

azakhstan

8th – 17th May 2015



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a group of 14 participants and leader Reg Thorpe of **NATURETREK** via Gatwick to Istanbul [4hrs] and then onto Almaty 10 hrs on the 9th May, with Kazakhstan being 5hrs ahead of the UK. The only birds seen today which was essentially the Swifts at Istanbul airport.

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Start at 0600hrs after a smooth and quick passage through. By now it was light enough to bird and the first birds seen included 2 **Common Myna** (☞), 2 **Masked Wagtail** (☞), 6 Red-rumped Swallow and Collared Dove, all around the airport as on the outskirts of the city where a pair of **Long-tailed Shrike** (☞) showed particularly well. Birds along the roadside also included a perched **Shikra** (☞), plenty of Roller, Red-rumped Swallow, Black-eared Kite, Lapwing and the Cinnamon Teal. Amongst commoner birds such as Magpie, Common Starling, Lapwing and Rook.

Our first stop was for a picnic breakfast in an area of fields and woods about 70kms outside town. A wander about the area while being prepared produced some nice birds in 3 **Demoiselle Crane** (☞) in flight and on the ground. Lots of Hume's Warbler, White-bellied Nuthatch, White-throated Sparrow, Bunting, Whitethroat, 3 Hobby, Cuckoo, 2 Nightingale (subspecies – *hafizii*) and Russian Jackdaw (subspecies – *caucasica*). After Breakfast our local guide Andrey took us to some nearby woods where we successfully staked out a pair of **Lulworth Tit** (☞) which showed very well despite being only 10yds from the noisy main road. We also saw our first Desert Quail and ground squirrel.

Further 50kms to an old quarry near Malybay, where there was a breeding colony of **Pale Martin** (☞) mixed in with so many other species that 30 birds or 15 pairs were present. The nearby area was also alive with other species including 1 Lesser Grey Shrike, 1 Golden Eagle, 10 Roller, 2 Bee-eater, 2 Isabelline Wheatear and our first of the recently split **Indian House Sparrow** (☞) which was different from the common House Sparrow in the cities.

Arrived at the Kokpek pass, by now the wind had picked up and was strong enough to hamper birding but we did manage to see a **White-capped Bunting** (☞) tucked away in a sheltered side valley. From here we drove up onto the Sogaty plains, a desert 3500 feet above sea level. We visited a renowned water hole formed by a leaking pipe in which the birds of t

steppe come to visit during the day. Ticks came thick and fast in 1 **Asian Crimson-winged Finch** (☒), 8 **Mongolian Finch** (☒) and 1 **Turkestan [or Red-tailed] Shrike** (☒). Other birds included Black-eared Kite, 2 Linnet, Long-legged Buzzard.

At the Charyn Guesthouse in Shonzhy with about 2hrs light to spare. The guesthouse held a large colony of 15 pairs of everyone rested I went out in the near gale-force winds [which is always a prelude to rain on the steppes] to look for an early morning walk before breakfast the next day. I found an excellent area of river and scrub which would be good for mornings and as always once I recorded good sightings on the first day everyone followed on the second morning.

The guesthouse itself was very comfortable and the food and service was very good. Slept like a log but was up at dawn chomping.

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After thunderstorms had cleared to leave a pleasant sunny morning, a tad chilly to start. Walked the area this morning and found a good number of species the highlight being 1 **Desert Finch** (☒), the rest of the list included 4 Cuckoo, 1 Indian House Sparrow, 3 Hoopoe, 40 House Martin, 2 Long-tailed Shrike, 6 Hume's Warbler, Common Myna, 2 Male, 2 Common Rosefinch, Greenfinch, **Blyth's Reed Warbler** (☒), Hobby, Roller, 16 Russian Jackdaw, 3 **Indian Golden Oriole**, **Oriental Turtle Dove** (☒), 4 Turkestan Shrike, 2 Starling, **Grey-headed Goldfinch** (☒), male Barred Warbler, 2 Great Wheatear and 10 Swallow. Not bad for a 20min walk.

