

RUSSIA

THE ASTRAKHAN STEPPES

21st May to 14th June 2016

Ben Macdonald



A Demoiselle Crane stands over her nest on the flat, featureless steppes of the Stepnoi Reserve in the Astrakhan region, home also to Russia's last viable herd of Saiga Antelope.

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the great privileges of the working for the Netflix 'Our Planet' series, from 2015 to 2017, was the rare opportunity to see both the Mongolian & Russian steppe over the course of eight week's filming, along with the wonderful cameraman and fellow birder John Aitchison for company. Working eighteen-hour days to capture the intimate lives of Saiga Antelope, Corsac Foxes and Steppe Eagles made this anything but a holiday, but we were nonetheless able to observe a range of species in a part of southern Russia visited by few other birders. We were able to enter the country, and the Stepnoi Reserve, on a carefully-negotiated filming Visa, but those seeking to follow should first email Anna Lushkenina (saigak@hotmail.com) for Stepnoi access. Nikolai Stepkin (n_stepkin@mail.ru), a keen birder, is also an excellent translator who could be of great help to anyone wishing to bird around the Astrakhan and Liman steppes.

II. SITES

Stepnoi Reserve, SW of Zenzeli, Astrakhan (large area around 45.803970, 46.774214)

Our main filming location comprised one of the best protected areas of steppe in southern Russia. Under the Soviet Era, a lot of this was farmland, but it has long since reverted to natural, short steppe. Under a team of rangers who would strike fear into the heart of the hardest poachers, the reserve has thrived. Cattle have been excluded and only native animals, specifically the Saiga Antelope, have been returned to graze and their numbers here are thriving, with up to 4000 animals in 2016. The birds are limited but special, and characteristic of the region. And the flat, pristine steppes, awash with lark song, are a sight not readily forgotten.

Well over 20 pairs of Demoiselle Cranes can be found across the reserve, as well as 10-15 nesting pairs of Steppe Eagles. The lakes are used by burrow-nesting Ruddy Shelduck, Black-headed Wagtail and visited by Black-winged Pratincole and a range of waders. The chorus of larks is extraordinary, with Calandra, Bimaculated, Short-toed, Lesser Short-toed and Skylarks: even Oriental Skylark was filmed with young: well west of the known range. Isabelline Wheatear is abundant. Steppe raptors are well-represented, with pole-nesting Long-legged Buzzards, a few pairs of Pallid Harriers, and thriving populations of Cinereous and Griffon Vultures. Farm birds include Bee-eaters, Hoopoes and Black-headed Buntings. Rose-coloured Starlings nest most years. Late migrants in small areas of tree stands included Greenish Warbler. In winter, the avifauna changes completely, with wintering White-winged Larks the highlight, and Hen Harriers and Rough-legged Buzzards some of the only other birds encountered during my recce of the site in February.

Zenzeli Lakes, Astrakhan (around 45.929424,47.083540)

Our translator Nikolai was a very keen birder and on the one day we had to leave the reserve, for an official inspection, we therefore had the amazing opportunity of visiting his local patch. The lightly-farmed habitats here haven't changed dramatically for perhaps more than a century; ancient diesel and even steam-powered tractors can be seen and many people still work in the fields by hand. The Zenzeli Lakes are however one of a series of natural lake systems, interspersed with a wide range of wooded, sandy and scrub habitats. They proved extraordinarily rich in birdlife.

The lakes held a range of waterfowl including Red-crested Pochard, whilst Lesser Kestrels and Marsh Harriers were both common. Some disused salt pans were home to Armenian Gulls, Kentish Plovers and Black-winged Stilts, whilst in most years, Nikolai encounters both breeding Black-winged Pratincole and White-tailed Lapwing around the lakes as a whole. We did not see either here on our visit but this was deemed to be rather unlucky. Great Reed Warblers are abundant in the reeds and Cuckoos were watched prospecting their nests. European Bee-eaters were nesting literally in the ground, at the sandy side of the tracks, whilst Blue-cheeked Bee-eater is apparently regular here. Lesser Grey Shrike was present in typical habitat with some tall bushes. A real highlight was superb views of Caspian Stonechat on its breeding territory, which appears even more distinct as a species than when I last saw it, wintering in Israel. Penduline Tit can be heard in the reed-edges. Menetries's Warbler is fairly common, and was seen in the tamarisks adjoining the water. With more time, there is no doubt many more species would have been discovered at these extensive lakes – but they certainly provided a wonderful afternoon's birding.

