BIRDING ABROAD LIMITED
KAZAKHSTAN
25 MAY – 6 JUNE 2019 - TRIP REPORT

Stretching from the Caspian Sea in the west to the Chinese border in the east, landlocked Kazakhstan is a country of vast proportions, whose landscapes encompass rolling steppe, stark desert, tranquil lakes and lofty mountains. This Central Asian country once hosted ancient trading routes along the famed Silk Road, which connected the Orient with Europe. Kazakhstan also forms a natural history bridge between these two regions of the Palearctic, possessing as it does, an astonishingly rich avian diversity.

The aim of our tour was to experience a significant cross section of the country’s habitats and bird life. In the north near to Nur-Sultan (Astana), we would visit the seemingly infinite steppe grasslands and lakes stretching all the way to the horizon; home to Demoiselle Crane, Pallid Harrier, Pallas’s Gull, Black Lark, White-winged Lark and Booted Warbler. Further south, our quest would encompass a variety of ecological zones, including Turanga woodland, home to Saxaul Sparrow, Azure Tit, Yellow-eyed Pigeon and White-winged Woodpecker. The Taukum Desert hosts both Caspian Plover and Greater Sandplover, whilst the dry rocky hills of the Charyn Gorge might reveal Macqueen’s Bustard, Pallas’s Sandgrouse, Meadow Bunting and Asian Crimson-winged Finch as chief prizes. Finally, traversing the altitudinal zones of the mighty Tien Shan mountains, would present another mouth-watering list of birds; Himalayan Snowcock, Ibisbill, Eversmann’s and Guldenstadt’s Redstart and White-browed Tit-warbler.

The team comprised Gary Dayes, Pete Greaves, Steve Gwilliam, Steve Holliday, Martin Limbert, Terry McEvoy, Dale Middleton, Doug Page, Neil Stocks, Mick Turton and Peter Wilkinson, with Lance and Nick as the Birding Abroad leaders, ably assisted by local ground agents and guides.
Saturday 25 May – The majority of the group set out from Manchester on the morning flight to Istanbul, connecting with an onward flight to Nur-Sultan (Astana). Nick and Neil joined the group at the hotel in Nur-Sultan, having flown out via Heathrow. Our guide in Kazakhstan was Victoria Kovshar, one of the country’s leading ornithologists who had travelled with Lance and Nick on their reconnaissance trip in 2017.

Sunday 26 May – After a late breakfast, we boarded our coach and headed south out of the city for some 60 km before bearing south-west into a landscape of true steppe grassland near the small village of Sarykol. It was a lovely blue-sky day with temperatures a pleasant 15-18 degree C throughout. Long stretches of roadside fields had been planted with ‘shelter belt’ trees, home to numerous small rookeries, which in turn had attracted several pairs of Red-footed Falcons, Common Kestrels and Oriental Turtle-doves. Continuing on we made several stops where the steppe was dotted with a myriad of lakes. Waterfowl included seven White-headed Duck, three pairs of Whooper Swans and small numbers of Common Shelduck, Red-crested Pochard, Common Pochard, Tufted Duck, Garganey, Northern Shoveler, Gadwall and Northern Pintail. It was nice to see a good mix of grebe species, mainly Great Crested and Black-necked, but also a handful of Red-necked and Slavonian, all in fine summer attire. Demoiselle Cranes were a notable feature of the landscape, with 60 or so seen during the day, mainly in pairs or small groups. A few Great Bitterns boomed or made short flights around the large reed beds, where Great Egrets outnumbered Grey Herons at the waters’ edge. Western Marsh-harriers patrolled the skies, five Dalmatian Pelicans, another steppe lake specialist, put in appearances, but it was the sheer numbers of Red-necked Phalaropes that produced the day’s most memorable sight. Several lakes were simply teeming with them, all staging on their route northwards, our best estimate being of some 6,500 birds – quite a sight! Other notable waders logged during the day included Terek Sandpiper (70), Little Stint (50), Curlew Sandpiper (15), Temminck’s Stint (9), Marsh Sandpiper (1), whilst commoner species including local Pied Avocets, Black-winged Stilts, Eurasian Curlew, Black-tailed Godwits, Common Redshank and Ruff.
Open water attracted 12 Slender-billed and 20 Steppe Gulls *barabensis*, though these were perhaps eclipsed by colonies of White-winged Terns (450 birds for the day) and Black Terns (150), with just a single Caspian Tern also being seen. Virtually every stop produced a few Black-winged Pratincoles, with a total of 30 for the day.