When we went back out onto the plains, first off we stopped at a number of locations on the south side road scanning a 3 Ruddy Shelduck, 30 Black-eared Kite, Long-legged Buzzard, 4 Lesser Kestrel, a distant displaying McQueen's Bustard, 1 house in small flocks in flight, 2 **Pallas Sandgrouse** (☒) also in flight, Cuckoo, 5 Roller, 5 Hoopoe, 20 Turkestan Shrike, 10+ Short-toed Lark, Bluethroat, 5 Raven, 30+ Isabelline Wheatear, 4 Indian House Sparrow and 2 Masked Wagtail. A Gazelle and Goitered Gazelle.

At a river valley that cut its way through the plains at a place called Temerlik, this proved to be quite a migrant trap for some nice Kazakhstan species. Highlight of the passage migrants was found to be Kazakhstan's 32nd Little Bunting.

close and was a tick for most of the party. Other migrants were 2 Common Sandpiper, Cuckoo, Barred Warbler, 2 N
: Dove, 2 Tree Pipit, 2 Water Pipit and 5 Siberian Stonechat. Resident or summer breeders were 2 Black-eared Kite,
Booted Eagle, Cinerous Vulture, 2 Hoopoe, 2 Turkestan Shrike, 2 **Azure Tit** (☞), 5 **Hume's Whitethroat** (☞), 2 Mistle
r [1pr nesting in a bus shelter], Rock Thrush, 2 Siberian Stonechat, 2 Masked Wagtail, 15 Tawny Pipit, 3 Grey-head
hunting, 4 Penduline Tit and Reed Bunting. We really should have stayed here at least 4hrs to explore more of this fi
ry dictated just 1hr.

t a Muslim cemetery on the outskirts of a village named Akcay produced small colonies of both Lesser Kestrel and R
tings of Demoiselle Crane, Cuckoo, 10 Short-toed Lark, 2 Masked Wagtail and 10 Isabelline Wheatear.

ed on minor roads to the Ketemen Mountains with the road hitting 6000ft above sea-level and the peaks even high
bottom and lower levels we stopped briefly and saw Corn Bunting, 20 **Oriental Crow** (☞) [recently split from Carri
hunting. Around the high roads, peaks and side valleys we had great views of 8 **Himalayan Griffon Vulture** (☞), 2 Bo
ire, Sparrowhawk, 2 Long-legged Buzzard, immature **Imperial Eagle** (☞), Golden Eagle perched, 2 Cuckoo, 5 Roller, 2
out to be "albigula" or **Central Asian Horned Lark** (☞), after I pointed out that the black of the breast joined the bla
d the eye, a species thought not be recorded with certainty in the area and will need to be looked into by the Kazak
s 4 Isabelline Wheatear, 3 Rock Thrush, 2 Masked Wagtail, 2 Tree Pipit, 2 Water Pipit, 2 Grey-headed Goldfinch, 2 R
ot least a superb male **Pine Bunting** (☞), which is quite rare in the south of the country.

lid our touristy thing by visiting the Charyn Canyon for an hour and getting our first Cetti's Warbler to boot. We the
e just before dark.

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wn for another walk around the hotel area, this time accompanied by a full crew, the list of birds was even better t
:extra species and numbers such as Siberian Chiffchaff, **White-winged Woodpecker** (☞), 6 Turkestan Shrike, 5 Barrec
rike, 2 Indian Golden Oriole, 2 Hobby, Crested Lark, 6 Roller, nest building **Desert Lesser Whitethroat** (☞) [*halimona*
the area], 2 Bee-eater and 2 Swift (subspecies – *pekinensis*).

e travelling to the mountains but had a number of stops to pick up the specialities of the northern part of the Sogat another or the same Black Stork about 30kms from the town plus 150 Rose Coloured Starling and 4 Black-eared Kite us quickly finding a male Desert Wheatear, while the second stop had us finding **Asian Desert Warbler** (📷) and another. Third stop we quickly spotted 2 **Mongolian Horned Lark** (📷) “brandti” [where the facial pattern and black breast-toed Lark and 2 Isabelline Wheatear. Stop four was to monitor from distance nests of Steppe Eagle and **Saker** (📷), Steppe Eagle in flight and Saker perched, also there were Black-eared Kite and Isabelline Wheatear in the area.