Astrakhan to Liman Road E119 (c. 46.444125, 47.942664 to 45.788213, 47.253800)

The journey from Astrakhan west into the land of the Saiga Antelope is fascinating and filled with good roadside birding. As you leave Astrakhan, the wooded steppe edges of the roads have enormous densities of grasshoppers and beetles, attested by Rollers and Red-footed Falcons being very common roadside birds. During February, the first stretch of the E119 was equally remarkable for its high densities of White-tailed Eagles, a common roadside bird in this part of the country, with a nest under construction next to a village. Indeed, the relative indifference of rural Russians to these huge birds, scavenging villages and living beside people, shows a very different historical trajectory to that taken in our own country.

As you enter the area where you find wetlands on either side of the E119, White-winged Terns become common, as well as Whiskered and Black Terns, Glossy Ibis, Black-crowned Night Heron, Purple Heron and Great Egret, whilst Pygmy Cormorant can also be seen. Cuckoos and Turtle Doves remain delightfully common along the roads, the former prospecting nests in the reeds. Near Liman (45.787395, 47.309769) we had breeding Ferruginous Duck on a roadside pool. This road would again benefit from proper exploration. Paddyfield Warbler should almost certainly be present, perhaps Booted Warbler, and with more time we would undoubtedly have discovered more species.

III. KEY SPECIES

Cinereous Vulture *Aegypius monachus*

The abundance of Saiga afterbirth and dead young, as well as dead cattle outside of the immediate Stepnoi reserve, recruited good numbers of this endangered bird. No nests were found or believed to exist in the vicinity and this appeared to be a non-breeding population. The vultures were a good symbol of ecosystem health in a country where farmyard livestock is still taken by wolves.

Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus*

Natural steppes have quite low densities of many birds, and whilst pallid harriers have been reported breeding very commonly in semi-natural steppes in Kazakhstan, and low intensity farmland, the population in Stepnoi Reserve appeared to be quite small. We encountered two females hunting on territory although only covered a fraction of the enormous expanses of grassland here.

Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis*

Breeding populations of Steppe Eagle formerly extended into Ukraine and Moldova in Europe, but the healthy breeding population on the Kalmykian Steppes, at Stepnoi especially, constitutes now the western outpost of the species range. Steppe Eagles do extremely well at Stepnoi. The rangers have provided platforms to increase nesting productivity, but they also make some fascinating nest-sites of their own. One had occupied a tiny Gypsy cemetery in the middle of the steppe, placing its nest within steel railings, safer perhaps from ground predators. We had superb opportunities to film Steppe Eagles at the nest, where the secret to their success was revealed in the high density of Sousliks (European Ground Squirrels) they brought to the nest. 10-15 pairs are present at Stepnoi and more in the wider region.

Demoiselle Crane *Grus virgo*

Now officially extinct in Turkey, and with the exception of a tiny population of 1-2 pairs in Azor-Sivash in Ukraine, the proper breeding range of this superb steppe species now begins north of the Caspian Sea, on the Kalmykian steppes, before continuing right across into Kazakhstan and Mongolia. Whilst some pairs of cranes can be found around the steppe lakes of Zenzeli and Liman, Stepnoi held an exceptional population, with perhaps one pair for every square kilometre. Many pairs were found carrying out distraction displays with chicks, and with great care we also filmed a female settle back onto her nest. The birds most often nested within 500m of lakes in grass tall enough to hide a sitting female.

Black-winged Pratincole *Glareola nordmanni*

A regular breeder most associated with the steppe lakes. Nikolai says that in most years, the species nests around the Zenzeli ponds (45.926178, 47.085110) and the roadside lakes beside Liman (45.789648, 47.286812). We had quite a poor year for pratincoles, evidently, as on just two occasions, a small group of 4-5 birds visited Stepnoi, flying towards a water source as we filmed on the steppe.

Bimaculated Lark *Glareola nordmanni*

With literally thousands of larks singing on the steppes at Stepnoi each dawn and dusk, we didn't have the time for a comprehensive breakdown each time. Of the rarer species, however, John picked up fledged Bimaculated Larks whilst filming the Saiga Antelope and several birds were seen across the steppes most days.

