

Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan

May 5-22 2009

A Birdwatching Tour



Tour participants: Daphne Gemmel and Bill Mueller (USA)

Tour organiser: Peter Roberts (UK)

Local bird guides: Victoria Kovshar (Kz), Valery Khrokov (Kz) and Surat Tashpulatovich (Uzbek)

Tour leader, report compiler and photographs: Alan Curry (UK)

Day 1. Tuesday 5 May: Despite all the banana skins the airline industry could muster, we amazingly arrived on time in Astana in the small hours, to be met by Victoria Kovshar, an Almaty based ornithologist and our local bird guide for the first part of our tour. Soon we were in a taxi and quickly checked in to the Hotel Tengri, our city centre base for the next few days. Thanks to our friends at Turkish Airlines, who had cancelled our initial flights rather abruptly, we found ourselves in Astana a day earlier than initially planned, so today was a day for chilling out with a little gentle sightseeing. Victoria proved to be a more than capable city guide as she lead us on a short tour of the shiny new city centre with its amazing collection of modern architecture. Although we were off-duty today bird wise, we did manage a momentary lapse, when a calling 'Tristis' Chiffchaff commanded our attention as we strolled through one of the fledgling city parks. However, one thing we did all learn today – Astana is not the best location to shop for a new fleece (!)

Day 2. Wednesday 6 May: Mainly sunny, with a cool northerly wind. Today we travelled South from Astana and explored a series of shallow lakes, extensive reed beds and well grazed steppe. Once clear of the outskirts of the city, Red footed Falcons began to appear, frequently sat in the roadside trees and a cracking male Pallid Harrier passed close to the bus. Stopping at a large reed fringed lake produced many Black-necked, Slavonian and Red-necked Grebes as well as several displaying White-headed Ducks. A Steppe Eagle soared in the distance while a male Bluethroat commanded our attention allowing admirable scope views at close range singing from the reed stems. Moving on, our next stop was at a much larger wetland where booming Great Bitterns could be heard instantly on disembarking the bus. Much to Bill's satisfaction, we secured some reasonable flight views as one flew low over the huge reed-bed. Marsh Harriers were abundant here and a pair of Whooper Swans flew by calling. A line of isolated trees on the lake shore held quite a few migrant Common Redstarts and a single Pied Flycatcher. Nearby, a shallow pool with muddy margins gave us a good selection of passage shorebirds including several hundred Ruff, many of which being in full breeding attire. On the track behind the bus, a superb White-winged Lark materialised allowing us some great scope views before taking flight and revealing its diagnostic 'Redshank-like' wing pattern. Out in the heat haze behind the pool, two beige forms transpired on closer inspection to be a pair of Sociable Plovers, one of the tour's major target species. The male offered some great scope views out on the short steppe, though it soon became apparent that the female was probably incubating and that a respectful retreat was in order. Lunch was taken in the shelter of a small orchard, where a pair of Long-eared Owls were roosting close to the bus and a migrant Wryneck entertained at close range. The afternoon was spent at another wetland a short distance away where good birds continued to come thick and fast. Several huge flocks of Ruff were seen, the scale of which was something that none of us had experienced before. Another pair of Sociable Plovers were encountered, along with a sizeable flock of Demoiselle Cranes. White-headed Ducks again featured, and as we were enjoying these, a spanking male Citrine Wagtail foraged near the waters edge. Soon it was time to head back towards Astana, after a most productive start to the tour or as Bill quipped 'a real ruff day'!