![Black-winged Pratincole were often seen at close quarters](image)

Drier short grass areas were explored throughout the day, resulting in a very respectable total of 14 White-winged Larks, for most of the group this being a highly desired new species. We were able to watch them on the ground and in aerial song flights, their white secondaries being almost translucent against the light.

![White-winged Lark – highly desired by the group as we crossed the steppe](image)
A migrant female Red-backed Shrike was noted, and in a small thicket where we had our picnic lunch, a Long-eared Owl and Greenish Warblers were found. It was nice to hear some unfamiliar warblers in full song, including in the artemisia scrub several Booted Warblers, and in thin phragmites strips at the water’s edge, several Paddyfield Warblers. Dykes near the roadside typically produced a few Bluethroats and Western Yellow Wagtails, here of the race beema.

A most abiding memory of the day was of another of the steppe specialists, the Pallid Harrier, of which we saw five males and one female, mainly at the beginning and end of the day when they are most active. Mammals noted included six Steppe Marmot, a Muskrat (introduced species) and a single Corsac Fox. The steppe was covered with Painted Lady butterflies, many, many thousands we estimated.

It had been a terrific first day, sampling some of the wonders of the steppe. We returned via the same route back to our hotel, enjoying a fine evening meal and a drink or two to quench our thirst and toast a great start to the tour.

**Monday 27 May:** After breakfast at 07.00, our coach was ready and waiting, and we set off for a full day out to the famous Kurgalzhen steppe which lies to the south-west of Nur-Sultan. Our journey would take us some 80 km directly out in the steppe, before completing an additional clock-wise loop of approximately another 80 km back to the main road leading to the city.

A day counter for Pallid Harriers was quickly assigned as soon as it became apparent that they, the males at least, were everywhere on the route out. One even showed over some waste ground before we had left the city! Oriental Turtle-doves were again encountered regularly in the roadside shelter belts, and a few Lesser Grey Shrikes perched prominently. Our main quest early on was to locate habitat suitable for Sociable Lapwings. A short stop at one such site eventually revealed the presence of a pair, and then a third bird, not yet on breeding territory, but feeding in a ploughed field. Such wonderful birds; let’s hope the conservation efforts taking place can halt this species decline and ensure its survival.

**Sociable Plover – becoming more difficult to see on its breeding grounds**

![Sociable Plover](image_url)
Red-footed Falcons were quite commonly encountered with 30 being the estimate for the day.

A longer stop was made at an area where the river had formed a large ox-bow lake surrounded by reeds and willows. The rich chorus of birds at this one spot was quite astounding and included two Booted Warblers, four Blyth’s Reed-warblers, two Cetti’s Warblers, two Barred Warblers, Lesser Whitethroat, two Bluethroats, two Common Rosefinches and a Common Nightingale which must have felt under sonic siege, as it turned up its own volume button to ensure it came out the loudest! More of these species were seen throughout the day, but not with the same collective effect as here.

Waders congregated on most lakes where there was some exposed mud, the species mix to some extent mirroring that of the previous day, though Red-necked Phalaropes were slightly down with only 5000 being estimated! The transient and fluctuating nature of the steppe for breeding birds was demonstrated when a visit to an area which had held a large colony of Black-winged Pratincoles for the previous two years, revealed it to be deserted this year! The vastness of the area probably meant they had relocated just a few miles away, but still out of our range.

We had by now entered Black Lark breeding territory and suddenly they were everywhere. A starling-sized bulky bird, the males could even be seen from the coach along the roadside, feeding and making short flights, chasing each other and their mates. At various stops we estimated a day count of 450, which together with about 40 White-winged Larks was a truly memorable experience, especially when they were displaying in flight. Eurasian Skylarks were common too with some 200 being noted.

