

THE SCOTISH ORNITHOLOGIST'S CLUB

TRIP TO KAZAKHSTAN

19th May – 3rd June, 2008

Led by Vladimir G. Kolbintsev and Russell G. Nisbet

The latest Team of Anne Tee, David & Janice Trotter, Campbell & Vicky McLellan, Gordon Addison, Anna White, Callum Smith, Clare Winsch and Joan Howie plus myself met up in Edinburgh airport on the 19th of May at 1230 hrs in preparation for the flight with the wonderful KLM airways to Amsterdam's Schipol before the 1830 flight out to Almaty in Kazakhstan. We left Holland at 1900 hrs and arrived in Almaty at 0510 Kazakh time which is five hours ahead of us.

Vladimir Kolbintsev met us with coach and driver, and after only twenty minutes or so we were at the Kazjol Hotel in Almaty after spotting a few **Indian Mynahs, Magpies, House Sparrows** and **Feral Pigeons**.

Once settled in, we had a very substantial breakfast downstairs al fresco at 0900 hrs after which I met with Indira from Silk Road Adventures to pay the bill (thanks to everyone for carrying so much cash for me).

By 1030 am we were out and about in Almaty city with Vlad who showed us some of the sites including huge statues, very grand buildings and churches plus an amazing market place with an incredible array of very fresh fruit and vegetables. We also managed to exchange a few dollars or euros for tenge. The attractive parklands produced **Blackbirds, Red-rumped Swallows, Great Tits, Masked Wagtail** and Green-veined White plus Small Balsam and a bugloss.

We had a fairly traditional kebab-style lunch plus a visit to a hotel foyer for postcards (the only ones in Almaty) and maps. We were back by 1530 hrs at the Kazjol Hotel where most of us caught up with a bit of relaxation, but the indomitable Anne ventured out again to Republic Square and saw **Nightingales** and **Blythe's Reed Warblers**. Gordon and I noted **Kestrel** and **Carrion Crow** from the window, and Campbell & Vicky notched up **Palm (or Laughing Dove)** as we were going out for our evening meal at 7 pm. We had the usual fun and games with the ordering and payment of a most enjoyable meal, but with Vlad's help, things were made much easier. We were all glad of a relatively early night!

On Wednesday the 21st May, we enjoyed another fine breakfast at 8 am and we all managed to get on the coach for 9 am even after some alarm clocks did not go off! Today we were heading for the lovely Sorbulak Lake through the horrendous Almaty rush-hour traffic! It took about an hour in this congestion before we eventually broke free onto the open road. I was absolutely amazed just how modern, wealthy and westernised Almaty seemed to be. Also it is very cosmopolitan with Mongols, Chinese, Russian and Turkish people living and working side by side.

En route to our first venue, we observed many **Lesser Grey Shrikes, Rollers, Bee-eaters, Laughing Doves, Collared Doves, Magpies, Jackdaws** (with white collars), **Rooks** at rookeries, nesting **Spanish Sparrows** and **Masked Wagtails**.

It was hot and hazy when we arrived at Sorbulak where 7,000 pairs of noisy greeted us nesting **Rose-coloured Starlings!** Almost every available nook and cranny of the boulder edging to the lake was taken up by a pair of these birds. Other birds around included **Lesser Grey Shrike, Sykes Warblers, Chiffchaff, Lesser Whitethroats, Hume's Yellow-browed Warblers, Gull-billed Terns, Common Terns, Black-headed Gulls, Yellow-legged Gulls,** and **Spotted Flycatchers**. There was a very good small wet area which housed **Red-crested Pochards, Ferruginous Ducks, 20 Black-winged Stilts, 2 Little Ringed Plover,** a **Curlew Sandpiper, 12 Little Stints,** a **Common Snipe** and a few **Lapwings**. On or over the lake we noted **Great Crested Grebes, Cormorants, Coots, 2 Dalmatian Pelicans, 10 Grey Herons, Great White Egret, Gadwall, Mallard, Teal, Ruddy Shelducks** with young, **Sand Martins, Swallows** and **20 Collared Pratincoles** spotted by Clare.