Day 3. Thursday 7 May: Clear and sunny all day, wind much lighter. An early start with a long drive ahead, bound ultimately for the fringes of the Kurgaljin Wetland system. However, we had barely left the shadow of Astana's shiny new towers when a low flying Dalmatian Pelican alighting on a roadside pool brought us the first of many stops this morning. Across the road a stunning male Merlin of the rufous-collared steppe form 'pallidus' perched on top of a small tree. As we admired the Merlin a Great Black-headed Gull passed close by followed closely by a male Pallid Harrier – travelling any distance was clearly not going to be easy! This pattern continued as we ever so slowly headed South-West. Both Pallid and Montagu's Harrier proved regular as did Red-footed Falcon – with barely a stand of roadside trees seemingly unattended. A shout went up as we encountered the first Black Lark of the day, what belters these birds are, not least for their fantastic

display flight. Groups of roadside Whooper Swans and Demoiselle Cranes vied for our attention and as we passed by a small village Victoria's sharp eyesight gave us another encounter with some Sociable Plovers. This time a party of six males, but alas proving a bit skittish and remaining out of camera range. A scrubby riverbank revealed a high density of Bluethroats, as a Booted Warbler half-heartedly responded to playback but remained unseen. Eventually we made it to our intended destination, a huge lake where White-winged Black and Black Terns were flying in the distance and a handful of Slender-billed Gulls sat just offshore. Unfortunately the hoped for Black-winged Pratincole colony showed no signs of occupancy although we did manage a couple of very brief flyovers. Lunch was taken by another lake teeming with passage Red-necked Phalaropes, while a stunning flock of White-winged Black Terns passed low overhead. Black Larks abounded here – a fabulous picnic site if ever there was one! Soon after, we arrived at a lake where a mixed colony of Great Black-headed and Steppe Gulls took centre stage. At times we were treated to sensational views of the Great Black-headed Gulls circling low overhead. Our first Isabelline Shrike of the trip appeared in a roadside shrub, generally rather pallid with no discernible rufous on the crown, it most likely belonged to the form 'isabellinus'. It was now time to reverse our tracks and head back towards Astana, but not without a multitude of stops to once again enjoy the many Harriers and Red-footed Falcons the journey had to offer!



Day 4. Friday 8 May: Calm, cloudless and hot. The morning was spent birding along a couple of wooded water courses about an hour to the South-East of Astana along the main Almaty highway. On the way we stopped to admire and photograph some nesting Red-footed Falcons which were utilising the scant roadside tree cover. On reaching our intended location Bluethroats proved abundant among the riverine scrub and it was not long before Victoria located our main target bird here - a singing male Pine Bunting that allowed us some admirable scope views. Lunch was taken by a nearby large reed fringed lake that thrived with activity. First up was a group of immaculate Little Gulls and one single Slender-billed Gull feeding close to the shore on hatching insects along with a highly confiding Red-necked Phalarope. Out in the middle of the lake was a pristine breeding plumaged Black-throated Diver, about which Bill gave us a master-class as to why this was not a

Pacific Diver! Most unexpected was a pair of Smew which proved quite skittish and difficult to pin down. White-winged Black Terns completed the scene. After a brief late afternoon return to the hotel to collect our luggage and an enjoyable meal in a local restaurant, there was still time before our late-evening flight for a short walk in a small woodland strip only a few hundred metres from Astana's main airport terminal. This proved a great success with a small breeding colony of Fieldfares expressing their unease at our presence, some more very showy Red-footed Falcons and a pair of highly welcome Azure Tits. We even managed to scope the female Azure Tit as she incubated her eggs at the entrance of an old woodpecker hole. And so, the Astana leg of our tour had now come to an end, the short flight to Almaty proved uneventful and with the ground logistics working as smooth as ever, we were soon checked in at the Hotel Oтра and ready for good nights rest.



Day 5. Saturday 9 May: Calm and sunny all day. Quite a bit of travelling today as we headed North-West from Almaty towards our camp site on the fringe of the Taukum Desert. Several stops were made and it seemed that almost any tree held a multitude of migrants, including our first Common Nightingale's, Syke's, Barred, Hume's and Greenish Warblers. European Roller's proved conspicuous along the roadside power lines and Shrikes featured prominently with Isabelline (of the form 'phoenicuroides'), Red-backed and Lesser-grey all giving agreeable views. Lunch was taken alongside an attractive reed-edged lake, that offered tantalising views of skulking Little Bitterns and an even more tantalising pair of White-crowned Penduline Tits that briefly appeared in the single willow tree a few metres from our picnic table. A brief stop at Tamgaly to check out the ancient petroglyphs also gave us a pair of Eastern Rock Nuthatch's on their regular breeding cliff face. Time was as usual catching up with us, as we resolved to endeavour to reach our camp site at a reasonable hour. However, we had only been travelling a few minutes when an emergency stop was in order as a much appreciated Saker Falcon soared over the road. Soon after, another rapid stop revealed a recent road casualty Eurasian Nightjar – a potential life bird for Daphne and Bill, but unfortunately we were unable to resuscitate the victim! Eventually we reached Konshengel Camp to be greeted by the friendly crew and as we settled in on a beautiful calm evening, the surrounding area positively

