

Birding Abroad Ltd - Kazakhstan

25 May to 6 June 2026

Landlocked Kazakhstan is a country of immense scale, where vast steppes, glittering lakes and rugged mountain ranges stretch across the heart of Central Asia. Once traversed by the ancient trading caravans of the Great Silk Road, the country occupies a fascinating crossroads between Europe and Asia and supports an exceptionally rich and varied avifauna. Our tour was designed to experience a broad cross-section of this remarkable birdlife.

Joining Birding Abroad for this adventure were Dave Cropper, Rose-Ann Movsovic, Nev Nicholson, Steve Pearson, Keith and Liz Reynolds, Tony and Theresa Walker and Alan Yates, with Lance and Nick as the tour leaders.

Pre-tour days: Sunday 24 & Monday 25 May

Lance and Nick had arrived in Astana several days ahead of the main tour and as group members arrived on flights from Manchester and London over the next two days, they were on hand to welcome them to Kazakhstan. Alan and Steve touched down first during the early hours of 24 May, thereafter, enjoying a couple of days sightseeing. The remaining group members arrived twenty-four hours later and having rested for a few hours were ready at midday on 25 May to meet our driver and begin an afternoon's pre-tour birding excursion.



Our destination was Lake Taldykol on the western outskirts of Astana. After a short drive through the city, we reached the northern shore of the lake, a large expanse of reed-fringed pools that survives despite the relentless advance of urban development. The wetland remains an important refuge for breeding and migratory waterbirds and provides a fitting introduction to Kazakhstan's rich birdlife.

Patience soon rewarded the group with excellent views of two territorial Paddyfield Warblers, whilst both Azure Tit and a pair of Citrine Wagtails were busy carrying food to nearby nests. A singing Bluethroat showed intermittently and the rather hoarse notes of a Great Reed-warbler croaked from

the phragmites. Overhead, a flock of 18 Glossy Ibis passed through, whilst a distant male Montagu's Harrier drifted over the city fringes and three Western Marsh-harriers quartered the reedbeds. Other highlights included a pair of Whooper Swans with recently fledged young and our first Marsh Sandpiper delicately feeding around a muddy islet.

A short relocation took us to the north-eastern corner of the lake, where high-rise housing developments were steadily encroaching on the remaining littoral zones. Exploring a narrow belt of scrub and scattered trees along the shoreline produced four Booted Warblers, a singing Common Whitethroat, several Bluethroats and two each of Red-backed Shrike, Spotted Flycatcher and Siberian Stonechat. More familiar companions included House and Eurasian Tree Sparrows, Common Starling, Hooded Crow and Eurasian Magpie. A particular surprise was four calling Common Quail, with two flushed from beside the track and seen well in flight.



Booted Warbler is a common breeding bird of the *Artemisia* scrub on the steppe

This section lake itself held an impressive variety of waterfowl, including 40 Common Pochard, 20 Red-crested Pochard, 15 Northern Shoveler, 15 Gadwall, eight Garganey, three Tufted Duck, together with single Eurasian Wigeon and Northern Pintail. Best of all was a pair of White-headed Ducks, scarce breeders on the steppe lakes of northern Kazakhstan. A herd of 80 Mute Swans, 12 Greylag Geese and four each of Great Crested Grebes and Black-necked Grebes added further variety. Although water levels remained high following the spring rains, waders included 30 Black-winged Stilts, three each of Terek, Marsh and Wood Sandpipers, and a single Common Sandpiper. Above the water, three White-winged, four Black and four Common Terns hawked for insects, whilst numerous breeding Black-headed and Steppe Gulls occupied the lake. Two Dalmatian Pelicans provided a suitably impressive finale before a Eurasian Hobby flashed through ahead of gathering rain clouds, signalling the end of a highly successful introductory excursion.

As Astana continues to expand, significant parts of the Taldykol wetland complex face increasing pressure from drainage and development. Research has shown that these wetlands remain important not only for birds but also for flood control, cooling the city during summer and maintaining urban biodiversity. Hopefully sufficient foresight will prevail to ensure that at least part of this remarkable urban oasis survives for the benefit of both wildlife and future generations of Astana residents.

Tuesday 26 May: Today marked the start of the official tour. After breakfast at 06.30 we met our local guide, Victoria, and 45 minutes later set off westwards from Astana towards the vast Kazakh steppe. Conditions were ideal, with sunshine throughout and temperatures remaining comfortably in the low twenties.

Our first stop was an area of shelter-belt trees known to have Pine Bunting on territory. Although a female showed only briefly before disappearing into cover, the walk produced four Eurasian Golden Orioles, an Azure Tit, several Great Tits and a fine male Common Redstart. A Corsac Fox added further interest as it scuttled away across the neighbouring grasslands, and a European Hedgehog made its way steadily along a path through the scrub.

Beyond the city fringes, the landscape opened into a mosaic of cultivated fields and steppe. Northern Lapwings were widespread and Rooks abundant, whilst a male Montagu's Harrier quartered the fields and at least eight Oriental Turtle-doves were seen on roadside wires and at the trackside.



Raptors quickly became a recurring theme of the day. An immature Eastern Imperial Eagle drifted overhead, soon followed by two ghostly adult male Pallid Harriers. Another Eastern Imperial Eagle posed obligingly on a telegraph pole before a third was seen circling high on a thermal. Western Yellow Wagtails of the steppe sub-species *beema* (or Sykes's Wagtail) were quite common and a few small tight flocks of Rosy Starlings added to the colourful interlude as they swept rapidly past. Shelter belt trees bordering the road provided old Rook nests which proved attractive to around ten smart Red-footed Falcons as well as a smaller numbers of Common Kestrels.

The first of several steppe lakes proved particularly productive. More than 20 Black-necked Grebes, mostly in pairs, shared the water with at least one Slavonian Grebe, allowing excellent comparisons. Waders included a Terek, two Wood and three Marsh Sandpipers, a Spotted Redshank and several Common Redshanks, whilst at least 50 Red-necked Phalaropes fed actively along the shoreline. Shallow floodwaters on the opposite side of the road were occupied by a colony of some 80 White-winged Terns, many of which passed almost within arm's reach. Another four Red-footed Falcons completed the scene, males and females, perched in partially submerged lakeside trees giving great views.

One of the day's principal targets was the increasingly rare Sociable Lapwing, a species whose fortunes continue to decline across its breeding range. Stopping at a favoured site, Theresa soon picked out a candidate bird feeding about 200 metres away in a fallow field. We were then treated to an unexpected display when it repeatedly flew at a Eurasian Magpie perched on nearby wires, allowing everyone to appreciate its striking wing pattern in flight.

