

Birding Abroad – Uzbekistan – Birding the Great Silk Road

12 to 23 May 2025

On our third visit to Uzbekistan, we enjoyed the company of the following group members: Helen & Rob Adams, John & Morag Clark, Pat Degnan, Bob Groves, Dorothy Jackson, Keith & Liz Reynolds, Beverly & Steve Potts and Joyce & Paul Simmons. Lance and Nick were the Birding Abroad leaders, and we were accompanied throughout by a local expert bird guide.



Monday 12 May: Group members flew out from both Manchester and Heathrow, meeting in Istanbul for our onward flight to Tashkent where we arrived in the early hours of the following morning. We were greeted warmly by Eric, our young English-speaking bird guide and taken to a smart 4-star hotel not far from the airport, where we checked-in and enjoyed a good night's sleep after the long journey.

Tuesday 13 May: After breakfast we had the opportunity to grab a few minutes bird watching around the hotel. This yielded a few each of Laughing Dove and Common Myna, almost ubiquitous species in the country we were to discover, as well as skies full of Common Swifts. Two Blyth's Reed-warblers were singing in a small clump of trees at the roadside, and Eurasian Tree Sparrows were noted to be equally as common as their House Sparrow cousins in these urban areas.

Following a short briefing about the tour ahead, we set off for a cultural visit to the old quarters of Tashkent. Although much of the city was destroyed by an earthquake in 1966, it was soon rebuilt as a model Soviet metropolis. Whilst little remains of Tashkent's traditional architectural heritage, pockets of historical splendour can still be found, now carefully preserved and cleverly linked in a series of paved walkways, allowing the tourist to explore at leisure on foot. Our hired guide showed us around several of the city's most well-known sights. These included: the Hazrati Imam complex, which houses several mosques and a library which contains what is considered the oldest extant Qu'ran in the world; the Madrasah Muiy Muborak; the Kaffal Sheikh Mausoleum and the Museum of Applied Art. Perhaps most stunning were the highly decorative Suzani style embroidered textiles, mainly silk and cotton, which were mounted at the latter, traditionally made by brides as part of their dowry. A fine restaurant lunch was neatly woven into our sightseeing itinerary, which was made so much more informative by being accompanied by a knowledgeable English-speaking guide. If not quite a match for Bukhara and Samarkand, then Tashkent clearly still has many wonderful treasures worthy of exploration. We returned to our hotel and enjoyed a nice evening meal, pleased that we had come out to Uzbekistan one day ahead of the scheduled birding tour, enabling us to recharge our batteries after the long journey and enjoy some cultural highlights in the country's capital city.

Wednesday 14 May: We rose for breakfast at 7.00 am and one hour later boarded two comfortable people carriers, heading first around the busy Tashkent ring road and then onwards south-west through open and fertile agricultural countryside towards the town of Zaamin (Zomin in Uzbek). During this 4-hour journey we noted birds from the vehicle as well as stopping a couple of times for comfort breaks and a leg stretch where the habitat looked promising. The occupied nests of White Storks were piled multi-story fashion on pylons, some 50 or so nests being counted, and both Rooks and Carrion Crows were common. More exotic fayre involved five European Bee-eaters perched on wires as well as six hawking Red-rumped Swallows. Areas of marsh adjacent to the road yielded sightings of 11 Glossy Ibis, 10 Great Cormorant, three Grey Herons, one Purple Heron, one Pygmy Cormorant, with eight Western Marsh-harriers quartering the fields. The White Stork nests also provided suitable nesting places for pairs of Indian Sparrows, the males having noticeably 'cleaner' whiter cheeks and wing bars than the more familiar House Sparrow. On the roadside were a couple of Crested

Larks, whilst service station stops produced at least four Masked Wagtails (*personata*), a fine-looking sub-species of White Wagtail.

From Zaamin, the road gradually climbed off the plain and through more 'badland' type habitat of dry eroded hills and arid canyons. Here we counted at least 10 European Rollers as well as more European Bee-eaters. Still gradually climbing, it was another hour before we reached the entrance to the Zaamin National Park, where after various checks we headed into Uzbekistan's oldest nature reserve, frequently referred to as the 'Switzerland' of Uzbekistan because of its beauty. Here juniper woodland and alpine meadows opened before our eyes, with valleys and rural villages shaded by tall poplars. By 1.30 pm we reached our hotel which was surrounded by a panoramic vista, with the higher snowy peaks of the Turkestan Range, a western outlier of the Pamir-Alay mountain system towering away into the horizon.



