

**Birding the Desert and Mountains of SE Kazakhstan- May 24th - June 6th 2009
with Sandwich Bird Tours and Central Asia Birding.
by John van der Dol and Machiel Valkenburg**

Participants:

Steve Barnes, Mike Brimson, Chris Dyett, Jim Law, Sean McCann, Robert Rackliffe,
John van der Dol and our Norwegian friends Einar Kongshang and Morten Venas
with our guide Machiel Valkenburg and translator Malika



Sogety Valley by Einar

May 24th

After an uneventful flight via Amsterdam, where we met up with our Norwegian friends, we finally arrived at 05.10 in Almaty on the KLM flight. It took ages to get through passport control – typical Soviet Style. We departed immediately from the airport to Kaskelen where we hoped to see the Meadow Bunting. After one hour driving we arrive in the Ili Ala-Tau NP where we had a field breakfast, pancakes with jam and fruit. During the meal the birding started with the first common species of Kazakhstan – Common Myna, Golden Oriole, White Crowned Penduline Tit, ‘bactriana Magpie and Common Rosefinch. We drove further into the park where we added Azure Tit, Greenish Warbler and Mistle Thrush to our list. Not long after we also encountered our first Hume’s Leaf Warbler. We finally stopped in the place where Meadow Bunting is regularly seen. We saw Masked Wagtail, White-bellied Dipper, Long-legged Buzzard and Common Kestrel but no Meadow Bunting. A Golden Eagle flew over and more Azure Tits were seen. We continued driving and stopped at an idyllic spot for lunch. The weather started to change a little. It became darker and colder resulting in a notable drop in birdlife. We decided to leave the park and go for our hotel located on the other side of the National Park. During our drive to the hotel we tried to change some money into local currency without success. It appears it would be best to change money in the airport but after our long wait we just wanted to get out on to the road. Fortunately we were able to exchange money with Machiel, our guide from Central Asia Birding. Whilst driving up to the hotel it started to rain. We had dinner and got to bed early as all were very tired.



Black-bellied Sandgrouse by Morten

May 25th

We had breakfast at 7 and left for Sogety at 07.45. We started by checking a local spot for Long-tailed Shrike which Machiel knew about. It took just seconds to locate it which resulted in a dance of joy by Morten, for which this was a lifer for him and he clearly wanted to see it. Also Golden Oriole was present which was found foraging on the ground! We started our drive to the east where after one hour we stopped again and this time for Richard's Pipit. Again this bird was spotted after a few minutes of searching. In the nearby bushes White-capped Penduline Tit was also present and this enabled some of us who had not had good views yesterday to do get some today. The weather was not clever with rain and a cold wind but already the group were gelling in the bus aided by a huge box of creamy biscuits. Fortunately by the time when we arrived at our second stop at the Kokpek pass it started to clear up although the wind remained strong. We walked up into the gorge and see our first of many Red-headed Buntings whilst some Chukars are pottering around the rocks. We saw Pied Wheatear which was a lifer for most participants and Rob discovered an Apollo butterfly. Finally we heard two White-capped Buntings but due to the cold and windy weather they were in no mood to show themselves. We headed further up the pass for our lunch stop which was in a gorge of the Kokpek pass. After lunch we tried for the area of desert where Pallas's Sandgrouse is seen on a regular basis. We saw some Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Horned Lark, Desert Lesser Whitethroat and a Steppe Eagle but we had no luck with the sandgrouse on this occasion. People specifically visit Kazakhstan to see this species but it is not common and some groups don't even see it. Our last stop was at a well near the Sogety Mountains. When we stepped out of the bus we immediately heard Grey-necked Bunting and Mongolian Finch. We positioned ourselves at the well where more than 50 Mongolian Finches came to drink and fortunately for us also two Crimson-winged Finches. Afterwards we descended to our guesthouse located in a 'wadi' near the Charyn River. This was to be our home for the next three nights. Dinner and we head for our beds in our individual chalets which were quite nice but without water or facilities. Stand pipes outside for washing and, by western standards, unacceptable toilet facilities, were to be the order of the day for the next three days.