As we travelled deeper into the steppe, cultivated land gradually gave way to vast expanses of natural grassland. The horizon stretched seemingly without end, and feather grasses rippled in the breeze like silver-green waves. Patches of sagebrush and drought-tolerant vegetation added subtle shades of grey, blue and gold to the landscape. Although often imagined as flat and featureless, the steppe here is gently rolling, crossed by ribbons of lush riverside vegetation and punctuated by saline lakes, freshwater marshes and extensive reedbeds. It was easy to appreciate why these grasslands support such a rich and distinctive wildlife community.



Lunch was taken beside one such river, with time to explore the riparian willows while Victoria prepared our picnic. The riverside scrub was alive with birdsong, including displaying Barred Warblers,

'Siberian' Lesser Whitethroats *blythi*, Blyth's Reed-warbler, Common Nightingale, Bluethroat and several Common Rosefinches, while European Bee-eaters drifted gracefully above the riverbanks.

By now we had left the tarmac roads behind and were following rough tracks across the open plains. Northern Wheatears became frequent companions and both Black Lark and White-winged Lark, became increasingly common. Males sang from the ground or fluttered overhead in display mode while others rose from the tracks before us. Seeing these two iconic species in such numbers, at least 80 of each we estimated, was a memorable experience and one of the defining birding spectacles of the Kazakh steppe. The support act in the lark chorus was our more familiar Eurasian Skylark which were also plentiful.



A male Black Lark postures and sings, they also perform elaborate display flights

The next lake produced a surprise when a Common Crane flew alongside three Demoiselle Cranes, perhaps a lingerer from earlier in the spring, maybe even injured and unable make its full northward migration. Several Black-winged Pratincoles put on a good show as they glided around us and a cross section of wader species fed on wetter margins, including some stunning summer-plumaged Curlew Sandpipers. A Eurasian Whimbrel was a surprise, the bird flying off and away from us at an angle which made it difficult to discern any detail. As we moved across the steppe from one lake to the next, a female Little Bustard showed well amongst a slightly lusher patch and another male Pallid Harrier quartered the area. Each lake seemed to have a slightly different mix of species, with numerous Great Cormorants at one, a few Common Goldeneye at another and regular flyovers of small numbers of Dalmatian Pelicans. Our final lake of the day hosted a large colony of Pallas's Gulls, with at least 400 adults being counted, many pairs having quite large downy young, a spectacular sight which not many birders from Western Europe will have seen.

Accompanying them on the breeding island were 40 Steppe Gulls, whilst 15 Slender-billed Gull fed over the insect-rich lake surface. Red-necked Phalaropes seemed to have their favourite lakes, some of which were swarming with birds, yet others held few or even none. Despite this, the day count reached some 6,000 individuals, probably a very conservative estimate. Little Stints too had been numerous at some lakes, with around 1000 for the day estimated, and scattered around some 14 Demoiselle Crane and eight Pallid Harriers provided more class. Notable mammals were Bobak (Steppe) Marmot and two Brown Hare. Butterflies are always of interest within our groups, so it was nice to record Eastern Bath White and several Eastern Pale Clouded Yellow during the day.

By late afternoon after a long day in the field, it was time to turn and head back towards Astana. Lightning strikes lit the sky as we reached the city limits, before a nice evening meal ended our first full day of the tour.

Wednesday 27 May: Breakfast was at 06.30 and within the hour we were again heading into the magnificent steppe, this time taking a more south-westerly route from Astana. Once again the weather was kind, with sunshine and pleasant temperatures accompanying us throughout the day.

Our first stop was a familiar area of riverside scrub that had proved productive on previous tours. Along the way, a roadside Fieldfare, a pair of Montagu's Harriers quartering the grasslands and three Oriental Turtle-doves provided an encouraging start. A short walk through some scrub produced singing Greenish Warbler, Siberian Chiffchaff, Common Grasshopper Warbler, Common Nightingale, 'Siberian' Lesser Whitethroat, Common Whitethroat and Blyth's Reed-warbler, together with three Common Rosefinches. A female Pine Bunting flew passed, eventually leading us to a superb singing male, which eventually showed well through the telescopes.

Continuing deeper into the steppe, a pair of Demoiselle Cranes were feeding in adjacent grassland.



As we approached Lake Sarykol, Nev's sharp eyes picked out a Eurasian Bittern standing motionless in a roadside dyke, which allowed remarkably close and prolonged views. The lake itself held singles of Temminck's Stint and Terek Sandpiper, whilst more open water supported Dalmatian Pelicans and Black Terns.

The next lake proved equally rewarding. Colonies of Black Terns and Black-headed Gulls were accompanied by at least ten pairs of Black-necked Grebes, many already sitting on nests. Careful scanning of the reed margins revealed three splendid, Red-necked Grebes, whilst nine Glossy Ibis fed alongside five Little Stints. One of the great joys of birding in Kazakhstan is that every stop seems capable of producing something special and today was no exception.

Beyond Jarlikol village, where Common Swifts wheeled above the rooftops, we paused at another shallow lake and were treated to one of the day's finest spectacles. Concentrated along a sheltered bay were about 100 Terek Sandpipers, 45 Little Stints, six Temminck's Stints, more than 200 Red-necked Phalaropes and 40 Grey Plovers in full breeding plumage.



These steppe lakes provide vital staging posts for waders migrating north to the Arctic, allowing them to refuel before completing the final leg of their journey. Around 50 Pied Avocets, likely local breeders, added to the scene, while Ruddy Shelduck, Red-crested Pochard, Whooper Swans with young and a male *thunbergi* Western Yellow Wagtail were further highlights. Three White-winged Larks flushed from the trackside, though this species was noticeably scarcer than in the areas visited the previous day.

Lunch was taken beside an old orchard that we have visited on several previous tours. Red-footed Falcons circled overhead alongside Black Kites, while a Eurasian Hobby flashed through at speed. Victoria then showed us a Long-eared Owl guarding its nest. Blyth's Reed-warblers seemed to pop up

almost everywhere we stopped, their songs providing a regular background rhythm to the day. A small flock of Rosy Starlings flew past, perhaps reflecting a particularly good year for this species in the north of the country, while a pair of Grey Partridges offered a pleasing reminder of a bird now much scarcer in many parts of Britain. Butterflies included Common Blue, Green-underside Blue and Duke of Burgundy.

During the return journey to Astana, a European Roller and Eurasian Buzzard were noted from the bus before we made a final stop at 'Little Taldykol Lake', a now-isolated remnant of the larger wetland complex. Despite lying within the city limits, the site still supports extensive reedbeds and open water and would make a superb urban nature reserve. Although our search for Moustached Warbler proved unsuccessful, another pair of White-headed Ducks were welcome additions. Bluethroat and Citrine Wagtail further underlined the site's conservation value; all set against the incongruous backdrop of modern high-rise buildings reflecting in the water.

We returned to our hotel well satisfied that we had truly experienced the Kazakh steppe, a landscape defined by a powerful sense of space, wilderness and subtle beauty: wind-swept grasses, mirror-like lakes, vast skies, and the quiet grandeur of one of Eurasia's last great ecosystems.