It was hot, 32 C, with clear sunny skies and because we were at an altitude of 2,400m above sea level, the group decided to take a brief period of rest before re-convening at 4.00 pm. Taking a short walk amongst the open mixed juniper woodland, we noticed some of the trees looked quite stunted and even prostrate. These were interspersed with grassy glades holding patches of shrubs including local varieties of hawthorn, rowan, barberry, wild rose, honeysuckle and cotoneaster. Wild tulips were abundant but had just 'gone over'. Our first encounter was with a singing warbler, which with patience and good views we eventually resolved was a Hume's Whitethroat. Although some authorities still treat it as a sub-species of Lesser Whitethroat, this bird is slightly larger, with a darker plumage, showing little contrast between the mantle and crown, and the colour of the ear coverts is more contiguous with the

crown. The song was quite different from a Lesser Whitethroat, being almost Blackcap like though slightly scratchier. Once we had familiarised ourselves with the bird's features, we were to see and hear several more at higher altitudes during the tour. We soon noted a pair of Rufous-naped Tits, one of the target birds of this habitat, with another four seen subsequently during our walk. A pair of White-winged Grosbeaks was spotted which frustratingly flew into a neighbouring ravine and could not be relocated.

A pair of Mistle Thrushes, often associated with higher altitudes in hotter climes such as these, were a nice addition as were a few Common Woodpigeons of the 'cinnamon-necked' form *casiotis*, whilst a few small groups of Eurasian Magpies were noisily feeding around what looked like the carcass of a dead dog. Rocky crags over a ravine were home to a family of Chukar, which called and sat out allowing 'scope views.

We were alerted by an unfamiliar call as a finch-like passerine bounded in. Perched on top of a pine, it proved to be a male Blyth's Rosefinch, another sought-after species hereabouts. The species has a Himalayan distribution and was named, along with many other species, after Edward Blyth (1810-1873), the English zoologist and Curator of the Museum of the Asiatic Society of Bengal.



A vibrant male Blyth's Rosefinch. The species occurs sparsely in Uzbekistan, where it inhabits montane forests and shrublands.

We enjoyed a fine end to the day with a Cinereous Vulture soaring around the border zone peaks. The hotel didn't sell beer, so a quick shopping outing brought in the desired refreshments which we enjoyed with our evening meal.

Thursday 15 May: We again took breakfast at 7.00 am and were away an hour later, this time descending to the national park entrance and then further to some pretty riverine habitat close to a nearby village. Here we commenced a short walk which produced two singing Indian Golden Orioles, as well as a Eurasian Hobby and a handful each of Eastern Olivaceous Warbler and Blyth's Reed-warbler. As if to remind us of home, Common Starling and Eurasian Blackbird were recorded, and a pair of Grey Wagtails were on the stream. A Golden Eagle soared past, and a distant Bearded Vulture (Lammergeier) circled the hills.

A small shady copse afforded an opportunity to study the features of more Indian Golden Orioles and at least two Common Rosefinch, one of which was also in song. Our guide had brought us here knowing of a pair of Indian Paradise-flycatchers at their nest, which we watched carefully through the low foliage, Keith managing the excellent photograph below.



We returned to the national park and checked out some steep roadside crags, being duly rewarded with close views of a White-capped Bunting which was in territorial song. Back in the shade of some tall trees we watched a pair of Oriental Turtle-dove on territory. Here too a Greenish Warbler and a couple of Hume's Leaf-warblers sang. It was good to see several Spotted Flycatchers during the morning, still relatively common in these parts. Higher up nearer our hotel, we stopped at a viewpoint where a pair of Yellow-breasted Tits were nesting

and enjoyed nice views of this attractive species, which some authorities regard as a form of Azure Tit, and others, a species in its own right. A bonus here was a second Bearded Vulture which flew over at close range.

Back at the hotel for lunch we enjoyed a splendid buffet and then rested until it had cooled down a little before venturing out into the alpine meadows near our base. During a good birding session, we encountered up to six Rufous-naped Tits, more Hume's Whitethroats, a pair of White-winged Grosbeaks and another male Blyth's Rosefinch. Rock Buntings showed more readily, with at least six being noted. A few Griffon Vultures were circling as the afternoon turned to early evening.

Other wildlife interest featured three Tolai Hare in the meadows whilst butterflies included Painted Lady and Berger's Clouded Yellow. A 'good-sized' Steppe Rat Snake was disturbed close to our path as we strolled in the lovely evening sunshine.