Asian Desert Warbler by Rob

May 26th

Bacon and eggs awaited us at 7 and we were soon packed and ready for another day's birding in this exciting region. We started with the spot for Pallas's Sandgrouse again but as yesterday without success but we did add Desert Warbler to our list. Clearly this is not an easy species to find and they appear to be very thin in the ground in a huge landscape of flat steppe. On the way to the Charyn Canyon a Steppe Grey Shrike was noted and not far from the canyon itself we started seeing Desert Wheatears. At one such stop a Saker Falcon circled above our heads for several minutes giving us stunning views. At the Canyon photography was the order of the day but as usual the scenery was just far too grand to do it justice with a camera. After about 20 minutes we continued our journey in a southerly direction towards Qarqara. The lunch spot here is a guaranteed location for Rock Sparrow and it was not long before the bird appeared. After a large lunch of yet more cold macaroni with tomato ketchup and cold sausage, a favourite of Einar's I believe, we drove on to Kegen. It was much hotter today, which was rather pleasant after a few rainy days. Along the way a Lammergeier showed itself giving great views, Demoiselle Cranes were seen in good numbers and Raven were noted. The gorgeous pass which we crossed harbours a colony of Lesser Kestrels. When approaching Kegen the first large Buteo was our target-species for the day – Upland Buzzard!, and new for the entire group. One was seen but they are not easy to differentiate from the ubiquitous Long-legged Buzzards. Common Tern was found near the petrol station where we also saw the *ferghanensis* race of Common Rosefinch which has much more red than the one we encounter in Europe. After being stopped by border control for 20 minutes (what would we do without Malika, our interpreter) we started our drive back to the hotel where we arrived at 7.30, just in time for yet another culinary delight before bed.

May 27th Zhalanash

The day began as usual at 7 o'clock with breakfast which today was pancakes with jam. Again we started the day in search of Pallas's Sandgrouse and at last we were fortunate. Two birds which were sitting very close to the road were flushed by our vehicle. They flew to the other side of the road and we continued by foot into the same direction. A long drag across the desert and we saw just one more bird fly over our heads and some people had distant views of Persian gazelles. Three Oriental Honey Buzzards were seen migrating in a northerly direction as well. We met up with our bus, a modern and comfortable Mercedes Sprinter and drove to Zhalanash which is located near the Kyrgyz border but further west. There was a lot of vulture activity

suggesting they were hungry due of the bad weather during the last few days. Black, Himalayan and Lammergeier were seen. The Himalayan Vultures gave stunningly close views during our lunch stop. Also we got acquainted with the local inhabitants – too bad that this man had a little bit too much vodka in his body. (Machiel’s words) A short walk up the hill resulted in great views of Red-fronted Serin’s and some Tree Pipits.

We checked the graveyard where Pine Bunting was regular seen but it was not until we failed that we were told that they had in fact not been recorded here for the last two years. We played the sound but only a Corn Bunting reacted. It was getting late so a fast run back to the hotel and dinner at 7.30. This consisted of plov (a local “delicacy”) and salad which everybody enjoyed very well. (again Machiel’s words) I am not sure I agree with his sentiments. We did the daily checklist and again retired to bed fairly early. Yet another very successful day.



Rose-coloured Starlings by Einar

May 28th – back to Almaty

All excursions start and finish in Almaty and so today we packed up our gear and spent the day driving and stopping on our way back to our hotel in Almaty. We had only one more target to add to our list, namely the elusive White-capped Bunting. First we returned to the well near the Sogety Mountains where Mongolian Finches are very abundant and we estimated we saw about 200 birds. A few Linnets and a Turkestan Shrike were added to the list.

We drove further towards the Kokpek pass – firstly we buy more cookies. We ate three kilos in a couple of days. In the pass we stopped at the bottom of a steep gorge where we immediately heard three of the buntings calling. Soon after we picked up a Rock Thrush sitting on top of the ridge. Rock buntings were all around and we had very close views of several.

We moved on and stopped in a small village called Masaq where we set up our tables for lunch. Many common village birds were around including Golden Oriole, Long-tailed Shrike and it was here that we had amazing views of White-winged Woodpecker



White-winged Woodpecker by Steve

After lunch we drove to Almaty without stopping and arrived around 17.00 at our Hotel located in the Ili Ala-Tau National Park. After dinner of chicken with fries, we again retired early to bed.

May 29th – To Taukum

Before breakfast Einar, the “mountain goat” decided to climb the nearby hills and into the forests. He returned with sightings of Nutcracker and a Black Grouse being the last extremely rare! We again packed our bags and headed out towards the Taukum desert by way of Sorbulak lake. After an hour we arrived at the lake seeing many Rollers, Lesser Grey Shrikes and Red-headed Buntings along the way. One of the first sightings at the lake was a rather splendid Dalmatian Pelican whilst Black-eared Kites were circling over. We walked along the dam spotting loads of birds. Among them Caspian Gulls, Terek Sandpipers, one Pallas’s Gull, Black-winged Stilts, Ferruginous Ducks and 15 more Dalmatian Pelicans. We continued on to a reed-bed where Clamorous Reed Warblers were calling and eventually showing themselves. A Little Bittern flew to and from giving great views.