At our lunching spot in the shade of a tree, we watched **Red-headed Bunting** and **Blythe's Reed Warbler**, and amongst the horses at the water's edge we saw a flock of around 30 **Terek Sandpipers**, a summer-plumaged **Spotted Redshank**, identified by Gordon, plus **Black-headed** and **Citrine Wagtails**. A **Kingfisher** shot past Anne and I whilst Marsh Frogs croaked, and the odd dragonfly flew around.

Whilst travelling to the Kapchagay Reservoir, we stopped in a desert area with the odd roadside bush and saw **Northern, Pied** and **Isabelline Wheatears, Isabelline Shrike** and **Barred Warbler**. Another desert stop produced the mounds of gerbils and two very pale **Long-legged Buzzard** plus **Calandra Larks**.

Our last stop was on the way back to Almaty, and was at a developed end of the Kapchagay Reservoir, spotting more **Pied Wheatears, Red-rumped Swallows, Mallards,** two **Saker Falcons** and 6 **Montagu's Harriers**. The

botanists scrambled up a banking to find Gypsophila and Delphiniums. This evening, we ate at the hotel.

On Thursday the 22nd we were down for breakfast at 0800 hrs as usual and away into the Almaty traffic by 0900 before heading for the Kokpek Pass under threatening skies. En route, we stopped for a fuel stop, noting **Lesser Grey Shrikes, Nightingale** and 6 **Tree Sparrows** spotted by Anna. Black-veined Whites along with Copper butterflies were easy to photograph in the hills owing to the cool weather conditions as we looked for the **White-capped Bunting**. Large flocks of **Rose-coloured Starlings** (probably non-breeders) were flying over the hills, and **Rock Buntings, Pied Wheatears, Chukars, Cuckoos, Blue Rock Thrush** and **Hume's Lesser Whitethroats** frequented the rocky landscape. Vlad found a pregnant Dione Snake, which he managed to 'control'. A stick insect was attracted to Vicky's clothing and we managed to have good views of the sought-after **White-capped Bunting**.

The next stop was lunch in the semi-desert zone of Syugaty. Vlad said that we were lucky that it was an overcast day as in strong sunlight we would have been baked! A beautiful male **Desert Wheatear** was our first bird here followed by a few cryptic Toad-headed Agamas. After lunch, we spread out in search of other species, and eventually came across **Desert Warbler, Desert Lesser Whitethroat** and **Tawny Pipits**. A Spotted Agama was found by our driver, and a Tolai Hare darted across the arid, scrubby terrain. **Booted Eagle, Common and Upland Buzzards** and **Black Kite** were the raptors spotted in this area. All around was evidence of Lesser Souslik and Greater Gerbil, and we caught glimpses of both creatures.

From here, we travelled to the wonderful Charyn Gorge which resembles a mini Grand Canyon. There were few birds here but we noted **Alpine Swift** and heard a **Grey-headed Bunting**. The amazing scenery made up for the dearth of birds! We spent a fair bit of time here taking in the atmosphere of this special place. It was mentioned that this point was the furthest from a sea on earth!

On the way back home, we stopped by the roadside beside yet another rocky area where Callum found a pair of **Grey-headed Buntings** for us. We were very late back tonight, arriving at the Kazjol Hotel at 9.45 pm and had dinner in the hotel at 10 pm.

On Friday the 23rd May, we once again fought our way through the Almaty traffic towards the Kaskelen Valley after a 0900 hrs breakfast and not getting away until 11 am due to our coach not being able to get through the traffic to reach our hotel in time. We took all our luggage with us so that we would be ready for our evening train journey over to Jabagly via Tulkubas.

It was quite cloudy at our first river stop where we successfully searched for the **White-crowned Penduline Tit**. Before that, I noticed a **Common Sandpiper** on a boulder in the river. A couple of **Hobbies** flew around the hillside, and Vlad spotted a fairly distant **Golden Eagle**. A beautiful Humming Bird Hawkmoth gorged itself on the scented honeysuckle bush as a few medium sized Heath butterflies flew around.

The second stop was at a building site from which we walked up a track, having a very good view of a male **Common Rosefinch** and **Rock Buntings** as well as a few butterflies including Orange-tips. The flowers were amazing once again, and Clare found a natural site of a bee hive in a bank. Our next sought-after bird species was located when we had good views of a pair of **Meadow Buntings**.

