboretum on 12th May and in Astana on 18th May. 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.

Dark (Black)-throated Thrush *Turdus ruficollis*

Single males, presumably migrants, were seen in Konshengol and in trees by the nearby camel station on 15th May. Both were of the black-throated form *T. r. atrogularis*.

Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*

Confined to the forested mountains of the Tian Shan with four seen on 10th, one on 11th and two on 12th May, with other birds heard. Breeding birds in the Tian Shan belong with the race *T. v. bonapartei*. As with Blackbird, the song of this form does not differ significantly from that of the populations breeding in western Europe.

Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti*

Two seen, one of them extremely well, as it responded to our tape, giving close, prolonged views. Many also heard in the wetlands near Topar on 16th May. In the north, at least eight singing males noted in damp scrub near Volgodonovka, approximately 30 km to the southeast of Astana, on 20th May. The lack of rich, rufous tones to the upperparts, and conspicuous white undertail-coverts placed these birds with the migratory form *C. c. albiventris*.

Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella naevia*

The characteristic reeling song was only heard in the Astana region where, presumably, these birds breed. Views of one seen briefly from a moving bus by the roadside on 18th May was somewhat unsatisfactory, but two in damp grassland and bushes near Volgodonovka on 20th May gave prolonged views as they responded well to our tape. Although these birds must be of the eastern breeding form *L. n. straminea*, they did not appear particularly paler or greyer than European birds of the nominate form. They did, however, lack all traces of spots or streaks on the upper throat or along the flanks, features that are usually apparent on European birds.

Savi's Warbler *Locustella luscinioides*

Surprisingly, several males were giving their reeling song during the heat of the afternoon at Zhalanash Lake on 20th May. These birds were of the form *L. l. fusca* which breeds in Central Asia. The song sounded identical to that of European birds and playback of European recorded song soon elicited a response. The upperparts of these birds was paler, greyish-brown, and lacking the warmer rufous tones of European birds of the nominate form, while the underparts were cleaner and whiter.

Eurasian Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*

One at the camel station at Konshengol on 16th May and three at Zhalanash Lake on 20th May. These birds were of the Asian race, *A. s. fuscus*, which lacks the rufous tones to the upperparts which the nominate form in Europe displays.

Blyth's Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus dumetorum*

A widespread migrant with several singing birds in Panfilov Guards Park opposite the Otrar Hotel in Almaty on 10th and 15th May. Migrants noted wherever suitable areas of bushes were available, although the camel station near the camp at Konshengol held the largest concentration with at least eight on 15th May and five there on 17th. In the north, six in a small orchard so the southwest of Astana on 18th May and a couple near Malinovka village on 20th May.

Paddyfield Warbler *Acrocephalus agricola*

One by the camel station near Konshengol on 16th May was the only record in the south. Large numbers in the reedbeds of the north, with at least ten near Astana on 18th May and thirty or more at Volgodonovka and Zhalanash Lake on 20th May.

Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus*

A migrant in bushes near Konshengol on 15th May was the only record in the south. Not as numerous as expected in the north, with just two birds seen in reedbeds near Malinovka village on 20th May, and a singing male heard on 18th May. These pale, washed out birds were of the race *A. a. zarudnyi*.

Booted Warbler *Hippolais caligata*

Not seen in the south. In the small orchard at to the southwest of Astana, at least 25 birds, presumably all migrants, were present on 18th May. Several territorial males in song near Volgodonovka, to the southwest of Astana, on 20th May.

Sykes's Warbler *Hippolais rama*

Two migrants at the farm at Nurly on 14th May, followed by a singing male at Zhelturanga on 16th May that showed well for the entire group. The following day, two at the camel station near our camp at Konshengol were presumably migrants.

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

This gem of a bird can, at times, be difficult to find in the Tian Shan but fortunately, this was not the case this year. In one afternoon we managed to track down no less than five birds including a pair and three singles. The birds we saw were of the nominate form, in which the intensity of the plumage tones is richer and deeper than other races that breed to the east.

Hume's Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus humei*

A common and widespread migrant and breeding bird. Migrants seen in Panfilov Guards Park in Astana on 10th and 15th May. In the forested hills between the Alpine Rose hotel and the Observatory, many were singing from the tops of the higher spruce trees but proved almost impossible to see well. We obtained our best views around the farms and camel stations at Konshengol on 15th and 17th May, where up to 15 birds were avidly feeding, often in the open and perching on fences or even feeding on the ground. Not recorded in the north.