A lone male Little Bustard was a nice sighting, the area holding only a very small and scattered population. The community of steppe passerines also included a few Siberian Stonechat, Northern Wheatears, a handful of Tawny Pipits, and where trees were present, a few Fieldfares, Eurasian Golden
Orioles, Steppe Buzzards and Black Kites. Plantations with young trees bordering the open steppe were favoured by Short-eared Owls, with seven being noted by the end of the day.

Lake after lake was covered in White-winged Terns, a day count of 2000 being returned. A colony of 300 pairs of Pallas’s Gulls on one island was a definite highlight, the parents already having downy chicks out of the nest, which being much whiter could be distinguished from the greyer chicks of their neighbouring Steppe Gulls.

It was a privilege to visit a breeding colony of the magnificent Pallas’s Gull

Mammals noted included Steppe Marmots, Red Fox and three Brown Hares.

As we returned to our hotel in Nur-Sultan, and the official day count for Pallid Harrier had reached 57! All but two of these were males, the females presumably being hidden away at nest sites.

**Tuesday 28 May** – Breakfast was again at 07.00 before we set off on a short drive to the north east of the city to an area known to be at the western edge of the range for Pine Bunting. Unfortunately, on this occasion we could not locate the buntings, but still managed to see a nice selection of birds around an area of overgrown gravel pits. A couple of hours yielded Long-eared Owl, six Eurasian Penduline-tits including one nest clearly in use, Tawny Pipit, four Red-backed Shrikes, ten Booted Warblers, two Paddyfield Warblers, two Grasshopper Warblers, 15 Blyth’s Reed-warblers, a single Siberian Chiffchaff, a Barred Warbler, five Bluethroats, ten Common Rosefinches and a covey of Grey Partridges.

We then drove back to Nur-Sultan enjoying one hour’s walk around its very ornate city centre, which remarkably has all been created during the last twenty years. On show were varied architectural themes which at times mimic World Heritage Sites and capitals elsewhere, all in an effort to lure professionals, government workers and tourists away from leafy and traditional city of Almaty, the former capital. The policy is only part successful we hear, but it has resulted in a spectacularly modern and clean city; though some might call it a somewhat unusual and slightly fantasia looking place. Even in the tiny park-like enclosures, we heard two Blyth’s Reed-warblers in song.
However, we had to press on to the airport, stopping briefly at some ponds en-route, which resulted in the finding of two Azure Tits, a Eurasian Penduline-tit at an almost completed nest, as well as more Booted and Blyth’s Reed-warblers, Bluethroats and Common Rosefinches. A new mammal for the day was a Weasel.

Our flight south to Almaty took just an hour and half and we were met by our new driver in the early evening and taken promptly to a modern hotel in the city centre.

**Wednesday 29 May** – Leaving the leafy boulevards of trendy Almaty, where a few Common Mynas were seen on the pavements, we headed north from the city driving for an hour and half before reaching the southern reaches of the Sorbulak Lakes. Here the barren and agriculturally unproductive clay soils of these ‘badlands’ are interspersed with lakes of various sizes. European Rollers were everywhere, and another ‘day count’ was instigated. Our first stop was at the river Aksai near the village of Karaoy, where we watched a pair of White-crowned Penduline-tits at their nest. Two Indian Golden Orioles flew over and a pair of Citrine Wagtails were observed. The river bank attracted a pair of Pale Sand Martins, which we watched carefully to clinch their subtle identification features. Rosy Starlings moved around in small groups, a regular feature of the next couple of days in this area.