Thursday 28 May: The weather deteriorated overnight, with persistent rain forecast throughout the day. Rather than battle the elements, we opted for a more relaxed start, enjoying a leisurely breakfast and some free time before meeting at midday for an exploration of flamboyant Astana.

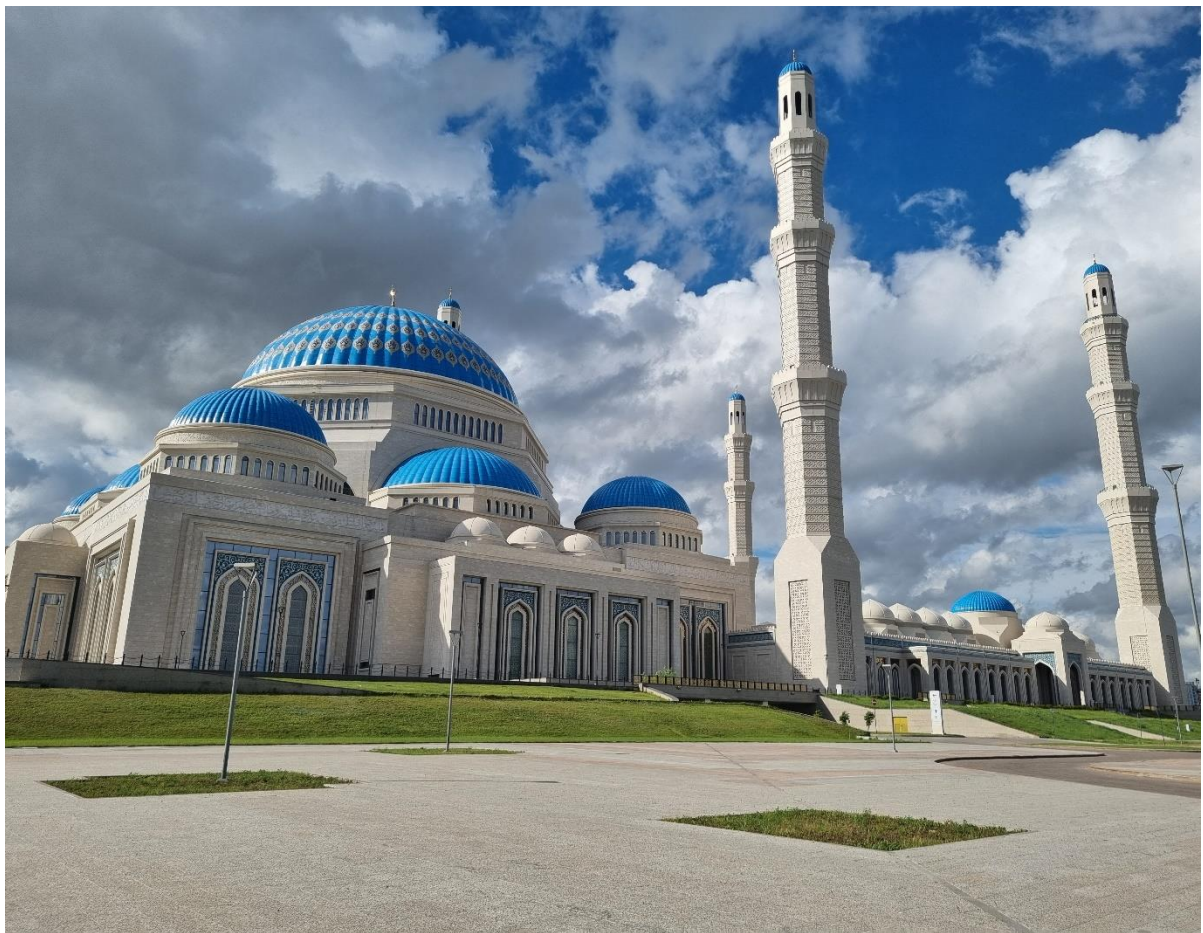


We headed with Victoria and our driver to the city centre for a stroll which revealed a city unlike any other in Central Asia. Emerging from the vast grasslands of northern Kazakhstan, the capital is defined by bold architectural statements, soaring skyscrapers and futuristic landmarks with some mimicry of iconic global cities. For visitors arriving from Europe like us, the scale, modernity and confidence of

the city was striking, creating the impression of a capital that has been built with one eye firmly fixed on the future. Quirky yes, but impressive and making a bold statement.

We took a stroll along the Nurzhol Boulevard, a grand, tiered promenade which runs for two kilometres through the heart of Astana - complete with the ubiquitous Blyth's Reed-warbler singing in the decorative bushes even here!

A nice lunch was then taken at an Uzbek restaurant before we drove to the city outskirts to pay a visit to the impressive Grand Mosque. Opened in 2022, it is the largest mosque in Central Asia, its gleaming white façades and soaring turquoise dome visible from afar. The scale of the building was striking, its 60-metre diameter dome rising over 85 metres into the sky, whilst the beautifully decorated interior, with its intricate ornamentation and vast prayer halls, offered a fascinating glimpse into the cultural and religious heritage of modern Kazakhstan.



By late afternoon it was time to head to the airport for our flight south to Almaty. We built in extra time to allow for roadblocks which were in force because Astana was hosting the Eurasian Economic Union summit and heads of state from across the region were attending, including President Putin of Russia. Our flight departed at 19.30 and we arrived in Almaty an hour and a half later. Here we were introduced to our new driver Andre and taken to our hotel. It was quite late by now and after our sumptuous lunch we opted to go straight to bed.

Friday 29 May: Breakfast was at 07.30 and soon afterwards we set off through the busy streets of Almaty, pausing briefly at a supermarket to collect provisions. Urban birdlife included numerous Common Myna and Eurasian Collared-dove. Heading east and then north, we soon left the fertile plains and the snow-capped mountains of the Tien Shan behind us. The weather was hot and sunny,

and with every kilometre the landscape became more arid; green fields gradually yielding to sandy plains and weather-worn Badlands, incorporating shallow, amber-coloured gullies carved by centuries of erosion. Beyond the road, the horizon shimmered beneath the heat, broken only by scattered drought-resistant shrubs. It was a dramatic change of scenery and our first introduction to the vast Taukum Desert, a landscape every bit as impressive as the northern steppe.

European Rollers appeared on roadside wires; small kettles of Black Kites drifted over the plains and Long-legged Buzzards regularly perched on posts, some even sitting out on the bare earth. Crested Larks flushed from the roadside, while a stop at a petrol station produced a 'Masked' White Wagtail *personata*, a form that seemed particularly fond of the shelter and shade provided by garage forecourts. Here too was the first of five Pied Wheatears observed on our journey north.