Greenish Warbler *Phylloscopus trochiloides*

Another widespread migrant. Singing birds, presumably migrants, were present in Panfilov Guards Park on 10th and 15th May, and occasional birds seen in the mountains. As with Hume's Leaf Warbler, most numerous and easily seen in bushes

surrounding camel stations at or near Konshengol, where up to eight birds were seen on 15th and 17th May, often allowing quite outstanding views as they fed from fences and low bushes, seemingly quite unconcerned by our presence. Two in the small orchard to the southwest of Astana on 18th May was the only record in the north. The birds breeding in Kazakhstan are of the race *P. t. viridanus*, which extends west to breed in northern Europe.

Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*

Much scarcer than the previous two species and often quite difficult to obtain good views of, but a singing male in the Panfilov Guards Park on 10th and 15th May brought it home to us just how distinctive the song of these eastern breeders really is. Other birds, invariably singles, were occasionally seen, with Konshengol being the best site to obtain good views. The lack of yellow and green tones in the plumage, combined with the distinctive song confirmed these birds as being of the race *P. c. tristis*.

Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis*

Three in the desert near our camp at Konshengol on 16th May were the only records in the south. Near Astana, a minimum of six in an orchard on 18th May and two near Volgodonovka on 20th May. These eastern birds would presumably be of the form *S. c. icterops* which differ from European birds in being greyer above and whiter below than the nominate form, and show less conspicuous and paler fringes to the edges of the greater coverts, secondaries and tertials. In this respect they were somewhat reminiscent in appearance of Lesser Whitethroat and if seen briefly, could be confused.

Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca*

Birds showing the characters of the Siberian breeding form *S. c. blythi* were noted above the Alpine Rose hotel on 11th May, and daily near the Konshengol camp with an estimated maximum of 18 birds at the camel station on 17th May. Even more numerous in the orchard to the southwest of Astana, with 30+ there on 18th May, and occasional sightings elsewhere on subsequent days. In addition, at least four birds of the race *S. c. halimodendri* in scrub in at Zhelturanga in the Ili River delta on 16th May. At least one pair was noted nest building here in a clump of dead tumbleweed. These birds differed from *S. c. blythi* in being plainer, more uniform sandy-brown in colour and lacking the contrastingly darker ear-coverts, while the song lacked the characteristic rattle of European birds of the nominate form.

Barred Warbler *Sylvia nisoria*

One in roadside Russian Olives some 120 km to the east of Almaty on 12th May and one in the same area again on May 14th. Two at Konshengol on 15th May and three at the nearby camel station on 17th May. Finally, two in the orchard to the southwest of Astana on 18th May.

Asian Desert Warbler *Sylvia nana*

Single birds near the camp at Konshengol in the evening of 16th May, and again the following morning.

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*

Heard in the forests below the Observatory on 11th May.

Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*

Only recorded from the Konshengol area where migrants frequented the trees and bushes that surround the isolated camel stations and farms. Estimates of this conspicuous species included eight on 15th and 16th, and 14 on 17th May.

Rufous Bush Robin *Cerotrachus galactotes*

A migrant at the camel station near our camp at Konshengol on 17th May showed extremely well for prolonged periods, often approaching too close to photograph. The pale, sandy-grey upperparts identified it 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 Turkey.

Thrush Nightingale *Luscinia luscinia*

At least one bird in the orchard to the southwest of Astana on 18th May. This individual remained in view for several minutes allowing prolonged telescope views. Although Thrush Nightingale is a monotypic species, the underparts of this individual appeared noticeably darker and greyer than those of Thrush Nightingale that breed in northern Europe at the western limit of their range. A similar phenomena has been noted at Ngulia, Kenya, where large numbers of Thrush Nightingales are trapped for ringing in late autumn, with some appearing much darker and greyer below than others (D.J. Pearson, pers. comm.).

Common Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos*

A common and widespread breeding bird, occurring wherever small patches of scrub and bushes occur throughout the lowlands, in both agricultural land and in small areas of trees and bushes in the desert. Many more heard than were seen. Birds seen and heard daily between 12th and 17th May, with one seen well and at least eight others heard near the arboretum to the east of Almaty on 12th May. The Turanga forest at Zhelturanga and areas of trees and scrub near Topar held at least ten singing males on 16th May, while four by the camel station on 17th May had very little cover to hide in. In the north, at least three in the orchard to the southwest of Astana on 18th May and two heard in scrub near Volgodonovka on 20th May. 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 in Europe.