plains we again stopped at the Kokpek pass, in the same side valley as before as there was now no wind. Besides seeing again we also recorded 4 Black-eared Kite, 3 Raven, 2 Rock Bunting, 2 Pied Wheatear, Blue Rock Thrush and Chukinch near Chilik, the place where we stopped for breakfast the first day. It was again an area of open fields edged with trees. We recorded 2 Hume’s Warbler, a calling Quail, 3 Hobby, Lesser Grey Shrike, White-crowned Penduline Tit and 3 pairs of Oriole.

we drove to our new destination in the Tien Shan Mountains – The Alpine Rose Hotel, standing at 7500ft above sea level. Before dark it was raining heavily and it didn’t look good for tomorrow at 12000ft. We could even miss all the mountains I had earmarked 23 species. The hotel itself was superb and can’t understand why tour companies hadn’t used it for a long time. We were going to stay at the archaic Observatory a thousand feet higher up. Food was again excellent and even the beer was free you only paid for two.

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the weather fears were in vein as a clear day dawned. Up again before dawn and spent 30mins on the balcony listening to a bird chorus – most of which I hadn’t a clue of. Woodpeckers were drumming and a possible White’s Thrush was heard around the hotel grounds was again fruitful with the first sighting being a pair of **Nutcracker** (📷) flying across the valley. Other birds seen were Oriental Crow, Common Buzzard, 6 Hume’s Warbler, Tree Pipit, 6 Coal Tit (subspecies – *rufipectus*), 2 **Songar Tit** (📷), Black Grouse, Grasshopper Warbler, **Black Throated Accentor** (📷) and **Blue-capped Redstart** (📷).

After a great breakfast we drove through the army security checkpoints with our permits and up to the very top of the mountain area at 11000ft. Thankfully there was no effect from altitude sickness and birds came thick and fast in the snowfields.

Alayan Snowcock (♂), 4 Chough, Kestrel, 10 Oriental Crow, 5 **Guldenstadts Redstart** (♂), male Northern Wheatear, 4 **Brown Accentor** (♂), 15 **Red-fronted Serin** (♂), 60 **Plain Mountain Rosefinch** (♂) and 3 **Brandt's Mountain Rosefinch** also seen.

When mountain species seen in the space of an hour we dropped down to 8500ft to a juniper scrub area near the obscure Mot Valley to find the mid-level species. By walking along the valley we picked up all the needed species within 2hr: **White-throated Rubythroat** (♂), male **Eversmann's Redstart** (♂), 4 **White-winged Grosbeak** (♂), 3 male **Red Mantled Flycatcher** (♂), 2 Mistle Thrush, 6 Black-throated Accentor, and finally the secretive **White-browed Tit Warbler** (♂) complete with a type of vole prey in its mouth.

After picnic lunch we returned lower down to the Big Almaty Lake to try and locate our last mountain species before the weather closed in. Walking along the path to the side of the lake we eventually spotted distantly one then two **Ibisbill** so we walked further to get much better views of this iconic species just in time to avoid the weather, which had now turned to rain and heavy rain/hail. We returned to the bus just avoiding a soaking. At a parking/campsite on the way to the hot springs we saw 1 **Blue-capped Redstart**, Grey Wagtail, 10 **Red-fronted Serin** and Sparrowhawk.

The weather was too heavy to bird so we called it a day at 1600hrs having completed a clean sweep of mountain birds except my **White-browed Tit Warbler**. While others slept or relaxed in the bar I sat on the covered balcony of my room overlooking a feeding station I had set up with seeds and nuts that I used from breakfast. I managed to coax in Oriental Crow, Great Tit, Coal Tit and even a Hume's Warbler. The feeding station was 3 presumably Red Squirrel with white coats but red faces, tail and feet – maybe a winter coat.

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When it rained, this time I walked the river running below and alongside the hotel. Chased up the white's thrush type call from the bird. The drumming woodpecker was traced down to a dead tree and turned out to be a **Three-toed Woodpecker**. It drummed well for about 6 seconds before it flew off into the forest. Traced down and had brief views of **Blue Whistling Thrush**. These were common and noted 4 pairs, other birds seen were Blackbird (subspecies – *intermedius*), 20 Hume's Warbler, 4 **Meadow Goldcrest** (subspecies – *tristis*) and 2 Grey-headed Goldfinch.