The weather was really starting to close in now as we reached the high point for us of the valley where we stopped to have another fine lunch. **Corncrakes** were calling along with **Tree Pipit**, **Grasshopper Warbler** and **Coal Tits**, and 27 large Red Deer were spotted on the hillside. These beasts resemble Moose rather than Red Deer! Vlad collected a posy of lovely flowers for Anna! A walk in the rain produced **Hume's Yellow-browed Warbler**, **Rufous Turtle Dove** and **White-bellied Dipper**. Vlad pointed out three different types of Juniper to us whilst we photographed our first Yurt.

We headed downhill in the hope of finding better weather, and were a bit lucky as the rain went off allowing us to have an hour or so wandering along some leafy lanes watching nesting **Rollers** and **White-crowned Penduline Tits** plus **Nightingales**, **Pheasant**, **Alpine Swifts**, **Common Swifts** and **Woodpigeons**. Those who 'stuck' with Vlad saw a vast array of wonderful wildflowers.

All too soon, it was time to 'hoot' the bus horn to allow the Team to assemble in preparation for our journey through a bit more of the Almaty traffic so that we could reach the railway station in time for our trip overnight to Tulkubas. We left Almaty at 8 pm with eight of us in second class and four in first class! There was not too much difference as the air-conditioning in the first class was not working and there was no hot water in the carriage! It was a hot, sticky and a bit of a bumpy journey, but we reached our destination at 0715 on Saturday the 24th in pouring rain none the worse for wear. Our 29 year old school bus was waiting for us and within around 20 minutes we were at Yevgeny's Guest House in Jabagly. From the train in the early hours, we watched loads of **Rose-coloured Starlings**, **Rollers**, **Hoopoes**, **Bee-eaters** and **Magpies**.

After the 0900 breakfast, we ventured out in the old bus for the Karasay Gorge firstly stopping at a very good wet area which housed 2 **Little Bitterns**

(spotted by Anna – who else) and the odd **Moorhen**. A **Black Stork** flew over and **Golden Orioles** sang from the Poplars. A rather bedraggled **Hobby** flew around in search of dragonflies whilst the odd Muskrat swam through the reeds.

Under our umbrellas, we walked into the Karasay Gorge listening to **Red-headed Buntings**. Soon we were also hearing the noisy calls from agitated **Eastern Rock Nuthatches** feeding young. The nest site of a pair of **Egyptian Vultures** was located along with a disused nest of a Short-toed Eagle, and we were able to watch the former birds in flight.

Now it was time to move on to our lunching spot at Taskol Lake where we saw a wide variety of birds with a lovely snowy mountain backdrop – **Corn Bunting**, nesting **Collared Pratincoles**, **Garganey**, over 20 **Gadwalls**, **Little, Common** and **Gull-billed Terns**, **Grey Herons**, **Little Ringed Plovers**, **Kentish Plovers**, **Black-winged Stilts** and **Marsh Harrier**. The odd Grayling flew around investigating the beautiful blue gentians and other lovely flowers. Locusts and grasshoppers ‘abounded’ here. A **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** flew high rapidly.

From here, we moved onto the wonderful wooded Berkara Valley which was a favourite site for many people. Whilst travelling there, we knew that we were going to see **Paradise Flycatchers**, but the landscape was so barren that we could not imagine a lush green valley appearing out of nowhere – but it did! After a bit of rain, all the woodland birds suddenly appeared and we were treated to a plethora of birds – **Asian Paradise Flycatchers**, over 50 **Spotted Flycatchers**, **Olivaceous Warblers**, **Upcher’s Warbler**, **Golden Orioles**, a calling **Scops Owl**, **Rufous Turtle Doves**, **Lesser Grey Shrikes** and **Nightingales**. We ventured out beyond the more wooded area to see some more indigenous plants and birds such as the **Grey-headed Goldfinches** and **Indian Sparrows**.

Close-by are some ancient burial chambers, and once again it was a long day out which meant that we did not get back to Jabagly until 8 pm for yet another lovely 4-course meal. I ‘squared-up’ financially with Yevgeny who showed me some of his beautiful wildlife and scenic images, and we agreed that most people would like a copy of these on disc.