Himalayan (White-tailed) Rubythroat *Luscinia pectoralis*

Two singing males in the Marble Valley above the Observatory on 12th May. These birds were either of the nominate form or the very similar race *L. p. ballioni*, both of which lack the white moustachial stripe that characterises the Tibetan breeding form *L. p. tschebaiewi*.

Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica*

A common breeding bird in the north, with eight on 18th May, and at least ten seen at various locations on 20th May including Volgodonovka and Zhalanash Lake, near Astana. Birds preferred *Phragmites* reedbeds and areas of dense scrub adjacent to wetlands. 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.

Blue-capped Redstart *Phoenicurus caeruleocephalus*

At least five males and two females in scrub and forest above the Alpine Rose hotel on 10th May.

Eversmann's Redstart *Phoenicurus erythronotus*

Three males and a females in scrub and forest above the Alpine Rose hotel on 10th May, followed by a pair and a male near the Observatory the following day.

Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*

A female in roadside forest above the Alpine Rose hotel on 10th May.

Güldenstädt's Redstart *Phoenicurus erythrogaster*

A pair displaying at the Cosmic Ray Station on 11th May. This species only breeds at the higher elevations and, at 3,300 metres, the road does not get any higher than this.

Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra*

A male in the orchard to the southwest of Astana on 18th May.

Siberian Stonechat *Saxicola maurus*

Scarce in the south with just three records, all presumably migrants. A female above the Alpine Rose hotel on 10th May, a male in low scrub by the Bartogoy camp on 13th May and another male near Topar on 16th May. More numerous in the north with three on 18th, 20+ on 19th and 12+ on 20th May. Males exhibited considerable individual variation, some with 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.

Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*

Single males at Big Almaty Lake on 10th May and above the Observatory the following day. More numerous in the north with two on 18th, 40+ on 19th and three on 20th May.

Pied Wheatear *Oenanthe pleschanka*

A pair near the camp at Bartogoy on 13th May and four in hills to the east as we drove towards the upper Charyn River later the same day. Two in the Kokpek Pass on 14th May. Common at Tamgaly Tas on 17th May where we estimated eight birds present in the limited area we covered, including a male of the white-throated morph *vittata*. Restricted to rocky hills.

Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti*

Surprisingly, the only record was that of a male at Zhelturanga on 16th May.

Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina*

Abundant on the grassland steppes and deserts where it was, by far, the most numerous species. Recorded daily between 12th and 17th May, with estimates exceeding 100 individuals on most days, and amounting to several hundred birds on 13th May. Many pairs already had recently fledged, but still flightless, chicks.

Bearded Tit *Panurus biarmicus*

Two groups of three birds at Zhalanash Lake, near Astana, on 20th May. These birds were surprisingly paler than birds we regularly see in Europe, and will be of the form *P. b. russicus*.

Songar Tit *Parus songarus*

A pair attending a nest hole in a roadside telegraph post above the Alpine Rose hotel on 11th May, and heard in the same place the following day. Apparently the hole was formerly used by a Three-toed Woodpecker *Picoides tridactylus*.

Coal Tit *Parus ater*

Regularly heard and up to four birds seen daily between 10th and 12th May in the spruce forest above the Alpine Rose hotel. Birds here believed to be of the race *P. a. rufipectus*.

Great Tit *Parus major*

Common in the Panfilov Guards Park in Almaty. Rather scarce elsewhere, apart from the farmland to the east of Almaty, in particular the woodland surrounding the arboretum where some 15 birds were present on 12th May. Also heard near the hotel in Astana.

Turkestan Tit *Parus bokharensis*

Common in the Turanga forest near Zhelturanga, where an estimated 15 birds were seen.

Azure Tit *Parus cyanus*

One at the arboretum to the east of Almaty on 12th May, one in the woodlands near Topar on 16th May and two at Volgodonovka, to the southeast of Astana on 20th May. Birds near Topar would be of the form *P. c. koktalensis* which is restricted to the lower Ili River valley and Lake Balkhash, and has a distinctly larger bill than the other races, presumably as a adaptation feeding in willow beds and *Phragmites*. The other birds we saw were presumably of the form *P. c. tianschanicus*, which ranges widely throughout this region of Central Asia.

Eastern Rock Nuthatch *Sitta tephronata*

A female feeding chicks in a nest at Tamgaly Tas on 17th May. If breeding is successful, the same nest is often used for many years in succession, but birds will build a replacement nest if the original is damaged by a predator, rather than attempt to repair it. Birds breeding in Kazakhstan are of the nominate form.