We then moved further north to check several of the main lakes and their surrounds. Whooper Swans and Ruddy Shelduck were much in evidence with 120 and 56 counted respectively during the day. Other wildfowl included 150 Red-crested Pochard and ten Ferruginous Ducks. A few Demoiselle Cranes flew over and another male Little Bustard was found at the trackside where our first Black-bellied Sandgrouse of the tour appeared. Pelicans were noticeable across the area, with both Great White and Dalmatians breeding on lake islands. Migratory waders were rather scarce this far south, but gulls included 40 Caspian, here replacing their close relative Steppe; the reverse of the situation in the north of Kazakhstan. Eight Gull-billed Terns were hawking for insects over the fields. We waited patiently for a White-tailed Eagle to return to its nest, only to realise half an hour later that the adult had been there all the time sitting quietly amongst the sun dappled leafy canopy!

Heading further north, the open steppe was ideal for Long-legged Buzzard and a count of ten was our highest of the trip for this species. Eurasian Hobby put in multiple appearances, usually chasing dragonflies in the warm air. Closer to the reed edges, Common Reed-warbler and Great Reed-warblers were noted, whilst any stand of more than a few trees held Greenish Warblers, probably migrants still...
on their way north. Moving on, roadside ponds held 12 White-headed Ducks and 46 Black-necked Grebes including many young, as well as a large ‘kettle’ of 100 passing Black Kites. We then went on to admire a large colony of Rosy Starlings at the roadside, a truly memorable sight at very close quarters. Flocks of this species were everywhere, totalling around 1000 birds for the day. Rocky ground nearby had a couple of pairs of Pied Wheatear. The day count for European Roller reached some 80 individuals.

Another two hours’ drive north brought us to Konshengol, from where it was only a few kilometres to our camp in the Taukum Desert. Staff had been brought from Almaty to run the camp for us and we were soon enjoying a welcome drink.
We then had a wander around the camp, where several Red-headed Buntings were singing, and down to an artesian spring which produced surface water and therefore attracted thirsty birds to drink. We sat quietly and watched; here we noted 25 Black-bellied Sandgrouse, a single Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, 20 Greater Sandplovers including some juveniles already free-flying, Temminck’s Stint, several Common Hoopoes, 50 Calandra Larks, seven Bimaculated Lark, 15 Greater Short-toed Lark and eight Isabelline Wheatears. Mammals seen today included three Goitered Gazelles, whilst reptiles included a Horsfield’s Tortoise. Quite a place this was! An evening meal and a couple of beers under the stars was the perfect way to end the day in this very special location.

Thursday 30 May - We were up just after dawn to watch for activity at the water hole, which attracted the same mix of species as the previous evening, with the addition of four Black Stork and three Brown-necked Ravens.

After a 06:30 breakfast we set off north, a drive of about 100 km or so through sparsely vegetated terrain with undulating sand dunes, broken by a couple of roadside stops to check out habitat that looked interesting. Our first stop was just a few kilometres outside the camp, where a few bushes were home to Tree, Spanish and Indian House Sparrows (indicus), the latter regarded by some authorities as a separate species, showing cleaner plumage compared with domesticus, as well as being wholly migratory. As pair of Lesser Grey Shrikes also had their nest in the same bushes. As the coach powered north, it flushed many larks off the roadside including numerous Crested, over a hundred each of Greater Short-toed and Calandra, plus a few Bimaculated. The roadside stops produced a couple of singing Rufous-tailed Scrub-robins, several Desert Lesser Whitethroats (halimodendri), a single Eastern Orphean Warbler, a European Nightjar perched and a Steppe Grey Shrike. Isabelline Wheatears were everywhere, and this area also produced a good day count of eight Red-tailed Shrikes and 20 Red-headed Buntings. Surprisingly three Chukars were seen, well away from their usual rocky hillside habitat. Three Short-toed Snake-eagles soared overhead and a Shikra was seen perched by some. As we went further northwards, we passed a few lakes which hosted several Ferruginous Ducks, and some scrub where we noted at least three Common Pheasants. A bridge overlooking a narrow river produced nice views of a pair of Azure Tits. Nearby we watched a small colony of Saxaul Sparrows, one of our target species, and two pairs of Sykes’s Warblers.
We then had a walk in the very special Turanga woodland and located seven Yellow-eyed Stock Doves; these birds were mainly in pairs and quite nervous, but eventually they showed well. Titmice included several Great Tits but also ten very obvious Turkestan Tits, a sub-species and possible future split from Great. Gradually we found four White-winged Woodpeckers so completing our quest for the specialists of this woodland.