Continuing on, we encountered tight flocks of Rosy Starlings crossing the barren plains, with around 175 recorded today. Another brief stop at an area of artesian groundwater proved surprisingly productive. A pair of Ruddy Shelducks shepherded nine young, while slightly lush vegetation surrounding the spring run-off attracted Red-headed Bunting, Hume's Warbler, Greenish Warbler and several Blyth's Reed-warblers. In this miniature oasis, birds and other wildlife were taking advantage of one of the few reliable water sources in the area, including three Patterned Snakes watched close-by. A pair of Little Ringed Plovers had established a breeding territory, and many Northern House Martins had colonised a roadside building.

By 13.00 we had reached the roadside settlement of Konshengel and, after leaving the highway, crossed several kilometres of open desert to our camp. A warm welcome from the camp staff was followed by coffee, lunch and time to settle into our tents before the afternoon's main bird watching began.

Our target was one of Kazakhstan's most sought-after breeding birds, the elegant Caspian Plover. All around us stretched the Taukum Desert, a vast wilderness of gravel and sandy plains, where the landscape formed a tapestry of muted colours, one where pale gold and amber sands blended with

the silvery-green hues of sparsely scattered *Artemisia* spp. and other drought-adapted plants, creating a scene of understated beauty and remarkable solitude.

Driving steadily across the desert, we made a series of stops to scan likely areas. A group of 12 Greater Sand Plovers was a splendid find, actually quite brilliant in any other context, while Isabelline Wheatears were common and the occasional Calandra Lark fluttered up from the ground ahead of us. With such an immense area to search, patience and methodical scanning was essential. Eventually, a pair of distant plover-like shapes, sleeker in form attracted our attention and we moved carefully closer for a better look. To our delight, they proved to be a pair of Caspian Plovers, and even better, careful observation revealed three tiny chicks, perhaps only a few days old, staying close to the adults. Viewing from a respectful distance, we enjoyed great views of these superb birds, undoubtedly one of the major highlights of the tour and a species few birders are fortunate enough to encounter on its breeding grounds.



Reluctantly moving on, we soon encountered a small concentration of raptors. A Cinereous Vulture, three Steppe Eagles and several Long-legged Buzzards were gathered within a relatively small area, presumably attracted by a mammal carcass. Nearby, a Little Owl peered from the stones of a derelict shack, our only sighting of the species during the tour.

As the afternoon progressed, small groups of Black-bellied Sandgrouse began flying towards drinking sites for their evening visit, prompting our return to camp. A short walk to a nearby waterhole produced a number of Black-bellied Sandgrouse together with several Common Hoopoe, Crested Lark and Calandra Lark. Two smaller larks provided an enjoyable identification challenge as we worked through the features of Greater and Turkestan Short-toed Larks before concluding that the birds were the latter species.

Back at camp at least three male Red-headed Buntings sang from prominent bushes as the desert air cooled and the evening light softened. Over an excellent meal prepared by our hosts, and accompanied by the occasional drink, we reflected on a memorable introduction to the remarkable landscapes and wildlife of the Taukum Desert.



A female Caspian Plover with one of its chicks, it was a privilege to see these very special birds

Saturday 30 May: Dawn came early in the desert and even before first light, a chorus of larks was already filling the air, and a European Nightjar could be heard churring in the darkness. The rising sun quickly warmed our tents, so several of the group enjoyed a pre-breakfast walk to the nearby waterhole. Here, at least 30 Black-bellied Sandgrouse came and went to drink, whilst a Common Snipe fed unobtrusively at the water's edge.

A hearty cooked breakfast was taken at 06.30, accompanied by views of Brown-necked Ravens scavenging across the desert and eight Goitered Gazelles scattered across the vast plain. We then set off north towards the Ili River, some 150 kilometres away. After only a few kilometres we stopped at a small cluster of Buckthorn bushes, where a handsome Lesser Grey Shrike posed obligingly. Nesting sparrows included both Spanish Sparrow and Indian House Sparrow *indicus*, the latter appearing noticeably cleaner and paler than the familiar European race, with whiter cheeks, underparts and wing-bars.

Further north, a brief stop among rolling scrub-covered dunes produced a showy Sykes's Warbler. Its song differed subtly from that of Booted Warbler, sounding scratchier, less rhythmic, without the final bubbly ascending ripple. A short walk amongst the crescent-shaped dunes then brought further rewards. The habitat looked ideal for Rufous-tailed Scrub-robin and we were soon watching a bird on territory. Nearby, a 'Steppe' Grey Shrike showed well through the telescopes, whilst a Tawny Pipit performed its song flight overhead. At least three 'Desert' Lesser Whitethroats, *halimodendri*, were also present, their distinctive tit-like calls very different from the familiar 'tac' notes of *blythi*.

As we continued north through the desert, larks regularly flushed from the roadside. Among them were at least two Bimaculated Larks, identified by their distinctive white-tipped tails and lack of the white trailing edge shown by Calandra Lark. A Yellow Souslik also made a brief appearance, standing long enough outside its burrow for everyone to enjoy good views.

Another stop was prompted by an impressive flock of around 250 Great White Pelicans circling overhead, presumably moving between feeding areas. Most of the desert depressions that periodically hold water were dry, although a few still supported small numbers of Black and Common Terns. We also encountered a couple of Carrion Crows of the eastern race *orientalis*, together with several Turkestan Shrikes as we pressed on towards the village of Topar.

A well-known desert birding site near Topar comprises an isolated concrete bus shelter that provides nesting opportunities for Saxaul Sparrow. The birds did not disappoint and we quickly located five individuals, mostly males, perched amongst the surrounding saxaul and tamarisk bushes. Saxaul Sparrows are true desert specialists, surviving both the intense summer heat and the harsh winters of Central Asia. Nearby, we also enjoyed prolonged views of a female Turkestan Shrike before a male eventually appeared.

Our main destination lay a little further east, where remnant Turanga woodland survives alongside the Ili River. These remarkable trees are highly adapted to drought and play an important role in stabilising desert soils and riverbanks. Their ageing trunks and branches frequently fracture, developing cavities and creating valuable nesting opportunities for a range of birds. Lunch was taken here in the welcome shade, accompanied by a pair of Great Tits of the local 'Turkestan' race *bokharensis*. The period after lunch was devoted to searching for the Turanga specialist birds. White-winged Woodpeckers proved surprisingly numerous, with eight recorded, whilst perseverance eventually rewarded us with seven Yellow-eyed Pigeons. Although characteristically wary, one bird finally settled long enough for everyone to appreciate its distinctive yellow orbital ring. Common Hoopoes seemed to appear at every turn, a Shikra circled briefly above the woodland and another male Saxaul Sparrow was found amongst the trees, its classy colours shown in the photograph below.