Friday 16 May: We stayed with our routine of breakfast at 7.00 am and away for 8.00 am, this time heading back downhill towards the national park entrance. We paused for further looks at the Yellow-breasted Tit which proved very secretive, whilst a male Pied Wheatear and three Rock Buntings gave better views. Two Blyth's Rosefinch, this time both females, fed quietly amongst the junipers below a roadside barrier. A fine pale phase Booted Eagle circled overhead after which it was time to move on and head for Samarkand.

Again, we passed through the lower arid hills and 'badlands' with European Rollers featuring strongly and precipitating a 'day count'. Back on the plain, the fields were full of fruit plantations, mainly cherry, almond and apple. Further on, a stretch of road climbed for a few miles into steppe grasslands where many hundreds of Rosy Starling were feeding in droves at the roadside. We stopped to admire the colourful spectacle, estimating some 1250 birds present! Here too we came across our first Red-headed Buntings of the tour, with three males being seen, always a fine sight as shown below.



By 1.00 pm we arrived at our hotel in Samarkand and promptly went for lunch at a city restaurant, followed by a short rest during the hottest part of the day. At 4.00 pm we resumed, our bird guide taking us for a walk along a canal overlooked by some cliffs just a few kilometres from the city centre.

Here he casually mentioned that Pallid Scops-owl and Eurasian Eagle-owl could sometimes be seen in the vicinity! Within a few minutes we had found a very confiding Pallid Scops-owl at its daytime roost, as well as a family party (two adults and three fully fledged young) of Eurasian Eagle-owls. Both species were rather unexpected 'write-ins' for the daily log, whilst the 'owl-fest' was completed by a couple of Little Owls which stayed tucked away on a shady ledge. The Pallid Scops-owl was captured nicely by Keith as shown below.



A pair of Shikra were nesting with both adults making regular flights in the area. A few Eastern Olivaceous Warblers and Blyth's Reed-warblers sang along the vegetated borders to the waterway, and the walk also produced 10 Alpine Swifts, two Common Tern, a Common Kingfisher and a Collared Sand Martin, all new additions to our growing bird list. Several Common Muskrats, an introduced rodent in the region, were noted swimming and a Grass Snake a new addition to our reptile list. The day count of European Roller reached 50.

Our evening meal was taken at a restaurant across town, where locals were engaged in various celebratory dances.

Saturday 17 May: This morning we were collected at 5.00 am by six taxis which sped us away to the scenically splendid Takhtakaracha Hills about one hour south of the city. Our new vehicles were capable of covering the off-roads tracks, which led to higher pastures interspersed with craggy outcrops, and impressive views across to the Pamir mountains. We soon noted several Hume's Larks in aerial song, later finding birds on the ground giving an opportunity to look at their key features as compared to the Greater Short-toed Lark.

Two displaying Tawny Pipits were in the same habitat zone, along with an Isabelline Wheatear and at least 12 Red-headed Buntings and two Common Hoopoes, whilst the open countryside was ideal for our first three Red-tailed Shrikes of the tour. Nearby crags formed a perfect home for a pair of Chukar, a Pied Wheatear, four Eastern Rock Nuthatch, three Blue Rock-thrush and a White-capped Bunting. We enjoyed an al fresco breakfast prepared by our hosts complete with tables and chairs, surrounded by this very lovely habitat, one of our favourite places in Uzbekistan.



Afterwards, we sat quietly listening to the various songsters amongst the shrubbery and trees in a smaller valley which sloped away below us. Here an Upcher's Warbler came in to investigate us, but unfortunately only a few of the group saw the bird, which was in fact a main target species. A couple of Eastern Orphean Warblers showed more readily, and two Common Nightingales were in fine song. A Common Quail was flushed whilst overhead there were six Griffon Vultures, three Egyptian Vultures, two each of dark phase Booted Eagle and Long-legged Buzzard and a single Cinereous Vulture. Butterflies seen included Common

Swallowtail, Black-veined White and Essex Skipper and our reptile list grew with the addition of Turkestan Thin-toed Gecko and the Turkestan Rock Agama shown in the photograph below.



It had been an excellent morning, so we returned for lunch at a restaurant a short walk from the hotel. Suitably refreshed we boarded a coach into the centre of Samarkand for the first of two sightseeing sessions accompanied by an excellent English-speaking cultural guide. First port of call was the Gur-e-Amir Mausoleum, resting place since 1404 of Timur (Tamerlane), whose vast empire once stretched from modern day Turkey to India. The outside of the tomb has a striking blue dome, with tall minarets and colourful tilework lining the walls. Everyone was awe-struck by the sheer beauty of this building complex, which also contains the tombs of Timur's sons and his grandson, the renown Ulugh Beg, himself a Timurid sultan and famous astronomer and mathematician.