throbbed with the collective song of many larks and buntings.



Day 6. Sunday 10 May: Calm and sunny all day. It soon became apparent that we were camped in a red and green desert, as recent spring rainfall had ensured that the entire area being a mixture of verdant green grass and poppies in bloom. Bird wise, the day began in spectacular fashion as a male Macqueen's Bustard performed his bizarre display on a distant dune, while nearby a female Goitred Gazelle offered equally distant views quietly grazing in a dune slack. Larks were seemingly singing everywhere, and good views of Calandra, Bimaculated, Short-toed and Lesser Short-toed were all obtained within a short stroll from the tents. Under normal circumstances, we would have spent some time at the nearby artesian well after breakfast, but the presence of a photographer's blind at the waters edge encouraged us into applying Plan B. Daphne had earlier identified Caspian Plover as a 'must see' species, so our best bet was to search an extensive area of dry salt flats about an hours drive away. A couple of hours and over sixty Greater Sandplovers later, persistence eventually paid off when Daphne located a belting male that afforded some great close views until it was driven off by an aggressive Greater Sandplover. We then embarked on the long drive down to Zhealturanghy, only pausing briefly for an accommodating roadside Steppe-grey Shrike. First stop was an area of scrub near Kopa village where we quickly found our first major target in the form of a couple of sublime Saxaul Sparrows sheltering from the now intense sun in some thick cover. Moving on, we soon arrived at the Turanga Forest where we stopped under the shade of a large old tree for our picnic lunch. We then got lucky here, when an incredibly well camouflaged roosting Striated Scops Owl was located close to our chosen stop before lunch had even been unpacked! This woodland has three speciality species two of which were located very quickly only a few metres from our picnic table in the form of Turkestan Tit and White-winged Woodpecker. However, the third one which is normally straight forward to locate – Eversmann's Stock Dove proved extremely elusive to say the least and we began to consider that maybe this could well be the day's nemesis. A final attempt in an unfamiliar area at last came up with the goods, as an Eversmann's Stock Dove sat up on a stump for us all to enjoy! It was now time to slowly retrace our route back to Konshengel, stopping briefly to admire a perched male Shikra and a soaring Steppe Eagle near

Kopa village. A small roadside reed-bed produced some great views of Paddyfield Warbler, responding with vigour to short snatches of playback. Winding our way back South across the Taukum Sands gave several Isabelline Shrikes, this time of the greyish crowned form 'karelini'. Soon we were back at our camp, after a most productive day indeed!

Day 7. Monday 11 May: A fine calm, sunny day. Immediately after breakfast we sat on a dune top close to the artesian well, which was photographer-free today and awaited the morning arrival of the regular Black-bellied Sandgrouse. We did not have to wait long before the first of many appeared along with a good selection of bathing passerine migrants including Red-headed and Ortolan Buntings and best of all an unexpected group of four Mongolian Trumpeter Finches. We then moved on to 'El Dorado', a small oasis of greenery better known as Konshengel village that is a classic migrant trap. On arrival we were greeted by an enormous flock of Rose-coloured Starlings, well in excess of a thousand strong, while the roadside telephone wires were peppered with hundreds of Red-headed Buntings. Among the trees themselves at least four Black-throated Thrushes were located amongst the hordes of Hume's and Greenish Warblers. While Barred Warbler and Thrush Nightingale were also gratefully received. More surprisingly, a male Little Bittern eyed us from the canopy and two point-blank roosting Eurasian Scops Owls sat tight along the perimeter fence. Driving back towards Almaty for an hour brought us to our lunch stop near Aldarly at a small wetland. Here we were treat to some great views of photogenic Demoiselle Cranes as well as a nice collection of passage shorebirds. A brief stop at the nearby 'magic tree' was its usual highly productive self, where among the wealth of migrants an impressive Orphee Warbler lurked in the canopy. Continuing our journey towards Almaty, for the first time during the tour rain began to threaten proceedings, necessitating only a brief stop at Sorbulak Lake and certainly not enough time to do this great site any justice. Before long, we were back in Almaty and saying our good-byes to our excellent guide Victoria, who's time with us had come to an end. Another night at the Hotel Ota and another classic 'Ota' breakfast to look forward to.