By mid-afternoon the temperatures had climbed to 33°C, making this the hottest day of the tour so far, marking an opportune time to begin the return journey to camp. A small Grey Heron colony was noted in riverside trees and informal 'from the bus' counts produced an impressive 80 Black Kites and

12 Long-legged Buzzards. Before reaching Konshengel, we paused at the scant waters of another artesian well where Turkestan Shrike, Pied Wheatear, Greater and Turkestan Short-toed Larks, Tawny Pipit, Red-headed Bunting, Rufous-tailed Scrub-robin and a couple of Temminck's Stints were all noted. The day count for Isabelline Wheatear reached an estimated 75 birds.

Back at camp, there was time to relax and explore the surroundings. Several group members returned to the nearby waterhole, where four Pallas's Sandgrouse feeding in the sparse vegetation provided a fitting end to another memorable day in the deserts of southern Kazakhstan. As well as Red-headed Buntings, our camp neighbours included a few Steppe Agama which stretched out over thorny Buckthorn bushes catching the sun's last rays. A fine evening meal was enjoyed in the restaurant tent before we retired. Whilst the previous night had been clear and star filled, tonight a thin veil of cloud had drawn over the Taukum, acting like a blanket and keeping temperatures up overnight.



Steppe Agama basking, displaying and keeping a watchful look-out for any danger

Sunday 31 May: A light breakfast at 06.00 consisted of coffee and croissants, accompanied by reports from some of the group that an earlier visit to the waterhole had yielded an impressive 26 Pallas's Sandgrouse. We then set off in search of one of the Taukum Desert's most elusive inhabitants, the increasingly scarce Macqueen's Bustard.

In the distance, we spotted an area of ridge-and-hummock dunes stabilised by sparse desert grasses and scattered saxaul, tamarisk and wormwood. Gently undulating and stretching to the horizon, it was ideal habitat for this enigmatic species. Despite careful scanning for displaying males over the next two hours, the bustards remained frustratingly elusive. The desert was far from lifeless, however. Goitered Gazelles were widespread, some sprinting effortlessly across the dunes, while five Yellow Soursliks were also noted.

A stop at another waterhole produced yet another fine immature Eastern Imperial Eagle and a pair of Ruddy Shelducks with young. Black-bellied Sandgrouse were ever-present, their rolling, snorting calls

carrying across the desert air, while a pale-phase Booted Eagle drifted overhead. Perhaps the most unexpected sighting of the morning was a striking polecat with a distinctive black-and-white facial pattern. Mental notes were hastily taken and subsequent investigation confirmed it to be a Marbled Polecat, a scarce and secretive species known from the area but seldom encountered. Butterflies adding further interest included Painted Lady and several Eastern Pale Clouded Yellows.

Returning to camp, we enjoyed a hearty brunch before thanking our hosts and bidding farewell to the camp staff who had looked after us so well during our stay in the desert. The journey south towards Almaty included the obligatory ice-cream stop and a short break beside a river valley. Here we encountered several Hume's Warblers and two Greenish Warblers with single Grey-necked and Red-headed Buntings and several Pied Wheatear on neighbouring crags, whilst a pair of Red-rumped Swallows appeared to be holding territory near a dam a little way upstream.

Throughout the tour, Red-headed Buntings were regularly encountered on territory - recently returned from their wintering grounds in India



As we continued south, familiar roadside birds, European Roller for example, accompanied us once again, but increasingly our attention was drawn to the magnificent Tien Shan. Though slightly obscured by a fine mist, their snow-capped peaks still dominated the southern horizon, providing a spectacular backdrop as we approached Almaty. By mid-afternoon we had checked back into our hotel for a well-earned rest. Some members of the group later explored the leafy boulevards surrounding the hotel and discovered a small colony of around 20 Alpine Swifts nesting on one of the older multi-storey buildings.

Almaty, Kazakhstan's former capital, presented a marked contrast to Astana. Set against the dramatic backdrop of the Tien Shan, it is a greener, a much older and mature city, renowned for its tree-lined avenues, vibrant café culture and relaxed atmosphere. After several days in the deserts of the Ili valley, it provided a pleasant change of pace and an ideal base from which launch the next phases of the tour.



Camp at dawn and dusk



Monday June 1: After breakfast at 07.00, we packed enough luggage for a two-night stay near the Chinese border, leaving the bulk of our luggage in storage at the hotel.

Before long we were heading east through the morning traffic. Our first roadside stop, made in search of Long-tailed Shrike, proved unsuccessful, yielding only four singing Corn Buntings together with numerous Rooks and Eurasian Jackdaws. A short walk into some overgrown allotments nearby was rather more productive however, providing excellent views of a pair of White-crowned Penduline-tits. European Bee-eaters and European Rollers adorned the roadside wires, while an Indian Golden Oriole sang from a stand of poplars.

Continuing eastwards, we paused briefly at a village market to buy fresh fruit, including some exceptionally lovely cherries, before enjoying our picnic lunch beneath the shade of roadside trees. The area was relatively quiet, although several Common Wood pigeons attracted attention when closer views revealed the warm buff neck patch characteristic of the regional subspecies *casiotis*, often referred to as the 'Cinnamon-necked' Woodpigeon. Of interest beside an irrigational channel were Banded Demoiselle and one of the 'Emerald' Dragonflies.

After lunch we visited a site that had formerly supported a breeding colony of Pale Sand Martin. Unfortunately, only three Collared Sand Martins remained, and the mixed colony appeared to have been abandoned. A Shikra drifted overhead, whilst European Bee-eaters, European Rollers and a singing Tawny Pipit provided welcome interest. Nearby, a pair of Lesser Grey Shrikes was noted before we left the main road and climbed south-east into the Kokpek Pass.

Here we stopped to explore a narrow rocky gorge, the increasingly rugged terrain providing our first real taste of the dramatic landscapes awaiting us in south-eastern Kazakhstan. The steep slopes supported a singing Rock Bunting, together with two splendid male Rufous-tailed Rock-thrush and four Blue Rock-thrush, both species of Rock-thrush in the same locality, a situation not often encountered.



Leaving the pass behind, we descended onto the vast Sugaty Plain, a striking semi-desert lying between the Shelek and Charyn rivers. Once part of an ancient inland sea, the landscape today is one of immense open vistas, its flat to gently undulating plains clothed in sparse desert scrub and stretching

away towards the distant, blue-grey arms of the Ketmen Range to the north and the Trans-Ili Alatau to the south. Together, the two mountain chains help to frame the basin, accentuating the extraordinary scale and solitude of the landscape. Here we searched for another speciality and, after some diligent scanning, eventually located a typically skulking Asian Desert Warbler which gradually rewarded us with excellent views. Two pairs of Desert Wheatears occupied the same area, the close association between these two species being well documented. Also present were at least four 'Desert' Lesser Whitethroats, *halimodendri*, together with a handsome 'Steppe' Grey Shrike.