Next our coach took us out of the town centre to the Meros Paper Mill, where tourists are given demonstrations of how paper is made from the bark of the Mulberry tree. It was said that the paper making craft was brought to Samarkand in the year 751 AD when defeated Chinese troops were captured and saved their own lives by divulging the techniques to their Uzbek captors. The mill had several other interesting exhibits, including one on the production of silk. Afterwards, we returned to the city to visit the Observatory of Ulugh Beg. The astonishing astronomer had the observatory built in the 1420s, making ground-breaking discoveries about the solar system and our universe. His records were so meticulous that they were used for centuries afterwards, even NASA today praising his achievements. The observatory buildings were only rediscovered in 1908 by Russian astronomers, who knew of Ulugh Beg's importance and relevance to modern science and were determined to honour his work.

Our first sightseeing session concluded, we returned to our hotel and visited a restaurant in the city for yet another rather nice meal.



The Gur-e-Amir mausoleum, resting place since 1404 of the great leader Tamerlane. Its architecture had widespread influence including on the Taj Mahal in Agra.

Sunday 18 May: We had set aside a second morning for the Takhtakaracha Hills. Upon our arrival we had a picnic breakfast in a small building surrounded by a stream and trees, where we watched a magnificent Blue Whistling-thrush, our only sighting of the trip. The trees held several Indian Golden Orioles and an Indian Paradise-flycatcher, with a few Eastern Goldfinches also noted. We then enjoyed a very pleasant walk of just over one kilometre through lovely pastoral meadows along the edge of a mountain valley. Eastern Orphee Warblers put on a great show with at least three pairs seen at close quarters in song and even nest building. Sadly, we learned that bird trappers had been in the area and removed the male White-throated Robins which we had seen here on previous trips and taken them to market as cage birds! Surely more can be done by the authorities to stop this vile trade. Again, we tried but failed to see Upcher's Warbler. Raptors included 10 Griffon Vultures, five Egyptian Vultures, three Cinereous Vultures, and singles of Short-toed Snake-eagle, Shikra and Long-legged Buzzard.

Further back towards Samarkand we paused for a walk on a boulder-strewn hillside, where we enjoyed fabulous views of two pairs of Finsch's Wheatear, the birds showing off all their

identification features clearly, although the females being predominantly brown-grey and off white below, required more careful study as shown below.



We returned to Samarkand and had lunch before our second sightseeing tour with the same very informative guide. Firstly, we called at the Registan Square, the country's premier tourist attraction and home to some of the city's most impressive architecture. The square is surrounded on three sides by large madrasahs, their construction dating back to the 15th century: the Ulugh Beg which is flanked by high minarets, the Sher-Dor with its tiger-like mosaics, and the Tilya-Kori, the youngest building in the complex which was also used as a mosque in times past and is one of the best examples of Turkic architecture and art in Asia.

Next, we visited the famous Bibi-Khanym Mosque, a masterpiece, built between 1399 and 1404 to commemorate the wife of Timur. By the mid-20th century only a grandiose ruin of it still survived, but major restoration work took place in the Soviet period.

Nearby we wandered around the colourful bazaar where many of the group were tempted by the amazing fresh and dried fruits, nuts and selection of tasty sweets on offer. Outside, flocks of Alpine Swifts swirled around, their 'chittering' calls filling the air, involving 100 birds at least. We thanked our guide for his services and returned to our hotel and evening meal.

Monday 19 May: We had a later breakfast today before checking out and heading to Samarkand railway station where we boarded the 10.30 am train to Bukhara. We were joined by Marina another guide from our ground agency who assisted Eric, as he already had plenty to do helping us locate all the special birds and wildlife. The journey took around 3 hours on

a smart, clean and efficient train, complete with polite carriage staff. We checked into our hotel situated near the Lyab-i Hauz pool and square, a famous tourist attraction itself with bars and cafes in the shade of Mulberry trees. It was here that we started the first of two sightseeing walks around Bukhara, later that afternoon. It was very hot, 34 C again, and the square and its artificial reservoir pool constructed in 1620 were bustling with tourists, many seeking shade and having a cool drink. Adjacent to the square we admired the Kanaka and the Madrasah of Nadir Divan-Beghi, both buildings incorporating ornate tiling depicting mythical birds and animals. We strolled through the square passed the statue of the legendary 13th century folk hero and cheerful joker Nasreddin, whose existence in real life remains the subject of debate. We walked on stopping at three surviving medieval trading domes or toki, which have high domes and open arches on all four sides providing shelter in winter and a good airflow and shade in summer. The Toki-Zargaron was used in earlier centuries as a market for jewellery sellers, Toki-Sarrafon for money sellers and Toki-Tilpak for hat sellers, though these days the merchandise sold is largely clothing, ornate metal work and art for tourists. We continued, passing the carpet museum once housing a mosque and had a little time to look at some of the wares on sale at the various stalls.