Lunch was a lovely picnic in the Turanga woodland, where two Shikra circled, before we set off south for the long drive back to our camp near Konchengol. The water hole was dominated by a splendid very pale Long-legged Buzzard, so fewer birds appeared on this evening’s vigil.

Mammals seen during the day were another three Goitered Gazelles, a Tolai Hare and a Yellow Souslik.

**Friday 31 May** – Once again we were up with the larks, enjoying their dawn chorus and seeing what had been attracted to the waterhole. The only new species turned out to be a fine male Desert Finch.

Most of the morning was spent checking out the vast dry stony plains near our camp in the hope of locating one of the few pairs of Caspian Plover which breed very sparingly around here. With the help of our guide, the search was thorough and systematic and we found at least 45 Greater Sandplovers during the morning, mostly in post breeding groups so comprising adults in various degrees of summer dress, accompanied by a number of juvenile birds already on the wing. With their breeding season almost over these birds looked set for moving on, despite it only being mid-June. Some pairs of Greater Sandplover were still sitting on nests however, or with tiny chicks, showing that the breeding cycle in this population is not totally synchronised across the local breeding range. Time was of the essence and so we continued our search for Caspian Plovers in an area where we know they were present just two weeks previously. At least a couple of female Charadriid plovers had us slightly perplexed for a short while, but overall, we remained unconvinced that any Caspian’s were present. It just shows that birding can be very challenging even with species not supposed to present any identification difficulties.
Up to ten Sykes’s Warblers were noted during the morning, but no Asian Desert Warblers as hoped. Small parties of Brown-necked Ravens roamed the area searching for carrion and we found at least four Asian Short-toed Larks during our stops, amongst the other larks.

We returned to camp for a light lunch and then said our farewells to the friendly staff who had looked after us so splendidly. We settled on the coach for a drive back to Almaty which was to take all afternoon. Droves of Rosy Starlings criss-crossed the landscape, with 3000 being our estimate for the journey. Some Black Terns were skimming the water of a lake as we drove into Almaty where we quickly checked-in to our hotel. As we approached the city, the mighty snow-covered peaks of the Tien Shan came into view; though quite beautiful though our birding adventure there would sadly have to wait a few days.

**Saturday June 1** – Today we headed east towards the border with China. Driving through agricultural areas just outside the city limits produced flight views of several Indian Golden Orioles, more Demoiselle Cranes and many European Rollers. Our first stop was at a mixed roadside colony of both Sand Martins and Pale Sand Martins, which again enabled us to study their subtle differences which in turn permitted a count of nearly 10 : 1 in favour of the latter! A couple of Tawny Pipits were in song display here. A walk around the reed beds at a small lake produced nice views of three Savi’s Warbler, four Bearded Reedlings and six Reed Buntings of the thick-billed race *pyrrhuloides*, which sported almost Bullfinch-like bills. It was nice to see and hear several Common Cuckoos, a species still doing well in these parts.

Lunch was taken at the Kokpek Pass, a one-hour drive further east. Two Golden Eagles soared overhead and a short walk into a narrow gorge produced two Rufous-tailed Rock-thrush, two Blue Rock-thrush, four ‘regular’ Pied Wheatears and a fine male *vittata* morph Pied Wheatear. *Vittata* is postulated either to represent a colour morph of Pied Wheatear, or perhaps an ancient hybridisation
between Pied and Eastern Black-eared Wheatear *melanoleuca* east of the Caspian Sea. However, the scarcity of *vittata* types in more western areas where the two species overlap, and its relative abundance beyond the easternmost range of *melanoleuca* gives greater credence to the colour morph theory. Buntings included five Grey-necked, two Rock and three White-capped, all in song.