Asian Desert Warbler – highly unobtrusive spending much of its time foraging on the ground

The final leg of our journey carried us across the spectacular Charyn Gorge before we reached our accommodation on the outskirts of the small town of Chunga (known as Shonzhy in Kazakh). Situated only around 70 kilometres from the Chinese border, the town has a substantial Uyghur population whose families, including our hosts, have settled here over many generations. After checking in, we relaxed in the garden where a Common Nightingale was singing and a few European Greenfinches fed quietly amongst the seed heads, a peaceful end to another rewarding day. During the night a Eurasian Scops-owl was heard singing.

Tuesday 2 June: An early breakfast at 05.30 saw us returning to the Sugaty Plain. Another attempt at finding the elusive Macqueen's Bustard was made, the group once again stopping repeatedly to scan seemingly perfect habitat, but despite our best efforts the bustards again remained hidden.

Leaving the road, we followed a rough desert track where eight Rock Sparrows were feeding, before reaching a small artesian spring at the junction of barren foothills west of the Charyn Gorge. By 07.30 our folding chairs were set out, and we settled down to watch a steady procession of birds coming to drink. It proved to be one of the most enjoyable birding sessions of the tour. During the next hour, flocks of thirsty passerines arrived at regular intervals; around 35 Mongolian Finches, 15 beautifully coloured Common Linnets of the race *bella*, 12 Horned Larks of the race *brandti*, three Grey-necked Buntings, three Greater Short-toed Larks with Pied and Isabelline Wheatears also making regular visits. The undisputed stars were the sandgrouse. Small parties of Black-bellied Sandgrouse arrived first, followed later by Pallas's Sandgrouse, a two, a three and a single, their distinctive calls announcing

their approach long before they swept in to drink. The flight profiles of the two species and their differently shaped black belly patches were readily discernible. Watching these exquisitely patterned birds at such close quarters as they carried out their daily ritual was a genuine privilege and undoubtedly another highlight of the tour.



From here we drove to two viewpoints overlooking the spectacular Charyn Gorge. Stretching for almost 80 km, the canyon comprises a succession of deeply eroded gorges sculpted from colourful sedimentary rocks by the Charyn River over millions of years. Far below, the river supports ribbons of riparian woodland that provide both breeding habitat and an important migratory corridor through an otherwise arid landscape. Birds played a slight understudy to the scenery, although the viewpoints still produced Eurasian Crag Martins, Oriental Turtle-dove, both Blue and Rufous-tailed Rock-thrushes, Cetti's Warbler, Common Rosefinch and numerous Common Swifts hawking overhead.



Descending once more onto the plain, we visited an extraordinary Rosy Starling colony centred on the stone walls of a village cemetery. We estimated that at least a thousand birds were present, creating an unforgettable spectacle of colour, movement and constant chatter. Many were displaying or carrying nesting material into the walls, while others commuted continuously to surrounding fields in search of food. Adult males glowed with deep rosy-pink plumage contrasting with glossy black heads and wings, while females and younger males showed more subdued tones. Sharing the colony were four pairs of Lesser Kestrels, the richly coloured adult males providing another splash of colour amongst the bustling starlings.

Our circuit of the region continued into a broad mountain valley at around 1,700 metres, where flower-rich meadows and scattered boulders produced something of a bunting bonanza. The songs of the males betrayed their presence, enabling us to locate a single Red-headed, four Grey-necked, three Corn, and two each of Rock and Meadow Bunting, the latter our principal target, here close to the western limit of their range.



A pair of Chukars perched obligingly on nearby rocks, whilst a male Siberian Stonechat was watched from the roadside as we enjoyed an al fresco lunch. Raptors drifting above the surrounding slopes included Cinereous Vulture, two Golden Eagles, Long-legged Buzzard and four Black Kites. Throughout lunch, streams of Rosy Starlings crossed the valley, some perhaps still moving north, but others commuting between feeding areas and nearby breeding colonies.

Cloud gradually built during the afternoon as we continued to the nearby Kegen Pass, where a brief shower kept us sheltering and viewing from inside the minibus with the sliding door open. A couple of Hume's Whitethroat, *althaea* showed briefly here. Although some authorities still treat it as a subspecies of Lesser Whitethroat, the bird is slightly larger and darker overall, showing little contrast

between the mantle and crown, with the colour of the ear coverts being more contiguous with the crown. Once the rain eased, a pair of Lesser Grey Shrikes perched out nicely. The real spectacle, however, was an enormous Rosy Starling colony occupying roadside cliffs. We estimated around 2500 breeding pairs here, with seemingly endless streams of birds swirling above the surrounding countryside. It was one of the most remarkable birding spectacles of the entire tour.



Significant breeding colonies of Rosy Starlings were already established at the time of our visit

Late in the afternoon we made one final attempt to locate Macqueen's Bustard, carefully scanning the seemingly endless plain. Once again the species eluded us, although around 75 Goitered Gazelles grazed across the stony desert, their pale silhouettes shimmering in the heat haze and repeatedly raising false hopes of distant bustards. A Eurasian Hobby drifted through, while both Desert and Pied Wheatears used the mud walls of an abandoned farmstead as convenient shelter. A few Black Kites cruised along a neighbouring gorge before we finally accepted defeat and returned to our guesthouse. Despite missing the bustards, the sheer diversity of habitats and memorable encounters had made this another outstanding day.

Wednesday 3 June: Today was largely a travelling day, allowing for a slightly later breakfast at 07.00. Before setting off, several of the group enjoyed a stroll around the village outskirts enjoying a pair of Turkistan Shrikes, five Indian Golden Orioles and three Laughing Doves. We thanked our hosts for their warm hospitality and began the journey back towards Almaty.

Before leaving the area, however, we could not resist one final visit to the isolated artesian waterhole that had provided such memorable birding the previous day. Folding chairs were quickly unpacked and for the next hour, we sat quietly watching the steady procession of birds arriving to drink. Many of the previous day's species reappeared, including Mongolian Finches and Horned Larks, whilst a Turkestan Shrike called in briefly. It was a relaxed birding session and a fitting farewell to the Sugaty Plain.



By 10.00 we were back on the road, making one final detour to the Kokpek Gorge for another attempt at finding White-capped Bunting. This time we explored a delightful valley a few kilometres from the previous site, its steep, boulder-strewn slopes cloaked in scattered shrubs and framed by rugged hills. Although the bunting again eluded us, the walk was far from unrewarding. Rock Buntings, Pied Wheatear, Long-legged Buzzard, Common Nightingale and a territorial Hume's Whitethroat performing its distinctive song flight, all showed well. Overhead, an adult Golden Eagle and a Peregrine Falcon circled the ridges, whilst the call of a Common Pheasant - our only record of the tour - echoed from dense cover below. Butterflies added further interest, with six Blue-spot Hairstreak and 20 Lesser Fiery Copper being noteworthy, one shown in the photograph below.