Afterwards we concluded our afternoon tour at the Kaylan Mosque with its tall minaret built in 1127. At 45 metres high, the tower was used for calling to prayer and more gruesomely for dealing with convicted criminals in the 16th century who were unceremoniously thrown off the top. Opposite we viewed the Miri-Arab Madrasah, a true sight to behold. Built between 1535 and 1536, it was one of the most esteemed religious universities in Central Asia and has been a place of study ever since. Classrooms are arranged across three corners of the building, the fourth containing the necropolis of Miri-Arab, 'Prince of the Arabs'.



The Miri-Arab Madrasah, a seat of learning since the 16th century. The madrasah still accepts 24 students a year to study religious and secular subjects.

We then walked to a restaurant on the eastern edge of the old city for our evening meal, pausing to admire one last antiquity, the Chor Minor, a madrasah built in 1807, each of its four towers covered in blue ceramic tiles with the motifs of different religions.

Bukhara is much more compact than Samarkand, most of the main tourist sites being within walking distance of each other.

Tuesday 20 May: We were up super early this morning and away for 4.00 am as we had a three-hour journey west of Bukhara to the Kyzyl-Kum desert where temperatures would reach the mid 30 C as early as mid-morning. Our quest was to find Turkestan Ground-jay, one of only four species in the genus *Podoces*, all dwelling in the various deserts and steppe of Persia and Asia. Our bird guide Eric continued to give us excellent service and once again gave solid advice on how to approach the task of finding these birds which can be quite elusive. We spread out and began our search in this vast wilderness. Patience was the order of the day. At least two Desert Lesser Whitethroats *halimodendri* were found and short rattling calls gave away the presence of eight Streaked Scrub-warblers in a five hundred metre or so stretch, some of which perched in the open showing contrasting long and blackish tail which was usually held erect. Noticeable absentees compared with earlier trips were Steppe Grey Shrike and Asian Desert Warbler, but undeterred we persevered locating a couple of Sykes's Warblers and migrants including two Common Redstarts and a female Red-backed Shrike way-out in the desert sands. Soon though Liz spotted our target bird, a Turkestan Ground-jay sitting at some distance on top of a bush.



The group assembled and we approached the bird to a sensible distance only to find it was part of a pair which were nest building. We watched them for a few minutes before leaving the area, not before Eric had shown us several interesting reptiles and a new mammal. These included three new species of lizard with many Lichenstein's Toad-headed Agama, three Secret Toad-headed Agama and five Reticulate Racerunner, the mammal being four examples of Long-clawed Ground-Squirrel.



Secret Toad-headed Agama - when threatened they open their mouths and ear flaps displaying bright colours and make a hissing noise to deter predators.

Afterwards we travelled a few kilometres to explore an area of trees beside a roadside restaurant, an ideal feeding area for migrants. A few minutes spent either side of our lunch produced a fine list including five Blyth's Reed-warbler, two Greenish Warblers, an Indian Golden Oriole, a Hume's Leaf-warbler, a 'Siberian' Chiffchaff, two more Common Redstarts and a Common Rosefinch. A species which can fluctuate in numbers year to year is the Desert Finch, so it was nice to see at least ten birds, some at close range. A single Pied Bushchat was also seen here but sadly it quickly disappeared.

We began the long drive back to Bukhara with several Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters on wires in the desert zone and later in more agricultural areas nearer Bukhara, more European Bee-eaters. A roadside lake which once held water and had proven attractive to birds in the past was bone dry. We did stop a few kilometres nearer Bukhara where further lakes and marshes produced six Purple Herons, a male Garganey and singing from the reeds were at least six

Clamorous Reed-warblers. Waders utilising the muddy pools included 10 Little Stints, 10 Wood Sandpipers, six Temminck's Stints, three Little Ringed Plover as well as a single Common Sandpiper. Several Western Marsh-harriers drifted over the fields and marshes.