Day 8. Tuesday 12 May: Very hot and sunny on the plains, becoming cooler and cloudy later. Today we travelled east from Almaty with our new local guide Valery Khrokov, the environment slowly changing from agriculture to dry stony desert. A brief stop was made in a scrubby area alongside a canal, where several highly vocal White-crowned Penduline Tits were located. Valery pointed out an almost completed nest, delicately suspended on the outer twigs of a willow. As we viewed, an interesting tit arrived with nesting material, its head save for a couple of white spots in the forehead was entirely black and the mantle and breast were of a much deeper shade of rufous than the other 'White-crowns' we had seen. It certainly appeared a good candidate for the form 'ssaphoshnikowi' or 'Black-headed Penduline Tit' although perhaps significantly it appeared to be paired with a regular White-crowned Penduline Tit. After lunch by a shady artesian-well near Nurly, where we were serenaded by several Common Nightingales and a Blyth's Reed Warbler, we continued on towards the Kokpek Pass. Here, in a narrow rocky gully, good views of White-capped and Rock Buntings were encountered. Several Hume's Whitethroats were also present, their thrush-like songs reverberating around the rocky cliff faces. At the top of the gulley, a Saker sat and surveyed his (or her) domain, while unseen Chukar and Scops Owl called in the distance. We eventually arrived at our overnight camp-site at Bartogai Lake by early evening and a short walk along the peaceful lake shore before dinner rounded the day off nicely with several Tawny Pipits, Isabelline Wheatears and Grey-necked Buntings performing nicely.

Day 9. Wednesday 13 May: Still and sunny at first, becoming showery by mid-morning. Pre-breakfast walk along the lake shore gave some good views of up to ten Mongolian Trumpeter Finches but unfortunately no sign of the Crimson-winged Finch we were hoping for. Heading out after breakfast, we drove across the visually stunning Sogarty Plain bound for the Charyn Gorge. With the weather being less than ideal, we elected to continue on to the gorge with a view to tarrying on the plain on the return journey. Passing through some gentle rocky hills, Daphne picked up on a resting Eurasian Griffon on a nearby ridge. As we admired the vulture, several Grey-necked Buntings sang close by, while a male Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush was located on a distant ridge. A short distance along the road brought us to a prominent monument of a Kazak warrior, that holds several pairs of breeding Rock Sparrows within the structure. Immediately on arrival, their distinctive call's advertising their continued presence, with some great views obtained at close range. The weather was now beginning to deteriorate, with some heavy showers passing through. Fortunately, by the time we had reached our lunch stop, these had now passed on leaving a bright and breezy afternoon in its wake. Lunch was taken overlooking the gorge, where distant views of both Himalayan and Black Vulture were obtained. A party of Lesser Kestrels hung over the nearby steppe. Electing to undertake the lengthy walk-in to the vulture breeding colony viewpoint proved a disappointment as mining disturbance appeared to have affected the colony, with only a lone Golden Eagle passing along the gorge on offer. Still, a very nice place indeed in which to spend an afternoon. Soon, it was time to head back to Almaty – a long drive that our indefatigable driver Sergei achieved with his usual aplomb! Another night at the Hotel Oтра.