The journey west then resumed, with a lunchtime stop beside a freshwater marsh near the village of Nurly. Despite temperatures exceeding 30°C and a brisk breeze that kept the reedbeds in constant motion, we still managed to find several singing Great Reed-warblers, together with brief views of two Bearded Reedlings, a male Reed Bunting and a Common Moorhen. There had clearly been an emergence of Southern Skimmer dragonflies which were in abundance around the marsh margins. As we enjoyed our picnic, a pair of Eurasian Hobby swept overhead calling loudly, providing a fitting finale to our birding for the day.

The final leg of the journey initially followed the new Chinese highway west and by late afternoon we were back in the leafy streets of Almaty, arriving at our hotel around 17.00. With the desert now behind us, we could reflect on a memorable few days spent exploring one of Kazakhstan's most remarkable and little-visited landscapes before turning our attention to the mountains that still lay ahead.

Thursday 4 June: After breakfast, we were away by 07.45 for the first of our two days exploring the magnificent Tien Shan Mountains south of Almaty. With the weather forecast looking favourable, we decided to make the most of the clear conditions by heading as high as access would allow, to the permanent snow line.

Our ascent began in the lower reaches of the national park, where a brief stop beside a fast-flowing mountain stream produced an excellent introduction to the birds of these forested valleys. Three Blue Whistling-thrushes patrolled a boulder-strewn river, whilst a Brown Dipper delighted everyone as it appeared in the rushing waters before sitting at the base of a mini waterfall, as shown in the photograph below. A pair of Grey Wagtails bobbed gracefully along the margins, and the surrounding mixed woodland echoed to the songs of Greenish Warblers. For botanists the Tien Shan are a dream with wildflowers all around. At this altitude clumps of Caucasian Jacob's Ladder were growing.



Beyond the first park checkpoint the road climbed steadily into the conifer belt, where majestic Tien Shan Spruce cloaked the mountainsides. The forest here felt distinctly alpine, the dark evergreen canopy broken only by scattered deciduous shrubs. Hume's and Greenish Warblers sang from the trees, while more familiar species such as Mistle Thrush and Northern Wren reminded us that some birds span continents. Despite a careful search, the hoped-for Three-toed Woodpecker remained elusive.

A little higher we stopped in a sunny forest clearing where one of the day's real stars soon appeared. A magnificent male Eversmann's Redstart, glowing orange, black and white in the morning sunshine, was busily collected food for its nestlings as captured in the photograph below.



Around the same area we encountered the first of around 15 Red-fronted Serins seen during the day, their cheerful calls becoming a familiar accompaniment whenever we stopped in the mid-elevation forests. A Turkestan Red Pika was a nice find hiding amongst the rocks here.

By mid-morning we reached the spectacular Big Almaty Lake, its remarkable turquoise waters lying beneath towering snow-covered peaks. Surrounded by alpine meadows, juniper scrub and scree slopes, it is one of the most beautiful locations in south-eastern Kazakhstan. A leisurely walk alongside the lake firstly produced a quietly feeding White-winged Grosbeak, which frequently disappeared into the junipers before emerging once again, and a striking Blue-capped Redstart which held territory nearby. Our attention then turned to the broad shingle delta at the head of the reservoir, ideal habitat for one of the mountain's most sought-after birds, the remarkable Ibisbill. Patient scanning of the braided streams began, before Lance eventually found a pair. Their soft grey plumage blended almost perfectly with the surrounding stones, making them surprisingly difficult to detect, but once located the telescopes revealed all the unmistakable features of this iconic species. Around 35 Ruddy Shelducks loafed along the shoreline, whilst a couple of Black-throated Accentors sang from the surrounding slopes. Wild flowers found around us included Hairy Honeysuckle and Himalayan Bell Primrose, along with local alpine forms of Narcissus-flowered Anemone, Stonecrop, Globeflower and Clematis. Grey Marmots stood upright near their burrows with five being logged and a couple of Red Squirrel were seen amongst the conifers.

Lunch was enjoyed beside the lake with another magnificent mountain panorama spread before us. Snowfields gleamed on the highest summits whilst below, a succession of alpine meadows, dwarf juniper and dark spruce forests descended towards the valley floor in subtle bands of green. Several Grey-crowned Goldfinches and Red-fronted Serins fed amongst the seed heads as we relaxed before we continued our climb.

Red-fronted Serin – breaking the genus mould with its distinctive red and black colours as well as more typical yellows.



Just below the treeline we paused to explore patches of dwarf juniper where a Red-mantled Rosefinch, two more Eversmann's Redstarts and a Common Whitethroat of the eastern race *rubicola* were found. The butterfly list grew today with Eastern Orange Tip, Spotted Fritillary, Peacock, Large White, Brown Argos, Queen of Spain Fritillary and Niobe Fritillary (shown in the photograph below) all being noted.



Beyond another army checkpoint we were granted access to the high alpine zone surrounding the Cosmos Station at around 2,800 metres. Above the treeline the landscape changed dramatically once again. Vegetation became sparse, with tundra-like turf, scattered boulders and lingering snow patches creating an austere but beautiful environment. A handful of Plain Mountain-finches fed beside the road as we approached the largely abandoned Soviet-era research station.

The station's ageing buildings now provide nesting sites for one of Central Asia's most charismatic birds and it was not long before we found a superb pair of Güldenstädt's Redstarts. With their striking plumage and confident demeanour, they are surely amongst the finest members of the entire redstart family.



A Common Cuckoo singing from an overhead wire had attracted the attention of a pair of Water Pipits, which harassed the cuckoo continuously, even when it flew to a new song perch some distance away. A couple of Red-billed Choughs wheeled effortlessly overhead as we continued along a nearby ridge, enjoying breathtaking views across the surrounding peaks. Then came an unexpected bonus. Hikers traversing the slopes above inadvertently flushed a pair of Himalayan Snowcocks which burst into flight, calling loudly before gliding across the valley and disappearing behind a distant ridge. Although seen only in flight, the encounter was still immensely satisfying, particularly as two more birds called from another mountainside a little later on. Searches of traditional sites for Altai and Brown Accentors proved unsuccessful today, reminding us once again that mountain birding rarely gives up all of its secrets in one go.



Our final stop of the day was about 500m below the Cosmos Station, where extensive juniper scrub appeared perfect for White-browed Tit-warbler. Although that species remained hidden, we were more than compensated when two magnificent male Himalayan Rubythroats appeared on neighbouring territories. Perched prominently on the tops of the junipers and delivering their rich songs, they glowed like tiny jewels against the muted greens and greys of the alpine landscape, an unforgettable finale to a wonderful day's birding.

We finally left the mountains around 18.00, descending through the forests as the late afternoon light softened across the slopes. After a long but immensely rewarding day in one of Central Asia's great mountain ranges, we returned to our hotel in Almaty with memories of spectacular scenery and some truly outstanding birds.