100kms we arrived at our camp in the Taukum Desert just before dusk, so settled in with a great meal and had an e

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around 0430hrs and made my way to the nearby waterhole around an artesian well for dawn joined by another bird that would turn up – again an envious list was compiled as we were able to stand fairly close without the noise of a birds. Birds seen were Wood Sandpiper, Temminck's Stint, Oriental Turtle Dove, Yellow Wagtail (subspecies – *thun* lline Wheatear, 3 Mongolian Finch, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, 10+ Short-toed Lark, 2 **Calandra Lark** (☒), 4 Swallow, 1 pipit which went unidentified but was probably a Red-throated Pipit without a red throat.

morning west of the camp, stopping and scanning as we went hoping for Caspian Plover but we failed to find any. V own-necked Raven, 500 Rosy Starling, 86 Black-bellied Sandgrouse, 13 Pallas's Sandgrouse, 15 Greater Sand Plover, 1 Red-headed Bunting, 4 Long-legged Buzzard, 10 Red-headed Bunting, 2 **Asian Lesser Short-toed Lark** (☒), Rufous Bush-robin, Common Golden Plover and Steppe Eagle.

the camp we travelled to Tamgaly 70kms to the south on route we spotted from the bus an immature Imperial Eagle, 10+ of Calandra Lark, 10 Red-headed Bunting, Hooded Crow, 15 Roller, 3 Bee-eater, 4 Brown-necked Raven, 20 **Bim** it, 12 Long-legged Buzzard and 2 Red-rumped Swallow. Also saw a few Horsefield Tortoise.

is famous for its rock petroglyphs which I found quite underwhelming. The real reason for the visit was to view **Eas** it its nest site and they didn't disappoint giving good close views as they fed chicks at the nest. Also seen were 10 R ime's Warbler, 6 Chukar, Little Owl (subspecies – *orientalis*), 4 Spotted Flycatcher and female Common Rosefinch.

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waterhole was disappointing mainly due to a full turnout of the group, only 2 Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Ortolan Bunting and 1 Red-headed Bunting were seen.

On the way to the Topar lakes/turango forest area but we made a few stops on the way. First stop was at the beginning here Long-legged Buzzard, Steppe Grey Shrike, Spanish Sparrow and Indian House Sparrow were all nesting in the site there were 10 Red-headed Bunting, 2 Spotted Flycatcher and 2 Bee-eater.

There was a local Eagle Owl roosting site but the bird wasn't present but we did find the carcass of a hedgehog it had been flushed while walking about and the guide found a species of viper snake coiled up under a bush. Also seen here were Sabelline Wheatear, Desert Lesser Whitethroat, 2 Red-headed Bunting, 5 Long-legged Buzzard and 4 Bimaculated Lark.

At the Topar Bridge over the lakes after an hour and this site turned out to be the best site on the trip for variety of species for me. Birds seen included 20 Red-crested Pochard, 6 Ferruginous Duck, 2 Shelduck, 2 Gadwall, 60 Black Tern, 1 Plover, 30 Temminck's Stint, male Bearded Tit, male Savi's Warbler (seen & heard), 2 Sand Martin, 3 Great Egret, 6 **Field Warbler** (♂), 8 Black-headed Gull, 2 Red-headed Bunting, 10 Cuckoo, 5 Black-eared Kite, Goldeneye, Masked White-crested Grebe, 6 Caspian Gull, 10 Swallow, 30 Roller, 10 Russian Jackdaw, 1 Yellow Wagtail (black-headed subspecies), 1 Bittern, 3 **Syke's Warbler** (♂), 4 Dalmatian Pelican, white-winged Black Tern, male Marsh Harrier, nesting pair of Kingfisher, 5 Blyth's Reed Warbler, 2 Cetti's Warbler, 10 Hoopoe, 2 Azure Tit, 2 Reed Bunting (subspecies – *pyrrhuloides*) and 2 Induline tits we heard in the reedbed but couldn't be coaxed out for identification sadly.

Stopped at a bus stop on the outskirts of Topar where a pair of **Saxaul Sparrow** (♂) were nesting in the rafters and showed a stop at a small river bridge on the other side of Topar produced our only Kingfisher of the trip as well as 2 Azure Tit and 1 Short-toed Eagle.