White-crowned Penduline Tit *Remiz coronatus*

Two pairs attending nests in roadside Russian Olives to the east of Almaty on 12th May. One nest was suspended from a low bush over a channel of water, while the second was approximately eight metres above the ground and well away from the nearest water. Both nests were still under construction and we enjoyed prolonged views of both birds at the nest, as they incorporated new material into the construction and shaped the structure. In contrast to the next species, White-crowned Penduline Tit does not utilise wetlands during the breeding season.

Eurasian Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinus*

A pair in building a nest in a *Phragmites* reedbed near Topar on 16th May. These highly distinctive birds displayed a rich, uniform chocolate-brown colour to the entire fore-crown, crown, nape and mantle, while the mask was only slightly darker and barely contrasted with the crown. The chin and throat was white and sharply demarcated from the ear-coverts. Although initially thought to be the Black-headed Penduline Tit *R. macronyx*, subsequent research established that this combination of characters corresponds with Eurasian Penduline Tit of the form *R. p. caspius*. Although this form is quite variable, it seems that we saw the most extreme form, which bears little resemblance to Eurasian 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. A subject worthy of further research.

Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus*

Heard in the Panfilov Guards Park on 10th May. At least four at the arboretum to the east of Almaty on 12th May, a pair in the same area again on 14th May, a male at

the farm near the Konshengol camp on 15th May and one heard in the orchard near Astana on 18th May. The birds we saw corresponded to the race *O. o. kundoo*, in which the black loreal line extends a short way behind the eye, and the intensity of the yellow pigment in the plumage is slightly richer than that of the nominate form. Females also differ in being yellower both above and below, and exhibit reduced streaking on the underparts.

Isabelline Shrike *Lanius isabellinus*

Recorded daily between 12th and 17th May, with up to 20 birds seen daily. Birds showing the characters of the form *L. i. phoenicuroides* greatly outnumbered all other races, with one on 12th, seven on 13th, two on 14th, two on 15th, 20+ on 16th and eight on 17th May. Birds showing the characters of the nominate form included two in the Kokpek Valley on 12th May, followed by singles near the farm at Konshengol on 15th, and in the desert near the Konshengol camp on 16th May. In addition we saw a couple of extremely well marked individuals that resembled *L. i. phoenicuroides*, with conspicuous white supercilium but lacking the chestnut tones to the crown and mantle. It is thought these birds could be of the form *P. i. karaleni*, if such a taxon really exists. Fascinatingly variable.

Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*

A male at the farm near Konshengol on 15th May, a male and female near Topar on 16th, a male near Konshengol on 17th, and a male and female in the orchard to the southwest of Astana on 18th May. All birds were assumed to be migrants.

Long-tailed Shrike *Lanius schach*

One in roadside trees to the east of Almaty on 12th May. This bird would have been of the migratory form *L. s. erythronotus*.

Lesser Grey Shrike *Lanius minor*

At least 15 on overhead wires to the east of Almaty on 12th May, but just two noted along the same road during the return journey on 14th May. Numerous to the west of Almaty with 11+ on 15th, 15+ on 16th and 10+ on 17th May. Many, if not all, of these birds in the desert would have been migrants.

Southern Grey Shrike *Lanius meridionalis*

Two birds in the desert between Konshengol camp and Topar on 16th May. Both showed the characters associated with the migratory form *L. m. pallidirostris*, which is sometimes treated as a distinct species, Steppe Shrike *L. pallidirostris*.

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, and increased green iridescence on the closed wing when compared with European birds. The birds at Astana appeared similar but slightly larger than those in the south, and the central rectrices of these birds also seemed longer, giving the tail a distinctive wedge -shape when fanned. It is possible these birds were of the race *P. p. hemileucoptera*.

Eurasian Nutcracker *Nucifraga caryocatactes*

Two in spruce forest above the Alpine Rose hotel on 10th May, and heard there on 11th and 12th May. Birds inhabiting the Tian Shan are of the form *N. c. rothschildi*, characterised by their darker plumage and larger size.

Red-billed Chough *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*

At least four around the Cosmic Ray Station above the Observatory on 11th May and a pair nesting in a small mausoleum in a cemetery near the upper Charyn River gorge on 13th May.