We returned to Bukhara and enjoyed a well-deserved drink in the hotel's courtyard, before taking our evening meal.

Wednesday 21 May: It was another 7.00 am breakfast start, and we were quickly away south taking the road towards Mubarek but stopping after some 45 minutes alongside the Amu-Bukhara canal where temperatures had already risen to 34 C. We walked out into the semi-tendered agricultural fields towards a small area of tamarisk tress where we enjoyed fabulous views of Menetries's Warbler, a close and confiding male shown in the photograph below and a female. The male undertook a few song flights, and we listened carefully to its short rattling call.



This was followed by equally good views of three Rufous-tailed Scrub-robins. Pools here provided breeding grounds for several pairs of Ruddy Shelduck, Black-winged Stilts, a pair of Kentish Plover and best of all, five pairs of stunning White-tailed Plovers. The reed edges proved useful for getting views of Clamorous Reed-warbler. Hawking above the surrounding fields were ten Collared Pratincoles and quartering the fields were several Western Marsh-harriers. A male Citrine Wagtail flew by but couldn't be re-found. Eric found us a Rapid Racerunner, a type of slender lizard with long legs and a long tail. A couple of rather colourless Great (Turkestan) Tits were seen as we walked back to our coach. As we drove back to Bukhara,

three Asian Wild Ass could be seen grazing within the Jeyran Ecocentre perimeter fence away to our left; we intended to return here the following morning so carried on back to our hotel for refreshments and a rest before another sightseeing tour.

The sightseeing began at an out of city location, where we were escorted around the summer palace of the last Emir of Bukhara. The building and its grounds known as the Sitori-i-Mokhi-Khosa Palace was built in the late 19th and early 20th century. Master craftsmen from the world over were involved in its construction, which included the most stunning interior designs of the day. The Emir fled the country with the arrival of the Russians in 1920 and a few years later the palace was made into a museum and currently houses exhibitions of decorative arts. We marvelled at the treasures on show, including fine examples of the gold-embroidered gowns worn by the Emir himself. The palace gardens have a large pool, where courtiers could keep a little cooler during the fierce heat of summer.



Afterwards we travelled back into the old city and visited the Bolo Haouz Mosque, with its beautiful frontage of 20 ornate wooden columns which when reflected in the pool outside create a quite stunning mirage of 40 pillars. We concluded our visit to ancient Bukhara with a tour of the massive Ark Fortress which was initially built in the 5th century and variously used since then as a military base and Emir's home. It was here in 1842 that British military 'diplomats' (or spies according to the Emir), Connolly and Stoddart were executed after being held captive in the horrendous 'Bug Pit'. This followed years of British diplomatic blunders during a tussle with Russia for influence with the rulers of the day. From the top of the Ark, we enjoyed panoramic views over the old city and ended with a look around the small natural history section complete with stuffed birds and animals typical of the region.

After warmly thanking our local city guide, we returned to the hotel for another fine evening meal.

Thursday 22 May: This morning was our last with field opportunities, so after an early breakfast we again set off to the Jeyran Ecocentre area, where we scanned the vast plain from some raised ground just off the main road. Concentrated viewing eventually yielded two individual and well separated Macqueen's Bustards, fine birds, one even doing a little display, but still quite distant. Here too were two Black-bellied Sandgrouse as well as several each of Asian Wild Ass and Goitered Gazelle. With just an hour to spare we had another look at the canal area seeing Menetries's Warbler again, yet more European Rollers and fly-over Collared Pratincoles.

It was soon time to head back to our hotel where we packed, later taking the high-speed train back to Tashkent. The temperature was 36 C, and this was now probably the mid daily minimum for the rest of the summer! Once back in Tashkent we settled at our final hotel and were joined over evening meal by the ground agent team who had helped plan and organise our tour and who wanted to know how we had enjoyed our holiday. True professionals! We duly thanked them and our guide Marina and then especially Eric who at just 19 years old had given his all in supporting us throughout the whole trip. His main occupation is in research at the ornithological institute, and he clearly has potential as a future top ornithologist. He had taken time out from his work to help us as a bird guide, and we certainly wish him well.

Friday 23 May: Most of the group were up extra early, ready to be taken to the airport for the morning flight back to the UK via Istanbul, with some taking a later flight and staying on in Istanbul for a few days extra sightseeing. It had been an excellent birding and cultural holiday which we all thoroughly enjoyed.

Thanks go to Keith and Eric our guide for their photographs used in this report.

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