We spent about an hour at the lake before continuing our journey north. The scenery was spectacular and the habitat was becoming more arid by the mile. Eventually we got to the desert and our first stop was at the “Wish Tree”. This tree was the only vegetation higher than 12 inches for miles and consequently it attracts migrant passerines from miles around. It is called the Wish Tree because locals tie bits of cloth to it making a wish in the process. Perhaps birders have contributed to this idea as all tour groups stop here and for good reason. In half an hour we saw Booted, Sykes, Blyth’s Reed , Barred, Common Whitethroat, Greenish, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler all in the same tree. Enough to confuse even some of the best birders. It was just incredible. Pied Wheatear turned up too. Our first views of Bimaculated Larks were here too and Demoiselle Cranes were found in a nearby piece of water.

We continued on and to a small village called Aydarly where we stretched our legs for a short while. Only Shikra was added to the list here.

We eventually arrived at our camp at 7pm after just having seen another pair of Pallas’s Sandgrouse cross the track in front of the bus. A nice cold beer awaited us at the camp. The camp consisted of three Yurts sleeping tents, each holding 5 beds

round the perimeter, a kitchen tent and a very comfortable and traditionally decorated dining tent.



Taukum Desert Camp by Einar

May 30th – Taukum

An early start at 04.45 followed by coffee and biscuits enabled us to drive out into the desert in search of the two Taukum specialities – Macqueens Bustard and Caspian Plover! The tactics are rather simple. We drive a few kilometres and stop and scan the area. During one of the first stops we found a Wolf running and we were able to scope it for some time. Our first sighting of the day was indeed a Macqueens which unfortunately landed out of sight in the desert.. We searched the desert until 08.30 after which we decided to return to the camp for breakfast. The Caspian Plover will have to wait for another occasion. We had another go after breakfast, but these waders are no easy. They are scarce, but they had been seen recently in this area. We felt confident we would get them in time, but not today.. The heat haze made life difficult too.

After a tasty lunch we enjoyed a siesta before going off birding again in the late afternoon. We checked the wells and saw several nice species including great views of Greater Sand Plovers, Pallid Harrier, Temminck's and Little Stints and lots of Black-bellied Sandgrouse. In Konshengel we encountered the friendly man again who did not like us looking into his trees. Unfortunately he was the only person with trees on his property and they were laden with warblers. It was difficult to ignore the birds, so we just ignored the owner and left the arguing to Malika and Machiel.

We returned to camp about 7 ready for yet another tasty offering. If we had known what was to come, food-wise, later on in the trip, we may have stocked up a little more.

May 31st – Taukum Tamgaly Tas

We again woke up early as we needed to get out for the Caspian Plovers, having failed to locate them yesterday. After just being 15 minutes in the field we discovered a group of no less than 9 individuals. This gave us time to move to one of the wells where great numbers of Sandgrouse were known to come to drink. At 07.30 the show started with Black-bellied Sandgrouse arriving in small groups. A total of about 150 were counted. But really we had come to try and find the other two species and it was not long before Pin-tails clocked on and while watching these, two Pallas's walked into view. What a superb start to the day.

We went back to our camp where breakfast was waiting for us. After a great meal we departed to Tamgaly Tas where we had to search for the Persian Nuthatch (Eastern Rock Nuthatch) and admire the petroglyphs. A long and bumpy road took us to the entrance of the 'museum'. After checking two spots we were lucky on the third. No less than six birds were present and we all had great views. We decided to move on immediately as we wanted to check the spot for White-winged Lark as well. On the parking lot a group of friendly Kazakhs offered us a meal which some received with grace. We had just one bird on our minds and therefore instead of sticking around we headed to the spot for the lark. We traversed the desert in line and played the tape but on this very hot day no White-winged Larks were around. We decided to drive to Konshengel again and check the trees for warblers and again bumped into the friendly landowner. Not a lot was seen. On the way back some of the group decided they wanted to walk back from the well to the camp while others thought they would return to get showered. The first group were rewarded with a Pacific Golden Plover which is a rarity for the region. Unfortunately it did not hang around for the others to catch up with it.

Again we arrived at 7 at the camp for a welcome cold beer before dinner. Another fantastic day. Not many species, but all good quality.