Joan, Anna, Callum, Gordon and myself were out before breakfast on the 25th, spotting **Boukhara Tit** (Vlad is a bit concerned about this tit as it breeds with the commoner Great Tit, and eventually may no longer be a true species!), **White-winged Woodpecker**, **Long-tailed Shrikes**, **Laughing Doves**, **Collared Doves**, **Red-rumped Swallows** and more **Indian Sparrows**. We managed back for the 8 am breakfast alright plus the 9 am start in the school bus which today was to take us to different parts of the large Ters Lake. The

first stop produced **Stone Curlew** (a surprise for Vlad), **Great Black-headed Gulls**, **Cormorants**, **Grey Herons** and nesting **Redshanks**.

The second stop at the head of the lake by the roadside produced 10 **Grey Herons**, a drake **Garganey**, **Little & Common Terns**, **Black-tailed Godwit**, **3 Greenshanks**, **Bee-eaters**, **Hobby** and **Collared Pratincole**. This shallow section of the lake was home to frogs, Amphibious Bistort and Water Crowfoot.

The keen eyesight of Anna and Clare was apparent at the 3rd vantage spot when Anna spotted 12 **Demoiselle Cranes** and Clare identified more **Great Black-headed Gulls!** Another **Stone Curlew** was sighted, probably feeding on the 1,000,000 grasshoppers, and a couple of **Hobbies** fed on the wing. The last stop before lunch was at the dam where around 10,000 **Rose-coloured Starlings** were nesting.

Lunch was taken by Koksay gorge, which divided Kazakhstan from Kirgizstan. This area was alive with Apollo (*Parnassius tianshanicus*) butterflies as well as Swallowtails, Blues and Clouded Yellows. A **Nightjar** called whilst we were having lunch, and we also noted a family of **Common Rosefinches**, **Hobby**, **3 Long-legged Buzzards**, **Raven**, **Rock Doves** and **Black Vulture**. Once again there was a wonderful array of wildflowers. As we were leaving, a couple of male **Little Bustards** flew past the bus, and at our last photographic stop we managed to find a family of **Rock Buntings**. Once again it was back for a lovely 4-course meal followed by a listen to the **Scops Owls** and a look for some bats.

On Monday the 26th of May, the usual section of the Team had a 7am pre-breakfast walk spotting **Hoopoes**, **Tree Sparrows** and **Hume's Yellow-browed Warblers**. It was another cloudy day as we headed up to the Aksu Gorge. At the first stop up the steep track (to allow the old bus engine to cool) we watched **Common Whitethroats**, **Blythe's Reed Warbler** and **Red-headed Buntings**. The second stop was on a high plateau where Anna spotted a Fox, and we all enjoyed the beautiful field of poppies and other plants. There was a tree full of **Rose-coloured Starlings**, and the wires contained **Corn Buntings** as **Black Kite** and **Long-legged Buzzard** were also spotted. At the side of the track, some of us managed to spot the odd **Chukar** and **Crested Lark**.

The gorge was a sheer delight as it was wooded and the weather was good. A **White-capped Bunting** sang for us all with **Black**, **Griffon**, **Egyptian** and **Lammergeier Vultures** flying overhead. Most of us managed to walk down and back up again seeing **Blackbirds**, **Mistle Thrush**, **Nightingale**, **Rufous-naped Tit**, **Yellow-breasted Azure Tit**, **Booted Eagle**, **Hobby**, **Lesser Kestrels**, **Crag Martins**, **House Martins** and a **Brown Dipper** for a lucky few on the river! At one point we were virtually convinced that we were watching an Eagle Owl

until at closer inspection we identified some roots of a Juniper! The butterflies were interesting here with Hermit (*Chazara enervata*), Large Wall Brown and Black-veined Whites being noted. Many beautiful insects were photographed as well as a Crab Spider.

On the way back down in the bus, we stopped at Irsu village where the children in particular were very friendly. This village can get cut off from civilisation by snow for several winter months. Gordon found a **Yellow-breasted Azure Tit** for the people who had not managed down the Aksu Gorge. Yet another lovely day out was over; so we headed back to base to prepare for another grand meal. Vlad was keen to point out the difference between the Almaty rush-hour and the Jabagly rush-hour which took place at around 8 pm when firstly the cows then the sheep followed by the horses were brought down from the day-time pastures back to the village!

It was a beautiful morning on Tuesday the 27th May that was just as well as this was the day we were to ride our horses up to the mountain hut in the Ulken Kaindy Valley. Most of us were more than just a little apprehensive about the horse riding, but our two horsemen selected just the right horse for each of us which made things much easier. Most of our luggage was going up to the hut by lorry with all the food, bedding and staff etc.