Great though the birding was, we had to move on if we wanted a stop at a small spring on the Sugaty Plain, known to attract desert birds thirsty for a drink. Sitting quietly above the small surface pools, we watched as an array of species arrived. Mongolian Finches were the most abundant with 70 or so coming and going, followed by Grey-necked Buntings (20), Rock Sparrows (10), Horned Lark (4) and a few brightly coloured Linnets of the race *bella*, with a nice male Asian Crimson-winged Finch too.
We arrived at our guesthouse at Chunga in the late afternoon, shortly afterwards acquiring some beer from the local shop, this being especially warranted as it was the special occasion of an all English European Cup Final, with Liverpool playing Spurs. A Eurasian Scops-owl was heard, but a search for this was deferred until the following evening. Some of the group got up at 02.00 to watch the game on the TV, and we all heard their cheers, so it was easy to tell Liverpool had won!

**Sunday June 2** – After breakfast at 06:30 we set off out on to the plain and scanned for Macqueen’s Bustard. The conditions were cold and drizzly though, and despite trying hard we had no luck. The weather looked better in the nearby hills and here we scanned for raptors, noting three Cinereous Vultures, three Golden Eagles, a single Steppe Eagle plus an Eastern Imperial Eagle for some. Small parties of Red-billed Chough flew around and at the Kegen Pass, several Rufous-tailed Rock-thrushes and Pied Wheatears (including another male *vittata*) and Eastern Goldfinch were noted.

Lunch was taken in a shallow picturesque valley in the hills and with the sun coming out, some passerines started to sing. Meadow Buntings are at the edge of their range here, so it was great to see and listen to seven of these birds on territory. It was ‘bunting’ valley with singing Rock and Grey-necked joining in the chorus. We paused at a small colony of Lesser Kestrels to enjoy these fine birds, where there were also several Rock Sparrows.

By mid-afternoon we decided to return to the plain. Here we searched successfully for Asian Desert Warblers, noting six of these fine birds in a one hour’s walk. Several Black-bellied Sandgrouse were seen and three Desert Wheatears, but best of all was a Pallas’s Sandgrouse which flew past us showing its distinctive features. It appeared to settle but we couldn’t relocate it and with dusk approaching we decided to leave the area in peace and return to our guesthouse. A new mammal for the trip today was Grey Marmot.
During the evening a few of the group tried for Eurasian Scops-owl and duly found one which showed well, as well as hearing two or three others calling around the edge of the village.

Monday 3 June – A more concerted try for Macqueen’s Bustard. This time the weather was drier, a few degrees warmer and brighter. Within minutes one had been located, a male in display no less and a fine reward for our efforts. We watched the bird for some time at a distance, enjoying its movements and displays. A pair of Desert Wheatears were feeding young nearby.

We then returned and had a stroll around the village gardens near to our guesthouse. Birds included some Laughing Doves, a few migrant Greenish and Hume’s Warblers, an Indian Golden Oriole, six Common Nightingales (of the local race golzii), Red-tailed Shrikes and then with time running out, the most sought-after species in this area - a fine Long-tailed Shrike.

The rest of the day was spent travelling back west to Almaty via the new ‘Chinese highway’. Storms had arrived and the rain was intermittently heavy. We did though manage to see three Barred Warblers and then further on at a second stop, a Black-headed Penduline-tit, which just a couple of the group manged to see before a downpour saw us all frantically retreating to the coach. A couple of Booted Eagles en-route were new for the trip list. A new addition to the mammal list today was six Great Gerbils.

We checked into our hotel in Almaty, getting a good night’s sleep before our final leg of the Kazakhstan tour, two excursions into the splendid Tien Shan mountains.

Tuesday 4 June – Our drive took us around the modern city ring road and then south, gradually climbing into the foothills where our guide registered us with the national park guards, who could then authorise our visit to the mountains. Our first stop was near a gushing steam which flowed down
off steep slopes into the main river. Here we found three Brown Dippers, a couple of Blue Whistling-thrushes, a male Blue-capped Redstart with young and several Grey Wagtails.