Russian Power supply by Steve

June 1st – Topar

We left camp at 07.30 and drove to Topar without stopping. This is an area with many small lakes, some of which we checked. Some species were added to the list including Great Bittern, Great White Heron, Common Kingfisher and Reed Bunting. Just beyond Topar we tried for one of our target species, namely the Black-headed Penduline Tit. Unfortunately we were unsuccessful but Turkestan Tits were found and this was a new species for all in the group. We carried on to Zheltorangly which is famous for its Turanga forest. Yellow-eyed Dove was found immediately upon our arrival and Saxaul Sparrow and White-winged Woodpecker were located not long after. After lunch we tried for Pale Scops Owl but were unlucky in our quest although we did find a couple of Desert Little Owls. We returned to Topar where again we tried for the Penduline Tit, again with no luck. We would have carried on looking but Sean had become violently sick during the morning and he was complaining of not being able to breathe. This is not the place to be ill. A decision was made to get him back to camp and we dosed him up with a cocktail of drugs which probably made it worse. A decision was mad that if he was no better by the morning we would have to evacuate him out and back to Almaty, but this is a long drive.

We got back in our camp at 17.00 so Sean was able to get to bed. The rest of us checked out the artesian wells but they were all empty.

It looked like bad weather was on the way as the skies turned a dark shade of grey and the wind got up. Really atmospheric. It rained hard in the night but dawn broke dry

June 2nd – Topar

As we have an extra day in our itinerary for missed species we decided to head back to Topar with the Penduline Tit as our target species. Sean stayed behind as he was still not fit to travel, although a lot better than last night. A good day's rest would sort him out – so probably our cocktail did help!?

On arrival at Topar we started with checking the old reed-beds where these birds nest and forage. We saw Common Tern, Black-crowned Night Heron and many Black-headed Wagtails of the form '*melanogrisea*'. The large lake near Topar village produced a new species too - Mallard. Many Black Terns and White-winged Terns gave good views. Eventually we found a pair of Black-headed Penduline Tits which gave a stunning display for all to see. Bluethroat was found in this area too. A half hour later we added a male White-headed Duck to our list, but then it started to rain and it effectively wrecked the rest of the day as it did not stop until the evening.

We had a farewell dinner in the camp – fries with shaslick marinated in red wine sauce together with a tasty salad.



Black-headed Penduline Tit

June 3rd – Taukum – Almaty

After saying our goodbyes to the staff of the camp we started on our long drive back to Almaty and back to the hotel in the mountains for our third one night stay. We stopped at the “Wish Tree” again but saw little different from the other day. We stopped at Sorbulak Lake again for lunch. We spent some time birding here and added Collared Pratincole, Spotted Redshank and Water Rail to the list but otherwise it was

much the same as a few days ago. However the place was infested with ladybirds and we managed to extract two ticks out of Einar's back using a cigarette.

We got back to the hotel in the late afternoon and settled into our rooms. An evening walk out from the hotel produced amazing views of Blue Whistling Thrush. The ones here are much darker grey, almost black as opposed to the blue colouration of the Northern India birds.

Another "wonderful" meal was followed by an early night in anticipation of the mountains tomorrow and yet another totally different habitat with its associated species.

June 4th – Almaty Observatory

We left our hotel at 8 o'clock. Our trusty bus was exchanged for 3 four wheel drive and very luxurious and spacious Delica's. We drove through the city to the entrance of the Ili Ala-Tau National Park. We were able to take in some of the architectural differences between this ex-Soviet style building technique of re-inforced concrete slabs and the new modern glass and steel constructions financed by banks and oil. Old and new, rich and poor, the contrast was striking. All services are laid above the ground, so gas pipes resemble the pipes as seen in industrial complexes where instead of going underground and obstacle they will bend the pipe over the top. Come to a drive way or a side road and you drive under the gas pipe. A rusty one at that!

On arrival at the park and paying the entrance fee we started driving up. We had our first stop at a river where Machiel, from the car, heard a Blue Whistling Thrush singing. After scanning several minutes we found the bird. We carried on past the Hydro Electric Power Station clearly built by the Russians with no regard to the beautiful countryside. A hideous mess of concrete and cast iron.

On arrival at Big Almaty Lake we walked round the edge to the far end searching the fast flowing streams for Ibisbill, a pair of which is supposed to breed here. We scanned from several different points but were unable to locate the birds. A huge area, the same colour as the bird with many black-spots. We will have to try again.

On the way back to the cars we found our first Black-throated Accentors, '*blakistoni*' Water Pipit, Eversmann's Redstart and Sulphur-bellied Warbler.



Eversmann's Redstart by Rob

We then drove up to the Observatory which was to be our base for the next two nights. We had lunch here and continued birding in the vicinity of the hotel. I

managed to get a flight view of Gldenstdt's Redstart but we will have to climb higher to make sure the whole group see it.

After lunch we immediately found another Sulphur-bellied Warbler, while Morten and Machiel located a White-browed Tit Warbler. Not long after the whole group had great views of this superb looking bird. It is one of the main reasons for coming here, so it was great to see it so quickly. The White-tailed Rubythroat was also found singing from the tops of bushes. Considering it was thick fog from time to time, we had a great time birding along the bottom of this juniper slope.