Day 10. Thursday 14 May: Calm and clear all day, perfect for the mountains. Boarding our sturdy mountain bus shortly after breakfast outside the hotel, we were soon bumping and grinding our way up the twisting road bound for the Tien Shan Observatory. Our first stop was in the Great Almaty Gorge, where a short walk along the rocky stream gave us our first encounter with a pair of Brown Dippers. Further up the road, a short snatch of playback induced a pair of Blue-whistling Thrushes to sit up nicely in a pine overhanging the stream, allowing us some superb scope views, while all around us Hume's Warblers sang from the pine tops. Continuing to climb, the pines began to thin out and in the valley below, we could now see the completely frozen Big Almaty Lake. We arrived at the observatory in good time for lunch, the surrounding snow covered mountains looking fantastic under the cloudless blue sky. Deciding to take advantage of the good conditions, immediately after lunch we again boarded the bus and embarked on the road up to the Kosmostation, a research station situated at a cool 10,500ft above sea level amid some spectacular

scenery. Eventually arriving at the snow bound summit, we quickly located most of the specialities required - Alpine Chough, Brown and Altai Accentor, 'Blakistoni' Water Pipit, Hodgson's Mountain Finch and the magnificent Guldenstadt's Redstart. We then began the descent by slowly walking down the approach road, with the bus following slowly behind. Daphne picked up an overhead Lammergeier that almost slipped through evading detection, while another Blue-whistling Thrush was surprising at such a high elevation. We could hear our main target species calling from a distant slope, and eventually a pair of Himalayan Snowcocks were located in the scope. Expecting to have to make do with these distant views, how pleased were we when the pair promptly flew-in to a near gully and gave some great looks – job done! With the evening now drawing in, it was time to board the bus and head back down to the observatory, well satisfied with our afternoon's efforts.



Day 11. Friday 15 May: Heavy early morning snowfall deprived us of any pre-breakfast birding, this quickly clearing to give a pleasant calm, sunny morning. A short walk in the grounds of the observatory after breakfast gave us some great views of a singing Black-throated Accentor on top of a tall pine. We then boarded the bus, with our goal being a visit to the Big Almaty Lake. Travelling down towards the dam, we had barely gone a few hundred metres when we were disembarking yet again! A highly photogenic male Himalayan Rubythroat was singing from the top of a bush at the roadside and continued to do so, posing for the cameras much to everyone's delight. Almost reluctantly, we again re-boarded the bus, this time successfully completing the short journey to the dam wall. Immediately on arrival we encountered a pair of Eversmann's Redstarts posing beautifully on the small pine saplings. As we crossed the dam, we could hear the distinctive calls of Red-fronted Serins and soon we were being entertained by a number of this attractive species. More views of Black-throated Accentor and Hodgson's Mountain Finch followed, as well as another calling Himalayan Snowcock high up on a rocky outcrop. Soon we were at the head of the lake, where persistent scanning of the gravel and boulders eventually revealed one of the tours most significant target species, Ibisbill. Not the best of views on offer unfortunately, its cryptic plumage blending in perfectly with its chosen environment but an Ibisbill none the less amid a fabulous panoramic landscape! Re-tracing our route back to the bus, and up to the observatory for lunch, we

could see that the weather was beginning to change, with the highest mountain peaks now covered by cloud. Over lunch, snow again began to fall curtailing further birding activities for the rest of the afternoon. A brief early evening interlude allowed for a short walk around the grounds of the observatory, all seemed very quiet until a Severtzov's Tit-Warbler was located discretely lurking in a dense pine, only a stones throw from the rear of the observatory.

Day 12. Saturday 16 May: A perfect calm and clear morning. Pre-breakfast was spent attempting to re-locate the Severtzov's Tit-Warbler, but despite our best efforts no sign was to be had in the immediate area of yesterdays sighting. However, great views were obtained of both Himalayan Rubythroat and Black-throated Accentor as they responded admirably to playback.. After breakfast we undertook a gruelling hike through at times knee-deep snow to view a juniper scrub covered hillside. Our two main target species Sulphur-bellied Warbler and Red-mantled Rosefinch were both located fairly quickly along with some fantastically showy Himalayan Rubythroats, although the long slog back to the bus will not be forgotten in a hurry! By late morning the clouds once again began to gather and back at the observatory, after our hard earned lunch, continuous snowfall again brought a premature end to all external proceedings. This time, there was no let up and we were forced to remain indoors until nightfall – a frustrating business!