Oriental Lark *Alauda gulgula*

One of the small 'breakthroughs' of the trip was the discovery of Oriental Skylark, including fledged young, on John's footage whilst scrubbing through. Officially (BirdLife distribution map), this species only begins breeding in central Kazakhstan, around Aralsk, which means we encountered it around 1000km west of the known breeding range. This is potentially fairly significant and at some time, if time ever permits, I'll probably put together a more official record of this interesting sighting.

White-winged Lark *Alauda leucoptera*

Birding the steppes in the height of winter is, to say the least, a quiet experience. Good numbers of Rough-legged Buzzards and Hen Harriers punctuate long drives across the steppe, and during my visit at Stepnoi, Grey Wolves were particularly in evidence, with the prints found of an enormous male, whilst some others were seen moving away from us at great range. Only one passerine, of any description, was seen on the frozen grassland at Stepnoi and that was White-winged Lark. The birds were present in low density, but at least 3 observed on the 7 February 2016. The birds are quite interesting in behaviour, 'scuttling' and hopping away from a vehicle or walker, rather than flying. This may, again, represent one of the western-most regular wintering sites for the species.

Caspian Stonechat *Saxicola maurus hemprichii*

A very smart and distinct population of this likely future species was observed breeding around the Zenzeli ponds – really quite striking birds. We believed these to be the "North Caspian" race. We didn't have our cameras with us, but the males were characterized by an almost black-grown head, burgeoning white collar, highly-concentrated flush of orange-pink on the breast, contrasting with white underparts, and very generous white in the wing.

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

On visiting in February, Nikolai showed me around an area of lakes he knows very well, north of Astrakhan, in the vicinity of Bol'shoi Ashuluk (46.989778, 47.772588) in the Kharablinsky District. In winter, we 'only' saw around 50 White-tailed Eagles and, to Nikolai's great surprise, a flock of Snow Buntings. However, Nikolai described an excellent selection of breeding birds on this patch in summer, which included Red-headed Bunting. We did not have any spare time on our June trip to visit, but again, this would seem to represent one of the western-most localities where this species can be observed in the Western Palearctic.



IV. LARGER MAMMALS

Saiga Antelope *Saiga tartarica*

An extraordinary relic of the age of the Polar steppes, when woolly rhinoceros and mammoth still wandered as far west as Britain, Saiga are one of the world's most endangered and frankly downright strange animals. The Stepnoi Sanctuary has done a superb job of protecting these animals against poaching, and removing feral herbivores that compete with them for grazing the steppe. Anyone fortunate enough to visit Stepnoi should note that there are now hides built onto some of the artesian lakes where the animals come to drink. Please do not seek to approach Stepnoi without a permit – you do not want experience the anti-poaching methods of the determined staff here.

Corsac Fox *Vulpes corsac*

A number of these fox dens punctuate the steppe, and we were fortunate enough to film a family of cubs, which resemble a cross between a Red Fox and a Siamese cat, as they attempted to catch birds and failed miserably.

Grey Wolf *Vulpes corsac*

A thriving population of grey wolves live alongside farmers on the steppe here, and whilst discouraged and some males occasionally shot, there is not the extreme antagonism and fear you come across in western Europe. Some of the male steppe wolves may be amongst the largest of the species and we were shown some enormous footprints. We were able to film grey wolves on the reserve, but the signs of their presence were everywhere. In winter, I found tracks immediately around the remote camp hut, and we also found the remains of cattle which, late home to the farm by night, had been comprehensively demolished by the pack.