Yellow-billed (Alpine) Chough *Pyrrhocorax graculus*

A pair at the Cosmic Ray Station above the Observatory on 11th May

Western (Eurasian) Jackdaw *Corvus monedula*

A common roadside bird seen daily between 12th and 20th May, with 400+ noted on 17th May between the Konshengol camp and Almaty, mostly by the roadside as we approached Almaty. 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 between 12th and 20th May, and in similar numbers to Jackdaw. Although the birds we encountered were of the nominate form, which occurs in Europe, the extent of bare skin on the forehead above the bill base appeared greater. Although a colonial breeder, it apparently does not use the same colonies each year, so we saw several deserted rookeries.

Carrion Crow *Corvus corone*

Widespread and recorded daily throughout the south, but absent in the Astana area. Particularly numerous in the foothills of the Tian Shan with approximately 40 birds seen on 10th and 12th May during the drive between Almaty and the hotel. 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*

One by the camel station near Konshengol on 15th May, and two there on 17th May, were presumably late migrants. Common in the north, with up to 20 recorded daily between 18th and 20th May. 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*

A fortunate encounter with two birds at the artesian well near our camp at Konshengol on 15th May gave us time to get telescope views of a species that is often difficult to see well on the ground, allowing the subtle brown wash on the neck to be fully savoured.

Rose-coloured Starling *Sturnus roseus*

Absent from the Tian Shan and the Astana area, and only 20+ recorded to the east of Almaty on 12th May. Elsewhere though, very common in the south with several hundred recorded daily between 14th and 17th May.

Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*

Absent from the Tian Shan and desert regions near Konshengol, but recorded widely elsewhere, being most numerous in the Astana region, although the maximum count here was just 60+ on 20th May.

Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*

A recent colonist, being first recorded in Kazakhstan in 1964. Now a common and widespread bird, recorded almost daily throughout the south, ranging from four

at from the Observatory in the Tian Shan, to several hundred by the roadside in agricultural land near Almaty. Still scarce in the north with just four near Astana on 18th May.

Saxaul Sparrow *Passer ammodendri*

A pair building a nest in a mausoleum in a cemetery near Zhelturanga on 15th May, and another pair in desert scrub near Topar later the same day. The birds we saw were of the nominate form.

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Birds of the nominate form are resident about the cities, towns and villages of Kazakhstan, and lead a life commensally with man. Birds of this form we seen in Almaty on 10th and 15th May, near the arboretum to the east of Almaty on 12th and 14th May and widely throughout the Astana area in many of the small villages we passed through between 18th and 20th May. In addition, the migratory form *P. d. bactrianus*, which is a summer visitor to Kazakhstan, migrating to the plains of northwest India and Pakistan during the winter months, was seen widely throughout the south and greatly outnumbered the nominate form. It differs in being brighter, with white cheeks and the chestnut areas appearing richer and more extensive. It is also distinctly smaller than the nominate form and lives away from human habitation, building its nest as a hanging structure in a tree or in a natural hole such as the burrow of a Pale Martin. This race was only recorded in the south, with several flocks totalling 400+ birds in fields near Nurly, and nesting in the Pale Martin colony on 14th, 60+ at Konshengol on 15th, 80+ between Konshengol and Topar on 16th and 40+ at Konshengol on 17th May.

Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis*

Single males at the arboretum on 12th May, at the artesian well at Nurly on 14th May and two by the farm near Konshengol on 15th May.

Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*

At least 25 in roadside trees between Almaty and Bartogoy camp on 12th May and 15+ in the same area on 14th May, two at Zhelturanga on 16th May and four in the small orchard near Astana on 18th May.

Rock Sparrow *Petronia petronia*

A singing male in rocky hills to the east of the Bartogoy camp, near the Charyn River canyon, on 13th May.

Brambling *Fringilla montifringilla*

A male by the camel station at Konshengol on 17th May.

Red-fronted Serin *Serinus pusillus*

Restricted to the mountains, with three above the Alpine Rose hotel on 10th May, five near the Observatory on 11th May and at least ten in the Marble Valley the following day.

European Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris*

A male at our lunch stop by the arboretum to the east of Almaty on 12th May was the only record. This rather grey individual was of the form *C. c. turkestanicus*.

Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*

Two on overhead wires in spruce forest above the Alpine Rose on 11th and 12th May, one at the arboretum east of Almaty, also on 12th May, and four in the same area on 14th May. These distinctive birds lacked the black band around the face and

were of the form *C. c. paropanisi*. These grey-headed birds are considered by some authorities to represent a distinct species, Grey-headed Goldfinch, *C. caniceps*.