We had dinner at 8 (if you can call it that). Don't go to Kazakhstan for the culinary experience unless it is a bad one you want. Phillips screw in your soup? Horse- meat with blue dye in ones soup? I lived three days on chocolates, biscuits and yoghurt. But the scenery and birds are to die for, so it was all well worth it. And it is a good way to lose a pound or two.

June 5th – Cosmos Station & Big Almaty Lake

We had a late breakfast at 8 o'clock but most people had been out since dawn and had recorded a variety of species including Himalayan Snowcocks, Blue-capped Redstart, Black-throated Accentor, White-winged Grosbeak, female Red-mantled Rosefinch and many Greenish Warblers. After our breakfast we drove to the Cosmos Station at 3800m where all high mountain specialities were on the menu. Even before reaching the top we had a distant Altai Accentor. Happily for us we would see several more later. We continued by foot and great views of Gldenstdt's Redstart were obtained. Morten continued on his own while the rest stayed behind to watch the Redstarts. Not all of us felt like climbing at that altitude. When Morten returned back with the only Brown Accentors of the day together with views of Himalayan Snowcock, we all had to do the climb. No success though. We did however see Lammergeier and a juvenile Golden Eagle. We returned back to the Observatory for lunch. During the drive down in our four wheel drive vehicles we noted many Plain Mountain Finches and Water Pipits and a good if a little distant Snowcock.

After lunch we had another attempt for Ibisbill at Big Almaty Lake. We adopted the same strategy as last time and again we were out of luck. While walking back we were stopped by border patrol who wanted to check all our documents. After some talking and explaining that we were birdwatchers they let us go and we continued for Songar Tit. which after playing the tape we were rewarded with a brief but distant call but we never saw the bird. We arrived back at the hotel at 7pm. Another brief walk in the vicinity of the base, then dinner and off to bed early in anticipation of our last day in the mountains tomorrow.



by Einar



Hotel in the mountains by Steve

June 6th- Big Almaty Lake-Almaty

Again early morning birding around the hotel was very nice with superb weather. Robert located yet another species of Accentor in the shape of the Alpine variety which most of the group managed to see. Four species of accentor in one trip is amazing!

After breakfast we again visited Great Almaty Lake for our last opportunity to see Ibisbill. Fortunately we were successful thanks entirely due to Sean who had spotted them from miles away, his revenge for missing the Black-headed Penduline Tit! Even at half the distance they were hard to see. Sean must have some eyes, or maybe a better scope than the rest of us. It was a new bird for our Norwegian friends and Sean so all were pleased.

We returned to the hotel for another scrummy lunch and packed up to descend to Almaty for our fourth and final stay in the city. We made some more stops for the Songar Tit, but they were not playing ball!

Further birding round the hotel in Almaty produced the usual Azure Tits, Grasshopper Warblers, White-throated Dippers and also some Corncrakes which as usual refused to show themselves despite the fact we were just feet away.



Green-capped Redstart by Rob

June 7th Almaty-home

A very early start with tea and biscuits and cake accompanied with a powercut and we were re-aquainted with our trusty bus and driver who took us to the airport. Checking in all went very smoothly and eventually we all flew off to Amsterdam where we said goodbye to Einar and Morten. They flew off to Norway while we set off for London.

Tour postscript:

For us an usual tour with eight guys and the guide from Central Asia Birding and Malika, our translator. It was a very successful tour with some stunning birds, many of which are sought-after species by the Western Palearctic birders. The plants too were excellent and Einar and Steve were able to get some great photos.

The scenery was some of the best one could wish for with beautiful snow-covered mountains surrounding the arid desert.

The accommodation was adequate to not quite so good although the Yurt Camp in the desert was excellent and great fun to stay in. The food, well I have already mentioned that although again in the Yurt Camp it was excellent.

In conclusion a great trip and thanks must go to Machiel from Central Asia birding and Malika who kept us all in order. It was her duty!

Thanks also to all the participants, for without them there would be no tour.

Photos in this report are by Einar, Morten, Steve and Robert. Thanks to all of them for supplying them.