In the end, most people really enjoyed the riding which enabled us to have fabulous views of the surrounding countryside. However, one or two folk had a bit of bother with saddle sores and aching bits and pieces! Our horses did extremely well in the heat with the sweat pouring off them. In fact, Kulgeir, my horse, stopped several times to get its breath back. Just before the first break (after 45 minutes), he stopped completely and had to be 'forced' to carry on. The flowers en route were as beautiful as ever, and we noted lots of butterflies (including Evermann's Ringlet *Lasiommata evermanni* and Apollo *Parnassius tianshanicus*) plus **Red-headed Buntings**. The next stop was for lunch at a small hut where we waited until 3 pm. Whilst having lunch, a **Lammergeier** and a **Long-legged Buzzard** flew past, and a **Yellow-breasted Azure Tit** was close to hand. We spent quite a bit of time overlooking the waterfall where an Ibex had a couple of kids and a **Blue Whistling Thrush** was nesting.

After lunch, it was only another 20 minutes before we stopped again to allow three of us to walk the rest of the way to the mountain hut at 1,900 metres. **Quail**, **Corncrake** and **Nightjar** were calling, and we had close views of **Rock Buntings** plus **Hume's Lesser Whitethroats**, and distant views of **Alpine Choughs**. A family of seven Wild Boars ran speedily across the track, and these were the only ones to be seen during the whole holiday although there was

plenty of evidence of their presence! This small band reached the isolated mountain hut at 5.45 pm by which time the rest of the Team was well ensconced. Around this idyllic hut, more **Corncrakes, Common Rosefinch, Common Whitethroat, Red-headed Bunting, Nightingales** and **Rufous Turtle Doves** were calling.

The next three days and nights were going to be quite an experience with no flushing loo, no hot water and no electricity! Our staff looked after us very well indeed, and once more we ate very well. In the evening, we ventured out to see if Clare's handkerchief dance would attract any Nightjars!

It was cloudy but warm turning to thundery rain on Wednesday the 28th as we watched our first Isabelline Brown Bear through the telescopes from the mountain hut. From here, our horsemen also found 10 Ibex and two Marmots for us to look at. Luckily, the rain held off until lunch which was brought up the local valley to us by our trusty horsemen.

Vlad was very keen to show us some of the special tulips, orange trollius and primulas, and we spotted some good birds as well – **Golden Eagle**, over 20 **Alpine Choughs, Rock Bunting, Black Redstart, Stonechat** and a wonderful **Nightjar** found for us by Anne. I flushed a **Quail** on the way down and Campbell flushed a family of **Grey Partridge**.

We arrived back at base at 1500 hrs feeling quite wet; so we had hot drinks, a little food plus a game of Scrabble!

It was an absolutely beautiful day on Thursday the 29th May which was a Godsend as this was the day we were riding up to our high point of the area (13,000 ft) which would overlook the magnificent Celestial Mountains of the Tien Shan! The views were breathtaking (as was the walking), and we saw **Lammergeier**, at least 6 **Griffon Vultures, Black Vulture, Water Pipits** and a **Northern Wheatear**. Alay Lidless Skinks were extremely common, and it was amazing to see Ladybirds, Ants and several species of butterflies at this extreme height! The Team managed to spot another Isabelline Bear on the opposite side of the valley feeding in a green square patch of vegetation. Whilst having lunch, we were visited by a pair of **Shorelarks** and the photographers were able to take picturesque shots of alpine plants.

Everyone walked all the way back which took most of the afternoon with Gordon adding **White-winged Grosbeaks** to our bird list. The usual birds of **Eastern Stonechat, Red-headed Bunting, Common Whitethroats** and **Corncrakes** were around the mountain hut, and we even heard the high-pitched melodious song of the **Blue Whistling Thrush**.

On Friday the 30th, it was time to pack all our belongings which would be taken down by lorry once more whilst all but three of us set off to walk to the small hut where we had our lunch on the way up. For some people, this was the best walk of the holiday with a juniper forest experience plus alpine grass meadows. Yellow-legged Tortoiseshells, Cardinals, Blues, Large White, Small White, Apollos, Hungarian Glider, Coppers, Swallowtail, Queen of Spain Fritillary, High Brown Fritillary, Brimstone and Eastern Pale Clouded Yellows were all on the wing on this very hot, sunny day. The best bird watching spot was at a small stream flowing through a wooded valley where we heard **Asian Paradise Flycatcher** and saw **Blue-headed Redstart**, **Greenish Warbler** and a party of **White-winged Grosbeaks**.