V. SPECIES LIST

1	Grey Partridge	<i>Perdix perdix</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
2	Common Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
3	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	Astrakhan-Liman, Russia
4	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	Astrakhan-Liman, Russia
5	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	Zenzeli, Astrakhan
6	Ruddy Shelduck	<i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
7	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	Zenzeli, Astrakhan
8	Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>	Zenzeli, Astrakhan, Russia
9	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	Zenzeli, Astrakhan, Russia
10	Ferruginous Duck	<i>Aythya nyroca</i>	Liman, Astrakhan, Russia
11	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	Zenzeli, Astrakhan, Russia
12	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	Zenzeli, Astrakhan, Russia
13	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	Zenzeli, Astrakhan, Russia
14	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	Astrakhan-Liman, Russia
15	Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	Astrakhan-Liman, Russia
16	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	Astrakhan-Liman, Russia
17	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	Astrakhan-Liman, Russia
18	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>	Astrakhan-Liman, Russia
19	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	Astrakhan-Liman, Russia
20	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	Zenzeli, Astrakhan, Russia
21	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax [carbo] carbo</i>	Astrakhan-Liman, Russia
22	European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
23	Eurasian Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
24	Cinereous Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
25	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	Zenzeli, Astrakhan, Russia
26	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>	Liman Hotel, Astrakhan, Russia
27	Pallid Harrier	<i>Circus macrourus</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
28	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	
29	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	
30	Long-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo [rufinus] rufinus</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
31	Steppe Eagle	<i>Aquila nipalensis</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
32	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>	Zenzeli, Astrakhan, Mongolia
33	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	Astrakhan-Liman, Russia
34	Red-footed Falcon	<i>Falco [vespertinus] vespertinus</i>	Astrakhan-Liman, Russia
35	Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
36	Water Rail	<i>Rallus [aquaticus] aquaticus</i>	Zenzeli, Astrakhan, Russia
37	Spotted Crake	<i>Porzana porzana</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
38	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	Zenzeli, Astrakhan, Russia
39	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	Zenzeli, Astrakhan, Russia
40	Demoiselle Crane	<i>Anthropoides virgo</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
41	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
42	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
43	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
44	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>	Zenzeli, Astrakhan, Russia

45	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
46	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago [gallinago] gallinago</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
47	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
48	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
49	Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
50	Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
51	Black-winged Pratincole	<i>Glareola nordmanni</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
52	Common Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	Astrakhan-Liman, Russia
53	Armenian Gull	<i>Larus armenicus</i>	Zenzeli, Astrakhan, Russia
54	Gull-billed Tern	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
55	Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>	Astrakhan, Russia
56	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	Zenzeli, Astrakhan, Russia
57	Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>	Volga Floodlands, Astrakhan, Russia
58	White-winged Tern	<i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>	Volga Floodlands, Astrakhan, Russia
59	Black Tern	<i>Chlidonias niger</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
60	Common Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	
61	European Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>	Astrakhan-Liman, Russia
62	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	Zenzeli, Astrakhan, Russia
63	Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	Zenzeli, Astrakhan, Russia
64	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
64	European Roller	<i>Coracias garrulus</i>	Astrakhan-Liman, Russia
65	European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>	Zenzeli, Astrakhan, Russia
66	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
67	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
68	Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius [cristatus] collurio</i>	Astrakhan-Liman, Russia
69	Lesser Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius minor</i>	Zenzeli, Astrakhan, Russia
70	Eurasian Golden Oriole	<i>Oriolus [oriolus] oriolus</i>	Zenzeli, Astrakhan, Russia
71	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	
72	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	
73	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	
74	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus [corone] corone</i>	
75	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	
76	Eurasian Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>	Zenzeli, Astrakhan, Russia
77	Bearded Reedling	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>	Zenzeli, Astrakhan, Russia
78	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
79	Bimaculated Lark	<i>Melanocorypha bimaculata</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
80	Greater Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
81	Lesser Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella rufescens</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
82	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	Liman, Astrakhan, Russia
83	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
84	Oriental Skylark	<i>Alauda gulgula</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
85	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
86	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
87	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	Zenzeli, Astrakhan, Russia
88	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	Zenzeli, Astrakhan, Russia
89	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	
90	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
91	Greenish Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochiloides</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
92	Great Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i>	Zenzeli, Astrakhan, Russia
93	Eastern Olivaceous Warbler	<i>Iduna pallida</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
94	Grasshopper Warbler	<i>Locustella naevia</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
95	Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
96	Menetries' Warbler	<i>Sylvia mystacea</i>	Zenzeli, Astrakhan, Russia
97	Rose-coloured Starling	<i>Pastor roseus</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
98	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
99	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	
100	Caspian Stonechat	<i>Saxicola [torquatus] hemprigii</i>	Zenzeli, Astrakhan, Russia
101	Isabelline Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe isabellina</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
102	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
103	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	
104	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
105	Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla [flava] flava</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
106	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	Astrakhan Airport, Russia
107	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	
108	Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	
109	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
110	Black-headed Bunting	<i>Emberiza melanocephala</i>	Stepnoi Reserve, Astrakhan, Russia
111	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	Zenzeli, Astrakhan, Russia