Eurasian Linnet *Carduelis cannabina*

Up to ten birds daily in the desert near the Bartogoy camp between 12th to 14th May, two near Konshengol on 17th May and two in the Kurgaldzinskiy Reserve on 19th May. 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.

Common Crossbill *Loxia curvirostra*

One in flight over the Alpine Rose hotel on 10th May and a pair feeding in a spruce tree outside the hotel on 11th May. These birds were, presumably, of the race *L. c. tianschanica* that breeds in the Tian Shan mountains.

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

Only found in the Tian Shan mountains, with 40+ feeding near the hotel on 10th May, 200+ noted between the hotel and Cosmic Ray Station on 11th May and ten near the Alpine Rose hotel on 12th May.

Desert Finch *Rhodopechys obsoleta*

At least 30 birds at the artesian well near Nurly on 14th May and 10 in trees in the forecourt of the filling station at Konshengol on 17th May, including one bird constructing a nest.

Mongolian Finch *Bucanetes mongolica*

Several small groups totalling some 20+ birds coming to drink at pools of standing water along the track to the Charyn Red Gorge on 13th May, and two drinking at an artesian well near our camp at Konshengol on 17th May.

Common Rosefinch *Carpodacus erythrinus*

Seen and heard in the Panfilov Guards Park in Almaty on 10th and 15th May, at least 40 birds at the farm near Konshengol on 15th May, with 15+ in the same area on 17th May, eight near Topar on 16th May, and 12+ near Volgodonovka, to the southeast of Astana, on 20th May. Although the males were more intensely coloured than males breeding in Europe, it is not possible to establish which race these birds belong with.

Red-mantled Rosefinch *Carpodacus rhodochlamys*

A pair in the Marble Valley above the Observatory on 12th May.

White-winged Grosbeak *Mycerobas carnipes*

At least six birds, including pairs and individuals, in juniper scrub above the Observatory on 11th May, and a male in the Marble Valley on 12th May.

Pine Bunting *Emberiza leucocephalos*

Two singing males at Volgodonovka, to the southeast of Astana on 20th May. The song closely resembled that of Yellowhammer *E. citrinella*, and was clearly recognizable as such, drawing attention to the bird.

Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia*

One heard and seen briefly at the upper Charyn River gorge on 13th May, and one at the Kokpek pass on 14th May.

Ortolan Bunting *Emberiza hortulana*

A female drinking at an artesian well near the Konshengol camp on 17th May was the only record.

Grey-necked Bunting *Emberiza buchanani*

Two singing males at the Bartogoy camp between 12th and 14th May, at least ten in rocky hills en-route to the Charyn River on 13th May, and four at Tamgaly Tas on 17th May.

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

Four singing males at the Kokpek pass on 14th May.

Red-headed Bunting *Emberiza bruniceps*

Surprisingly scarce away from the desert regions, with just occasional roadside birds noted on 12th and 14th May. Common, however, at the Konshengol camp with 20+ on 15th, 40+ between Konshengol and Topar on 16th and 60+ at Konshengol and between there and Tamgaly Tas on 17th May.

Common Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*

Males noted at Topar on 16th May, and at least eight near Volgodonovka on 20th May. The birds on 20th May displayed the large, deep-based bill structure characteristic of the form *E. s. pyrrhuloides*.

Corn Bunting *Emberiza calandra*

At least six singing males by the roadside east of Almaty on 12th May.

Annotated Checklist of the Mammals

Mountain Weasel *Mustela altaica*

Singles below the Observatory on 11th and 12th May.

Siberian Weasel *Mustela siberica*

One seen on 18th May, somewhere to the southwest of Astana.

Grey Marmot *Marmotta baibacina*

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

Bobak Marmot *Marmotta bobak*

Occasionally seen on steppe grasslands near the Charyn River gorge and near Astana.

Red Squirrel *Sciurus vulgaris*

Noted in the Panfilov Guards Park, Almaty and the forests of the Tian Shan below the Observatory.

Jerboa *sp.*

One in the desert near the Charyn Red Canyon and another near the Konshengol camp. With so many possible species, it is not possible to specifically identify these to the species

Giant Gerbil *Rhombomys opimus*

Common around the Bartogoy camp and Charyn River region.

Hedgehog *Erinaceus sp.*

Unidentified hedgehogs occasionally seen at night.

Turkestan Red Pika *Ochotona rutila*

Two singles in the Tian Shan near the Observatory.