Climbing still higher, we entered coniferous and mixed forest with pretty glades, where two Black-throated Accentors were found and a few Tree Pipits were singing. A superb Three-toed Woodpecker began drumming and duly flew in, settling on a telegraph pole where it performed splendidly for the group. At this same location, three Northern Nutcrackers called and showed before disappearing over distant ridges and a Songar Tit began calling but stubbornly remained in cover. Greenish and Hume’s Warblers were everywhere, singing and calling away. Deciding to concentrate on the forest and tree line zones today, we focused on an area of juniper scrub which covered the higher slopes, a unique habitat type of its own. The area hosted three male Himalayan Rubythroats which sang and displayed in the open, plus six White-winged Grosbeaks, four Red-mantled Rosefinches and small parties of Red-fronted Serins.

Red-mantled Rosefinch – not shy birds, often feeding close to the group
Common Whitethroats of the race *rubicola* also frequented the scrub but our main target was of course White-browed Tit-warbler and eventually a nest building pair showed well, much to everyone’s delight. The grassy areas were home to three Water Pipits of the very distinctive race *blakistoni*.

The main river had been dammed years ago creating a huge reservoir to supply water to Almaty city below. The lake edges are boulder strewn and create excellent habitat for Ibisbill, and before long a pair had been located which we watched for some time, feeding and moving around, quite well camouflaged amongst the river shingle. After a while one flew much closer, enabling nice photographs to be taken. Blue sky and sun prompted raptors into the air, including three Bearded Vultures circling together whilst we watched the Ibisbill! Concluding a very pleasant walk, we returned to our hotel in Almaty having enjoyed an outstanding day out in the Tien Shan.

**Wednesday 5 June** – this was the last day of the Kazakhstan tour so we returned to the Tien Shan, this time going straight to the highest accessible point in the alpine zone, which is amongst the snow fields at the Cosmostation on the Ozerby Pass.

We were greeted by small parties of both Red-billed and Yellow-billed Choughs and groups of Plain Mountain-finches. Our main quest was to see Himalayan Snowcock, so we walked out along the mountainside which afforded panoramic views of the slopes and valley below. A pair of Altai Accentors showed very well, nest building just a few metres above the pathway. We thought little of two ramblers who had gone ahead of us following the track over the nearby ridge. Then, a few minutes later as we settled to scan the area, we were astonished to see a group of nine snowcocks fly from the very same mountain, gliding passed at close range, before settling amongst boulders about half a kilometre away. They had clearly been disturbed by the aforementioned walkers, so we considered ourselves fortunate indeed to witness such a close-range fly-past. As we watched the snowcocks on the ground, mist began to descend shrouding the mountain temporarily, so we took shelter under the
cover of the former research buildings, from where we watched a pair of Guldenstadt’s Redstarts, plus an additional lone male. Cloud and drizzle then began to break as we descended the mountain, allowing us to spot a Brown Accentor on rocks nearby and as we drove slowly further down, more Water Pipits and another Himalayan Rubythroat were located. A Stoat was seen carrying one or more of its own young.

Guldenstadt’s Redstart – king of the genus and a high alpine breeder

Lower down amongst the pines and glades we enjoyed a fine pair of Merlin, clearly of a paler montane race and thought to be lymani, a rare local resident. In the wider valleys lower down, a male Eversmann’s Redstart showed brilliantly, with a free flying juvenile staying mostly hidden nearby. An Eastern Goldfinch showed very well on the roadside. More Greenish and Hume’s showed and sang; these had been a constant soundtrack on our walks and stops.

By late afternoon it was time to return to the hotel, where some prepared to head home in the morning and others prepared for the start of a new adventure to Uzbekistan. We said a fond farewell and big thankyou to Victoria, who had been fantastic as a guide.

The group enjoyed a nice meal together, before Pete Greaves, Steve Holliday, Martin Limbert, and Neil Stocks retired to bed ready for their early morning flights back to the UK. The rest of the group had to pack and connect with the 23:30 flight from Almaty to Tashkent, capital of Uzbekistan where a whole new adventure awaited......

We would like to thank Peter Greaves, Mick Turton, Steve Holliday and Victoria Kovshar for allowing use of their fine photographs.

Lance Degnan and Nick Whitehouse September 2019

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