Lunch was waiting for us close to the river where the waterfall was, as a Camberwell Beauty flew through the trees. Joan and I had a close encounter with a **Blue Whistling Thrush**, and a couple of **Yellow-breasted Azure Tits** fed in the nearby foliage. Our horses were with us; so fairly soon after lunch we were all saddled up and on our way back to Jabagly. The weather was really hot now which produced the best butterfly spectacle of the trip with thousands of butterflies on the move, and in particular at least two species of Graylings. At the last but one stop, a few of us decided to walk the rest of the way, passing a pond housing several dragonflies and a Red-necked Terrapin.

The trusty bus was waiting for us, and it took us back to Yevgeny's Guest House (after saying "farewell and thanks" to our horses and horsemen) where we could 'freshen up' before having a meal. **Greenish Warblers** were calling in the garden. Our train was due to leave Tulkubas at 1940, and luckily for us it was about twenty minutes late as we only arrived at the station at 1940! It was still very hot indeed which made the journey back to Almaty very sweaty indeed; at least for the second class passengers! Our first class friends this time had wonderful air-conditioning plus water in their carriage. So all was well! Clare had to share a compartment with three strangers!

We arrived exactly on time at 0825 at Almaty on Saturday the last day of May, and with little traffic we were able to reach the Kazjol Hotel for breakfast with ease. After this, we boarded the three taxis for our trip up to the Observatory at Gaish. It was an extremely rough track, but the 4x4 taxis coped very well. The first stop was in search of the **Brown Dipper** which eluded us at this point, but we noted the very yellow **Grey Wagtail** instead. Not long after we pulled away, the folk in our taxi spotted the **Brown Dipper** and we stopped to have good views but the other two taxis had moved on! We had another half-an-hour stop at a very wooded area, which seemed to be alive with **Hume's Yellow-browed Warblers**.

When we reached our accommodation for the next two nights, it looked like a set from Dr Who! Most of us had a walk around the local hillock before the 2 pm lunch, seeing **Red-fronted Serin, Cuckoo, Alpine Choughs**, three **Red-mantled Rosefinches**, and hearing a **Wren**.

After a very substantial cooked lunch, Vlad took us further afield as it began to rain. I was amazed that so many birds were still out singing in the inclement weather, but we noted **Himalayan Rubythroats, Black-throated Accentors, Common Rosefinch** and **Water Pipits** as well as Marmots and Picas. The flowers once again were beautiful and abundant.

Although there was some rain to start with on Sunday the 1st of June, the weather gradually improved, and the folk who ventured out before breakfast were rewarded with **Himalayan Rubythroats, Black-throated Accentors, Merlin**, glimpses of a **White-browed Tit-warbler** (thanks to Clare) and the sounds of the **Himalayan Snowcocks**.

After the 9 am breakfast, all of us except David, who did not feel like experiencing any more of the bumpy rides, drove down to Big Almaty Lake in search of a very special bird – the **Ibisbill!** It was a very pleasant walk to the far end of the reservoir and we noted some **Ruddy Shelducks** by the water's edge. Vlad the lad spotted the **Ibisbill** for us, and we all had very good views for over half-an-hour through the telescopes of two adults and two young.

On the way back, we added **Red-fronted Serins, Goldcrest, Sparrowhawk** and **Merlin** (found roosting by Clare), **Carrion Crows** and perhaps best of all a beautiful **Evermann's Redstart** which posed for us. We also came across an Alay Lidless Skink which seemingly was only the third record for the area and the first for ten years! A few butterflies were on the wing, and we noted Black-veined White, Eastern Marbled White, Eastern Meadow brown, Spotted Fritillary and the odd Skipper. Anne spotted a nesting colony of **House Martins** near the dam wall.

We now returned to the Observatory for lunch, stopping en route to look at a party of **Grey-headed Goldfinches, Red-fronted Serins** and **Red-mantled Rosefinches**.