John



Einar using the facilities in the desert by Einar

Systematic List

The names used in this list follow the order and nomenclature of “The Birds of Kazakhstan” by Arend Wassink and Gerald J Oreel 2007

Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea*
Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*
Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina*
Common Pochard *Aythya farina*
Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca*
White-headed Duck *Oxyura leucocephala* A single male on a lake near Topar
Gadwall *Anas streptera*
Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope*
Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata*
Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*
Garganey *Anas querquedula*
Common Teal *Anas crecca*
Black Grouse *Tetrao tetrix mongolicus* Four seen and heard in the mountains near the hotel on the outskirts of Almaty. Another heard on the penultimate day there.
Himalayan Snowcock *Tetraogallus himalayensis sewerzowi* Heard on two days and a dozen seen by the group in the vicinity of the Observatory
Chukar *Alectoris chukar falki*
Common Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus mongolicus*
Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo sinensis*
Great White Pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus*
Dalmation Pelican *Pelecanus crispus* Fifteen at Sorbulak Lake, 6 there on our second visit and two singles at Topar
Great Bittern *Botaurus stellaris* Single near Topar
Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus* Between one and six on four dates
Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* Five near Topar
Great Egret *Casmerodius albus*
Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*
Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis capensis*
Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristata*
Black-eared Kite *Milvus lineatus*
Lammergeier *Gypaetus barbatus aureus* A sub adult on the way to Zhalanash and an adult on two days in the mountains
Himalayan Griffon Vulture *Gyps himalayensis* Two at Zhalanash
Eurasian Black Vulture *Aegypius monachus* Two at Zhalanash
Short-toed Eagle *Circaetus gallicus*
Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*
Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus* The commonest harrier of the trip with one or two daily in the desert



Steppe Grey Shrike by Rob

Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus* Three males on the way to Topar

Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*

Shikra *Accipiter badius cenchroides*

Oriental Honey Buzzard *Pernis ptilorhyncus* Three birds seen migrating through the Sogety valley

Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus* The commonest buteo of the region

Upland Buzzard *Buteo hemilasius* Three birds seen near and at Zhalanash were considered to be this species. They are difficult to separate from the previous species

Booted Eagle *Aquila pennata* Six birds seen

Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* Eleven birds seen in all areas

Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis* Two individuals in the desert

Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni* Common in arid regions



Lesser Kestrel by Morten

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*
 Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo* very common throughout
 Saker Falcon *Falco cherrug* One in the Sogety valley was the sole record
 Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* Two in the Sogety valley
 Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus* One near Topar
 Corncrake *Crex crex* Several heard and a couple seen and photographed by just one observer
 Little Crake *Porzana parva* One heard near Topar
 Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*
 Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra*
 Demoiselle Crane *Grus virgo* Small parties in all desert areas with up to 27 on 7 dates
 Macqueens Bustard *Chlamydotis macqueenii* Two in the Taukum desert not far from our camp
 Ibisbill *Ibidorhyncha struthersii* A pair at great Almaty Lake were rather elusive but showed well in the end
 Pied Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta*
 Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*
 Collared Pratincole *Glareola pratincola* Three at Sorbulak Lake
 Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*
 Greater Sand Plover *Charadrius leschenaultia* Common in the Taukum desert with up to 14 in a day
 Caspian Plover *Charadrius asiaticus* A party of four adults and five young not half a mile from our camp were difficult to find
 Pacific Golden Plover *Pluvialis fulva* A single bird at one of the artesian wells in the desert did not hang around for long
 Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*
 Little Stint *Calidris minuta*
 Temminck's Stint *Calidris temminckii*
 Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus* Eight and five at Sorbulak Lake on our two visits there
 Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*
 Common Redshank *Tringa tetanus*
 Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus*
 Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus*
 Pallas's Gull *Larus ichthyaetus* An adult on our first visit to Sorbulak Lake and a sub-adult on our next visit there
 Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans* The common large gull of the region
 Little Tern *Sternula albifrons*
 Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon nilotica*
 Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybrida* One near Topar
 Black Tern *Chlidonias niger*
 White-winged Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus* Six at Sorbulak Lake and 3 near Topar
 Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*
 Black-bellied Sandgrouse *Pterocles orientalis arenarius* The commonest sandgrouse in both the Sogety Valley and up to 250 in the Taukum Desert.