Friday 5 June: Our final day of birding began with breakfast before departing at 07.30 for one last excursion into the magnificent Tien Shan. Overnight the weather had changed markedly, with low cloud draped across the mountains and light rain forecast for much of the day. Undeterred, we climbed steadily back towards Cosmos Station, arriving at 08.50.

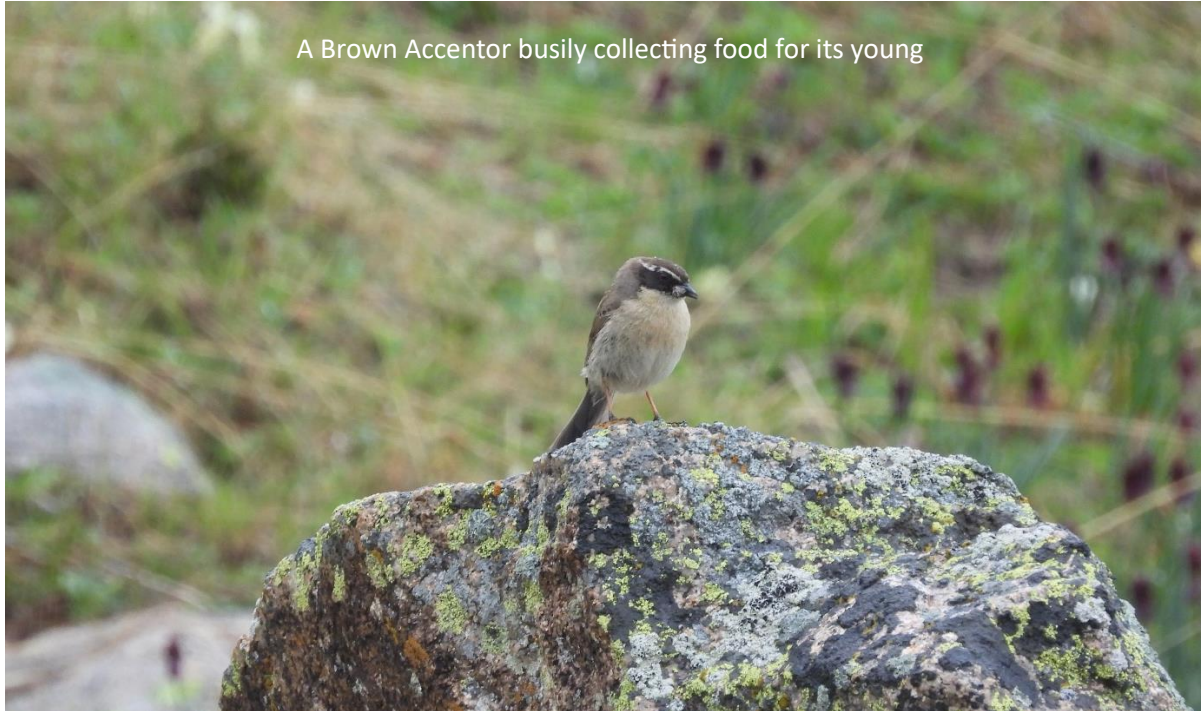
The alpine zone had a very different feel from the previous day's sunshine. Fine drizzle drifted across the slopes and wisps of cloud curled around the surrounding peaks, lending the mountains a wonderfully atmospheric quality. Several Water Pipits of the race *blakistoni* perched conspicuously on boulders, determinedly proclaiming their territories despite the conditions.



The male Güldenstädt's Redstart was once again singing from the roof of one of the weathered station buildings, whilst the Common Cuckoo continued to attract the close attention of an agitated pair of Water Pipits. From somewhere high in the mist came the haunting, curlew-like calls of Himalayan Snowcocks, although the visibility was far too poor for any realistic chance of seeing them today.

For those with an interest in botany, the alpine flora proved fascinating. Wild alliums were especially abundant, including Black-red Onion, one of many species for which these mountains are renowned. Yellow Edelweiss, Bell-shaped Pasqueflower, Altaian Violet and Alpine Tulip added splashes of colour to the otherwise muted landscape. Kazakhstan is recognised as the evolutionary home of the world's tulips, with more wild species occurring here than in any other country.

Despite the persistent drizzle we continued on foot, working slowly down the mountainside in search of Altai and Brown Accentors. Distant movements amongst the rocks repeatedly raised our hopes, although most remained frustratingly inconclusive in the poor visibility. Around ten Plain Mountain-finches fed unconcernedly beside the road, accompanied by a single Northern Wheatear. Deciding to leave the track, we ventured out across the tundra-like slopes and were rewarded when a Brown Accentor appeared, busily collecting food and allowing excellent views and photographs.



Continuing down into the dwarf juniper zone, we made one final search for White-browed Tit-warbler. Patience eventually paid off when a female appeared beside the roadside barrier, allowing lovely views of this delightful little bird, its subtle plumage and long tail shown in the image below.



The same area also held three singing Himalayan Rubythroats whose glowing crimson throats brought welcome colour to the grey morning. Sulphur-bellied Warbler, remained one of the few species to evade us, but two more of both Red-mantled Rosefinch and Eversmann's Redstarts plus Hume's Warblers calling persistently from the surrounding scrub completed another memorable mountain birding session.

With the rain becoming steadily heavier, we retreated to a welcoming mountain lodge for lunch, where bowls of hot soup, fresh bread and warming drinks were especially appreciated. Outside, flowering dandelions attracted seven Grey-crowned Goldfinches and five Red-fronted Serins. It also provided a fitting opportunity, with the tour drawing to a close, to thank Victoria for her outstanding support throughout our time in Kazakhstan. Having guided all of our previous tours, her enthusiasm, local knowledge and tireless attention to every aspect of the logistics had once again played a major part in making the trip such an enjoyable and successful one.

By mid-afternoon it was clear that the weather had finally won and we reluctantly declared that "rain had stopped play". Returning to Almaty by 15:30, we said our farewells to Victoria who kindly passed on our thanks to Andre our driver before we settled back into the hotel. Some of the group enjoyed a final stroll through the city's leafy boulevards, while others preferred to relax before packing for our early departure the following morning. With the bird list completed over dinner and memories of steppes, wetlands, deserts and snow-capped mountains still fresh in our minds, it was not long before we headed to bed after a thoroughly memorable and enjoyable birding journey across one of Central Asia's most remarkable countries.



Saturday 6 June: We had to be up very early for our driver to take us to the airport for our 05.40 flight to Istanbul from where we all later made our connecting flights to Heathrow and Manchester.

Our thanks go to Liz and Keith, Rose-Ann, Dave, Tony and Theresa for sharing their photographs used in this report. Also, to Dave and Rose-Ann for their knowledgeable help with the butterflies and wildflowers we encountered throughout the tour.

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Big Almaty Lake - Ibisbill habitat!



Camp kitchen, some great memories from Kazakhstan, with Victoria on the right