After lunch, I arrange to take a guided walk onto the adjacent hillock followed by a walk over to the **White-browed Tit-warbler** site, and then, for those who wished, a further walk into a small valley to look for the Himalayan Snowcock. I soon realised how tricky it was to keep the Team together because as much as I tried, people seemed to drift away to do their own thing. I then realised how difficult it was for Vlad to do the same with folk having different walking paces and interests!

There was not too much to be seen on the hillock (it was 3 pm after all), but we fared better at the **Tit-warbler** site with good views of this bird for many of us plus **Black-throated Accentor** and **Hume's Yellow-browed Warblers**. Those of us, who ventured further, added **Brown Accentor**, **Water Pipit**, **Plain Mountain Finch** and **Himalayan Rubythroats**. Even my attempts at mimicking the Snowcock did not produce a single squeak although the Marmots seemed to respond! All too soon it was time to venture back to base to get ready for our dripping showers before our last meal in the mountains!

Many people had a pre-breakfast walk once again on Monday the 2nd of June on a reasonable morning, seeing amongst other birds **Himalayan Rubythroat**, **Mistle Thrush**, **Blue-headed Redstart**, **White-winged Grosbeaks**, **Red-mantled Rosefinches**, **Red-fronted Serins** and **Grey-headed Goldfinches** plus **Sulphur-bellied Warbler** for Gordon. This morning, we were all away by 0945 after breakfast in the three taxis which would take us up to the former hydrogen bomb manufacturing site at the Cosmostation at 3,400 metres. We stopped at a possible **Himalayan Snowcock** site but only heard the birds calling; so we continued to the Station where we parked the taxis for the next few hours. Very unfortunately, the weather turned for the worse with wind and cold rain. It was not very pleasant at all as we panted up the scree tracks looking for birds. One of the main species we were looking for was **Guldenstadt's Redstart**, and on the way back down after sheltering from the elements, Vlad got a glimpse of one.

As the weather started to improve, our spirits lifted a little and we realised that apart from the untidy buildings we were in a beautiful part of the mountains, and had actually stepped into Russia! Loads of **Alpine Choughs** were in evidence, and a few pairs of **Red-billed Choughs** were nesting in the buildings. **Plain Mountain Finches** and **Water Pipits** were relatively common and a **Northern Wheatear** sang from the car park area with the odd **Alpine (Altai) Accentor** also being seen. This seemed to be a good spot to linger as Joan reported that whilst sheltering in one of the taxis she had good views of the rare **Redstart!**

Vlad came to the rescue when he found the bird again, and although most of us did not see it at this point, eagle-eyed Anna found it for us later through a telescope after a **Merlin** had swiftly flown over our heads.

That was more or less the end of the wildlife holiday! All of us, except for David who walked all the way back to Gaish, jumped in the taxis and admired the beautiful violets and primulas on the slopes. We had lunch then packed for the 2 ½ hour journey back to the Kazjol Hotel where we settled in for a meal

and a short night. Short because we had to be at the coach for 5 am on Tuesday the 3rd! We all made it on time, and with the streets of Almaty being very quiet at that time in the morning we were soon saying our farewells at the airport to Vlad who had looked after us so well. Both sets of flights were on time although we had about 5 hours to kill in Schipol but with the odd game of Scrabble, good books and an art exhibition to look at, the time went fairly quickly.

We will all remember the kind hospitality shown to us by all we met, the staggering scenery, the better than expected food, the horse riding, the train journeys, the changeable weather, the 176 birds seen or heard, over 30 butterfly types, frogs, snakes, terrapins, creepy-crawlies and hundreds of flowers which Anna has listed, and if anyone wishes I can send a photocopy of these. But, perhaps best of all was the patience and expertise shown by Vlad to all our requests and queries plus the friendship of all those on the trip. People were asking me if I would go again? Well, although I received no real complaints about anything, I felt awkward about subjecting friends to three days with poor hygiene, no hot water and a 'squat loo'; sweltering cramped conditions on the train, hour-long traffic jams in Almaty and entrusting your lives to the wonderful horses. However, in retrospect no doubt we will quickly forget about the hardships (including all the colds) and remember all the wonderful highlights. Thanks in advance to Vicky and Campbell who have invited us all down to 18 Glen Crescent in Peebles later in the summer for a reunion.

Written by Russell G. Nisbet - June 2008.