Black-bellied Sandgrouse by Rob

Pin-tailed Sandgrouse *Pterocles alchata caudactus* Three came down to drink at the artesian well with the 250 of the previous species
Pallas's Sandgrouse *Syrrhaptes paradoxus* A difficult bird to get but we had a pair near the road in flight followed by a single overhead in the Sogety Valley. In the Taukum Desert a pair flew in front of the van on our arrival at the camp and presumably the same two came to drink with the previous two species giving stunning views. Not all groups connect with this species
Rock Dove *Columba livia*
Yellow-eyed Dove *Columba eversmanni* A dozen in the Zheltoranga forest gave good views
Common Woodpigeon *Columba palumbus*
Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*
European Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur*
Oriental Turtle Dove *Streptopelia orientalis* Common
Laughing Dove *Streptopelia senegalensis* Two singles
Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*
European Scops Owl *Otus scops* Heard regularly during the first week in Almaty and the Sogety Valley with just one seen in a hole in a cliff face
Little Owl *Athena noctua* Two in the Zheltoranga forest
European Nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus* One heard and two flushed during the day, one of which obligingly sat out in the open to allow photos to be taken
Common Swift *Apus apus*
European Bee-eater *Merops apiaster*
European Roller *Coracias garrulus semenow*
Eurasian Hoopoe *Upupa epops*
White-winged Woodpecker *Dendrocopus leucopterus* Two singles and 6+ in the Zheltoranga Forest
Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra psammochroa* Very common in dry areas
Bimaculated Lark *Melanocorypha bimaculata torquata* Also very common in arid areas
Greater Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla longipennis*
Lesser Short-toed Lark *Calandrella rufescens heinel* Two in the Sogety Valley
Crested Lark *Galerida cristata magna*
Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis dulcivox*
Horned Lark *Eremophila alpestris* Up to 8 in the Sogety Valley

Sand Martin *Riparia riparia innominata*
 Pale Sand Martin *Riparia diluta* Two near Zhalanash
 Eurasian Crag Martin *Ptyonoprogne rupestris*
 Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*
 Common House Martin *Delichon urbicum*
 Red-rumped Swallow *Cecropsis daurica rufula*
 Richard's Pipit *Antus richardi* A pair breeding on the way to Sogety Valley from Almaty



Richard's Pipit by Rob

Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris*
 Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis haringtoni*
 Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta blakistoni*
 Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* ?
 Black-headed Wagtail *Motacilla feldegg*
 Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreoala calcarta* A single near Zhalanash
 Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*
 Masked Wagtail *Motacilla personata* Common
 White-throated Dipper *Cinclus cinclus leucogaster* Common in suitable streams
 Brown Dipper *Cinclus pallasii tenuirostris* Three singles
 Wnter Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes tianschanicus*
 Brown Accentor *Prunella fulvescens* A single seen by just one observer and photographed
 Black-throated Accentor *Prunella atrogularis huttoni* Ten on daily basis in the mountains
 Altai Accentor *Prunella himalayana* Five naer the Cosmos Station
 Alpine Accentor *Prunella collaris rufilata* Two near the Observatory
 Common Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos hafizi*
 Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica pallidularis* A single male near Topar



White-tailed Rubythroat by Morten

White-tailed Rubythroat *Luscinia pectoralis ballioni* Eight on two days near the Observatory gave stunning views as they sat singing on top of Juniper bushes. A little different from the ones on their wintering grounds in Nepal

Evermann's Redstart *Phoenicurus erythronotus* Three on three days in the mountains

Blue-capped Redstart *Phoenicurus coeruleocephalus* A male and two threes in the mountains

Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruris phoenicuroides*

Guldenstadt's Redstart *Phoenicurus erythrogaster grandis* A single near the Observatory and three up at the Cosmos Station gave fantastic views. This was one of the target species we came to Kazakhstan for.



Guldenstadt's Redstart by Rob

Siberian Stonechat *Saxicola maurus*

Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina* Commonest wheatear in the area

Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*

Pied Wheatear *Oenanthe pleschanka* Fairly common in arid rocky areas

Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti atrogularis* Up to three on four dates

Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush *Monticola saxatilis* Two single males in the Sogety Valley area

Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius pandoo* A single male in the Kokpek Pass

Blue Whistling Thrush *Myophonus caeruleus temminckii* A single near the hotel in Almaty and two on the way to the mountains
 Common Blackbird *Turdus merula*
 Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*
 Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti orientalis*
 Common Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella naevia*
 Paddyfield Warbler *Acrocephalus agricola* One and two on just two dates
 Blyth's Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus dumetorum* Common
 European (Caspian) Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus fuscus* Common in the aukum desert
 Marsh Warbler *Acrocephalus palustris* A single and two in the grounds of the Hunting Lodge in the Sogety valley
 Eastern Olivaceous Warbler *Acrocephalus pallidus elaeicus* Common
 Booted Warbler *Acrocephalus caligatus* (below) One to three on three dates.