Day 13. Sunday 17 May: Calm and clear all day, a perfect last day in the mountains. A pre-breakfast stroll around the observatory gave some great views of both White-winged Grosbeak and Red-mantled Rosefinch. We then chose after breakfast to slowly walk down through the juniper slopes below the observatory, towards the waiting bus near the dam. Our main target was Severtzov's Tit-Warbler and this time we eventually got lucky, with a series of acceptable views as an individual was tracked darting between the juniper bushes. On a roll, we now elected to return to the gully on the far side of the dam to try again for Blue-capped Redstart – the one remaining new species for Daphne on this leg of the tour. Positioning ourselves with a good vantage point, the use of playback once again done the trick as two males appeared at close range. Next up, the same

technique was applied for Songar Tit, and once again success quickly followed as a Songar Tit flew in from up the gully to investigate. Among the pines, a Merlin of the mountain race 'leman' circled around calling and behaved in a generally agitated manner suggesting it was breeding close by. After lunch we began our slow descent back to Almaty, cutting a swathe through the hordes of Sunday afternoon picnickers along the lower slopes. Sergei and Valery delivered us smoothly to the airport where the Uzbekistan Airways check-in proved to be challenging to say the least. Eventually we made the late evening flight to Tashkent, and soon we overcame the almost inevitable immigration difficulties at the airport, to be met by our new Uzbek guide Surat and driver Nicoli, who delivered us to our central Tashkent hotel for what remained of the night.

Day 14. Monday 18 May: Warm and overcast. After an early breakfast, we departed on the long drive from Tashkent to Samarkand in our plush new air-conditioned mini-bus and a chance to catch up on some much needed sleep for some. It was a very different roadside scene to what we had been seeing in Kazakhstan, with vast green cotton fields dominating for most of the journey. A brief stop was made to view some White Storks breeding on top of some electricity pylons, before continuing our West-bound journey. Surat had clearly done his homework, when he suggested stopping in a rocky hilltop cutting. Instantly on disembarking the bus, a singing 'pied' wheatear was located on the roadside boulders. Careful scrutiny confirmed its identity as a Variable Wheatear, a new bird for some present! Back on the bus and soon we were in Samarkand and an excellent restaurant for lunch – though Bill seemed less than impressed with the background music! After a short rest at our impressive hotel, Surat then accompanied us on a wander around Timur's Mausoleum and the Bibi Khanum Mosque and despite the light rainfall this proved a visually stunning start to our short stay in Samarkand.



Day 15: Tuesday 19 May: Calm and overcast. An early morning start and an hour long drive South of Samarkand to the Takhtakaracha Pass. Beginning at the highest point, we walked along a scrubby valley following a trail to the top of a grassy ridge. Birds were plentiful along the trail, including our first Eastern Olivaceous Warbler of the trip. Common Nightingales in particular

seemed incredibly abundant, singing from most clumps of vegetation. A song-fighting Lesser-grey Shrike proved entertaining, when Bill brought to our attention a glimpsed passerine with a black tail that had flown down a scrubby gully. Judicious use of playback swiftly produced a pair of highly desirable White-throated Robins for us to savour. A key target species, they performed with aplomb for several minutes before moving out of view. Continuing along the trail, Daphne located and photographed a female Bluethroat that eluded the rest of us. Before reaching the summit, the trail became much steeper and here we encountered another male White-throated Robin, that sang and showed famously on the nearby bush tops. At the head of the pass a small drab passerine with a distinctive wheezy call note sat on top of a large boulder. Scope views revealed this to be a Hume's Short-toed Lark, another new bird for some! With all our main targets now achieved here, it was now time to withdraw back down the trail and take some well-earned breakfast in a roadside tea-house. Back on the bus, we began to descend the pass with the weather was now deteriorating badly. With heavy rain now falling, a brief stop at a wooded valley produced some great but soggy views of a pair of Yellow-breasted Tits foraging at eye-level. We now had only one major quarry remaining, but on arriving at the Finsch's Wheatear site, the conditions could not have been much worse – heavy rain, thunder, lightning and rolling banks of fog! Finding anything here was clearly going to be a struggle but persistence eventually paid off when a break in the weather gave us our first in a series of close encounters with up to four individuals. We returned to the bus in a significantly damper condition than when we left, with our next stop being a long overdue lunch followed by a well earned rest at the hotel.