Then in the Turango wood after which we found 8 **Yellow-eyed Pigeon** (♂), 6 White-winged Woodpecker, 10 Spotted Cuckoo, 10 **Turkestan Tit** (♂), 3 Desert Lesser Whitethroat, 10 Russian Jackdaw, 10 Rook and 10 Roller.

The back took less than an hour so we stopped off at Koshengel to see what migrants had come in and included 10 Spotted Warbler, 4 Siberian Chiffchaff, 10 Oriental Turtle Dove, Common Rosefinch, 2 Red-backed Shrike and Common Myna.

A patch at our waterhole produced 10 Pallas's Sandgrouse, 8 Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Calandra Lark, 4 Swallow, Desert Stint and 6 short-toed Lark.

last full day of the holiday, started with 2 Nightjar flying overhead as I stumbled through the darkness looking for them! Then off to the waterhole for dawn. Which produced 6 Black-bellied Sandgrouse, 2 Pallas's Sandgrouse, 2 Hoopoe, Pale Martin, Bee-eater, 9 Temminck's Stint, Calandra Lark, Bimaculated Lark, Short-toed Lark, Isabelline Wheatear, Dove.

for Caspian Plover with no luck, but did get a nice surprise in a grounded **Crested Honey Buzzard** (♂) along with 10 r also stopped at a different well with a few trees and it turned out to be a good migrant trap producing female Montale Indian Golden Oriole, Greater Sand Plover, 6 Spotted Flycatcher, 26 Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Lesser Grey Shrike, 10 Red-headed Bunting, Barred Warbler, 8 Hume's Warbler, 2 Eurasian Turtle Dove, 2 Redstart, Greenish Warbler, Ortolan Bunting.

ed Koshengel and got 20 Hume's Warbler, 20 Common Rosefinch, 20 Spotted Flycatcher, 10 Desert Lesser Whitethroat Warbler, 20 Oriental Turtle Dove and 2 Barred Warbler. A waterhole at the north end of the village held 3 Temminck's Shrike and 2 Red-headed Bunting.

back to Almaty we again stopped off at the Magic Tree where migration was in full swing. One of the first birds I found (very rare here), managed to get 5 of the group on it but it disappeared before the main group arrived. Other birds were 10 Red-headed Bunting, 4 Blyth's Reed Warbler, 2 Lesser Whitethroat, 5 Hume's Warbler, 2 Common Rosefinch. Other birds around were 1000 Chinese Wagtail (1 subspecies – *calcarata*), 200 Rosy Starling, 2 Little Plover and 2 Black-winged Stilt.

at the pools just north of Sorbulak lake like we did on the way out and recorded 4 Wood Sandpiper, 20 Black-winged Redshank, 2 Redshank, Greenshank, 3 Little Stint, 25 Temminck's Stint, Whimbrel, male Marsh Harrier, Shikra, Ring-necked Duck, 30 Red-crested Pochard, 6 Ferruginous Duck, 14 Garganey, 4 Gadwall, 2 Pochard, Black-necked Grebe, Caspian Gull, Savi's Warbler and Great Reed Warbler.

of the day was at the dam end of Sorbulak Lake where we saw 3 Spotted Redshank, 5 Redshank, 2 Little Stint, 20 Black-winged Stilt, 2 Avocet, Black-tailed Godwit, 2 Common Tern, 60 Ruddy Shelduck, 10 Gadwall, 2 Shoveler, 30 Red-crested Grebe, Caspian Gull, 5 Black-headed Gull and finally Turkestan Shrike.

travelled to the rather upmarket Kazzhol hotel in Almaty for a welcome shower, meal and sleep in a normal bed before at 0630hrs to Istanbul.

Trip with 214 species seen of which 64 were lifers. The weather was 27C/Sunny/cloudy/one rain shower on the Soga with occasional thunder storm in the Tien Shan Mountains and 32-35C/Sunny/occasional rain shower in the Taukum and Hotels were of a good standard as was the campsite in the Desert. Food at all places was excellent and freshly prepared and cooking staff of Kan Tengri Mountain Services were very friendly and enthusiastically hard working. Naturet quality and would recommend this trip to anyone that asked.

Martyn Hnatiuk