Booted Warbler by Steve

Syke's Warbler *Acrocephalus rama* Common in the desert
 Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus zarudnyi* One or two on three dates in reed bed areas
 Clamorous Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus stentoreus brunnescens* Three at Sorbulak Lake
 Asian Desert Warbler *Sylvia nana* Small numbers in the Sogety valley
 Barred Warbler *Sylvia nisoria* A single in the "Wishing Tree" on the edge of the Taukum Desert
 Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca minula*
 Hume's Whitethroat *Sylvia althaea monticola* One or two in the Ala-Tau Park and en route to the Charyn Canyon
 Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis volgensis*
 Siberian Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita tristis* One in the "Wishing Tree"
 Greenish Warbler *Phylloscopus trochiloides viridanus* Common
 Hume's Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus humei* Common



Hume's Warbler by Morten

Sulphur-bellied Warbler *Phylloscopus griseolus* Three and two near the Observatory
 Goldcrest *Regulus regulus tristis*
 White-browed Tit Warbler *Leptopoecile sophiae* Four and a single near the
 Observatory in the Juniper scrub. Another specialist target species
 Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*
 Bearded Reedling *Panurus biarmicus rusicus*
 Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*
 Azure Tit *Cyanistes cyanus tianschanicus*) Common



Azure Tit by Einar

Turkestan Tit *Parus bokharensis turkistanicus* Fifteen near Topar
 Great Tit *Parus major*
 Songar Tit *Poecile songara* Heard only in the pine forests down from Great Almaty
 Lake
 Eastern Rock Nuthatch *Sitta tephronota* A family part of seven seen
 Black-headed Penduline Tit *Remiz macronyx ssaposhnikowl* A pair near Topar gave
 stunning and prolonged views

White-crowned Penduline Tit *Remiz coronatus* Up to four on the first four dates
 Eurasian Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus*
 Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*
 Turkestan Shrike *Lanius phoenicuroides* Fairly common
 Long-tailed Shrike *Lanius schach erythronotus* Two pairs
 Lesser Grey Shrike *Lanius minor* Common
 Steppe Grey Shrike *Lanius pallidirostris* One or two on four dates
 Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica bactriana*
 Spotted Nutcracker *Nucifraga caryocatactes rothschildi*
 Alpine Chough *Pyrrhocorax graculus forsythia*
 Red-billed Chough *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax centralis*
 Western Jackdaw *Corvus monedula soemmerringii*
 Rook *Corvus frugilegus*
 Carrion Crow *Corvus corone orientalis*
 Brown-necked Raven *Corvus ruficollis* Two or three on three dates in the desert areas
 Common Raven *Corvus corax laurincei*
 Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris porphyronotus*
 Rose-coloured Starling *Sturnus roseus* Extremely common
 Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*
 Saxaul Sparrow *Passer ammodendri nigricans* About a dozen in the Zheltoranga Forest



Saxaul Sparrow by Rob

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus bactrianus*
 Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis transcaspicus*
 Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus dilutus*
 Rock Sparrow *Petronia petronia intermedia*
 Red-fronted Serin *Serinus pusillus* Up to 20 on six dates
 European Greenfinch *Chloris chloris turkestanicus*
 European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis parapanisi*
 Common Linnet *Carduelis cannabina bella*

Plain Mountain Finch *Leucosticte nemoricola altaica* Common in high altitudes
 Asian Crimson-winged Finch *Rhodopechys sanguineus* Two and a single in the Sogety Valley
 Desert Finch *Rhodospiza obsoleta* One or two on three dates in the Taukum Desert
 Mongolian Finch *Bucanetes mongolicus* Very common at waterholes in the Sogety valley with up to 200 seen in one day
 Common Rosefinch *Carpodacus erythrinus ferghanensis* Common
 Red-mantled Rosefinch *Carpodacus rhodachlamys* Two or three on three dates in the mountains near the Observatory
 White-winged Grosbeak *Mycerobas carnipes* Up to ten on three dates near the Observatory
 White-capped Bunting *Emberiza stewarti* Just two birds seen
 Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia par* Up to 6 on three dates
 Grey-necked Bunting *Emberiza buchanani neobscura* Up to six on four dates in arid areas
 Common Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus pyrrhuloides* Two near Topar
 Red-headed Bunting *Emberiza bruniceps* Common
 Corn Bunting *Emberiza calandra buturlini*



Red-headed Bunting by Morten

Mammals

Reference : Mammals of the World Checklist by Duff and Lawson, A&C Black, London 2004

European Rabbit *Oryctolagus cuniculus*
 European Hare *Lepus europaeus*
 Eurasian Red Squirrel *Sciurus vulgaris*
 Bobak Marmot *Marmota bobak*
 Yellow Ground Squirrel (Souslik) *Spermophilus fulvus*
 Grey Wolf *Canis lupus*
 Golden Jackal *Canis aureus*
 Eastern Roe Deer *Capreolus pygargus*
 Siberian Ibex *Capra sibirica*
 Persian (Goitered) Gazelle *Gazella subgutturosa*
 Pika sp
 Weasel sp
 Desert Rat sp



Our base in the desert



John van der Dol
Sandwich Bird Tours
July 2009



Good Night!