Day 16. Wednesday 20 May: A birding rest day, the morning well spent touring some of Samarkand's most significant historical sites. First up was the amazing Street of Tombs, followed by the Astronomical Observatory and last but not least The Registan. Our sightseeing being thoroughly enhanced by Surat's extensive local knowledge. After a substantial lunch, we undertook the long drive to Bukhara, arriving at our excellent new base, a small smart atmospheric hotel situated among the back streets of the old town in the early evening.

Day 17. Thursday 21 May: A testing 4.30am departure found us two hours later scouring the Qizal-Qum Desert in search of the near-mythical Pander's Ground-Jay. Surat, our fine local guide was keen to take us to a nest site that he knew from a previous visit. This involved walking off-road for a significant distance, with hindsight this proved a basic error, as a couple of hours later we returned to the bus with only Daphne having secured any views of this sprightly asian roadrunner. A handful of Steppe-grey Shrikes and Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters provided scant compensation. After some much needed sustenance, we elected to return to the initial Plan A and concentrate our efforts along the edge of the highway itself. We need not have worried, once we located one, they then came thick and fast and some great views were obtained of several individuals foraging at close range on the road itself. Whoopee! Embarking on the long return drive to Bukhara, the pressure was now well and truly off and some of us took time out and enjoyed a well earned nap! A brief stop at a roadside wetland proved productive. A family of Purple Herons on the nest were visible in the scope, while Marsh Harriers patrolled overhead. Several Eurasian Reed Warblers could be heard singing from within the reed-bed along with an unsatisfactory invisible Savi's Warbler – potentially a new species for Daphne. Yet another late lunch in Bukhara, followed by an evening meander of the old town.



Day 18. Friday 22 May: Our final morning birding was spent leisurely exploring some of the wetland areas on the edge of Bukhara. Kentish Plover was new for the trip, as were several White-tailed Plovers. A pallid Little Owl glared at us from a sandy bank, and nearby a pair of Pied Bushchats and a highly vocal Clamorous Reed Warbler inhabited a tall stand of reeds. Moving to an area of scrub alongside a canal, produced a Long-tailed Shrike and an incubating female Shikra on a nest low down in a track side willow. Menetrie's Warbler was our main target here and it was not long before playback induced a positive response from an accommodating individual. Job done! Lunch was taken in a poolside restaurant in Bukhara Old Town, leaving enough time for packing, shopping and a final circuit of the remaining unseen Mosques, Minarets and Medressa's before our busy late evening flight back to Tashkent.

Day 19. Saturday 23 May: The long slog back home. And time to add up the trip list – 248 species in total, which I don't think was a bad effort. I guess the most significant misses for Bill and Daphne were Booted Warbler, which we did hear on two occasions though I suspect the main arrival back on breeding territories had not yet occurred and Asian Crimson-winged Finch which seem highly erratic in their appearances at Bartogai at the best of times. An undoubted bonus however, was the location of the roosting Striated Scops Owl in the Turanga Forest, you win some and you lose some so they say.....

We never did get round to electing the bird of the trip, personally there was only one winner – the mighty Black Lark.

An easy decision for word of the trip though – more!!! Nice one Bill.



Many thanks to all our local guides and drivers who contributed greatly to the smooth running of the tour, Peter for the faultless logistics and Daphne and Bill for their great company.

Alan Curry.
Northumberland.