

# Birding Georgia

## Trip Report

**Kazbegi and Chachuna - 21st-29th April 2018**

**Iain Robson and Janet Fairclough**

### Background

After failing to organise a trip to Azerbaijan, a week-long trip to Georgia offered the chance to see some Caucasian specialities, friends had done the Kazbegi area on shorter trips and cleared-up. After a bit of reading we decided to add the Chachuna area in south-east to our itinerary as it seemed to offer some great birding – we weren't disappointed.

Timing is critical to get the mountain species – go too early and you risk bad weather, treacherous roads and no migrants. Go too late in a year with an early spring and the high-altitude birds could have gone. We opted for the last week in April which was spot-on.

### Trip highlights

Kazbegi area - Güldenstädt's redstart, great rosefinch, Caucasian snowcock, Caucasian grouse, red-fronted serin, mountain chiffchaff, wallcreeper.

Chachuna area - Menetries's warbler, Finsch's wheatear, western rock nuthatch, black francolin, demoiselle crane, green warbler, Armenian gull, steppe eagle.

### Itinerary

21<sup>st</sup> April – Fly Manchester-Istanbul-Tbilisi arriving 0335 on 22<sup>nd</sup>

22<sup>nd</sup> April – Arrive Tbilisi 03:35hrs, few hours sleep then drive to Kazbegi. Birding at Stepantsminda

23<sup>rd</sup> April – Birding around Stepantsminda

24<sup>th</sup> April – Birding around Stepantsminda and Jvari pass

25<sup>th</sup> April – Drive to Dedoplistskaro birding at Jvari Pass and Ananuri Fortress *en-route*

26<sup>th</sup> April – Birding in Chachuna Protected Area

27<sup>th</sup> April – Birding in Chachuna Protected Area

28<sup>th</sup> April – Drive to Tbilisi via David Gareji Monastery and Jandara Reservoir

29<sup>th</sup> April – Fly Tbilisi-Manchester via Istanbul

## Day-by-day

### Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2018

We arrived into Tbilisi airport at 03:35 on our Turkish Airlines flight from Manchester via Istanbul. We hailed a taxi to take us to our pre-booked hotel near to the airport, we paid about three times as much as we should have but it got us to the Hotel Marcos (we later found that the son of the lady who runs the hotel does airport transfers).

We managed a few hours sleep and a quick breakfast before heading back to the airport to collect our hire car from Avis. It was 4x4 Renault Duster with winter tyres – a 4x4 is essential for this trip. We were on the road by 10.30, driving through Tbilisi and onto the Georgian Military Highway, which is seemingly one of the most dangerous roads in Europe but we had no problems.

13:00-13:40 Russia-Georgia Friendship Monument 42.493758, 44.452658

We arrived at our first stop, the [Russia-Georgia Friendship monument](#), not too far from the Jvari Pass. The monument is a large round stone and concrete structure overlooking the 'Devil's Valley' and gave us our first taste of high-altitude birding and high-altitude temperatures. The monument attracts a lot of, mainly Russian, tourists but birding is easy from the viewpoint by the car park.

The first birds noticed, just under the viewpoint, were three ring ouzels of the *amicorum* race 'Caucasian ring ouzel' - two males and a female. *Amicorum* has a broad white breast-band and a large scaly panel in the wing. Also from the monument car park were a singing male alpine accentor (*montana* subspecies), 10+ alpine chough, a pair of common kestrels and our first of many water pipits. We also saw our only rock thrushes of the trip, a fly-by pair which landed under the monument.



'Caucasian' Ring Ouzel

Moving on towards Kazbegi, we stopped briefly on the switchbacks beyond the pass when we saw some small birds which turned out to be a flock of twite. These were interesting as they are the *brevirostris* subspecies, which are larger and paler than the twite we see in the UK, with a deeper pink rump.



Twite

We arrived at Stepantsminda (The town is called Stepantsminda but is most usually referred to as Kazbegi by visiting birders) at 14:40 and checked into the Anano Guest House – our base for the next three nights. The guest house had been recommended by our friend Jimmy who had been to Kazbegi twice before. It was basic but clean – just the job for us.

16:00-18:30 Slopes East of Stepantsminda 42.652556, 44.655541

We drove up to the area of pines behind the village to get our bearings. There was a church behind the pines which people had seen the grouse and snowcock from, so we had quick scan before heading downhill to an area of sea buckthorns. From this area we picked up more *amicorum* ring ouzels, lots of black redstart (*ochurus* race), black-eared wheatear, a fly-through lammergeier and our first target species – **Güldenstädt's redstart**! A stunning male perched briefly on top of the bushes.



Güldenstädt's redstart

Water pipits, mistle thrush, blackbird, goldfinch and raven were plentiful around here. A buzzard flew distantly – too distant to race. Another birder arrived and said he had seen the grouse and snowcocks from this same area that morning – we would be back.

Happy, we headed for the guest house and a nice meal in town.

### **Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2018**

#### 06:30-08:00 Slopes East of Stepantsminda

By 06:30 we were back in the same area as the previous night, it was a lovely bright morning but very cold. This is due east of the town up a rough track, an area of sea buckthorn scrub giving good views of the mountain slopes.

We set up our scopes and started to scan the slopes, where several glaciers came from the mountain tops onto the scree below. Pretty-soon we could hear snowcocks 'singing' but couldn't get onto them and it was the **Caucasian grouse** we picked up first, one then a second male, lower down, where the end of a glacier met the scree. The main male was wandering about and the second male appeared briefly, they gave good views albeit distant.



Back to the snowcock – we had been scanning the ridge as that's where our friend from yesterday had seen them, with no luck, I tried a different plan, scanning the lower slopes and glaciers. I then picked up a male Caucasian **snowcock** on the edge of glacier in a ravine – he was singing and displaying and we soon picked up the female a little further down the slope. He was on a rock at first, then hopped down and walked a bit across the glacier before going out of sight. We were elated and managed to get some birders who arrived a bit later onto the birds. A bank of fog/cloud then rolled down the valley from Russia, obscuring our view of the mountain so we descended into the valley. On the way back to the car, we got onto a male **red-fronted serin** perched on the sea buckthorn and three more flew out of cover.



Mount Kazbegi in the morning sunshine

08:15-09:30 Bushes south of Stepantsminda 42.646518, 44.640207

Because of the low cloud, lying like a blanket over the valley, we headed for an area of bushes to the south of the town, the clouds made it very cold. We birded the area to the west of the road – a mixture of bushes and cattle grazing by the stream with some swampy bits.

It was a bit like birding at home – blackbirds, dunnocks, great tits. Chaffinches, house sparrows and long-tailed tits – although they were a different race (*major*) until a griffon vulture flew over and we found a short-toed lark. But it wasn't great so we headed for breakfast back at the digs.

11:00-1400 Chkheri river valley 42.666685, 44.637719

We recce'd the track that heads up the Chkheri river valley – it appears to be a new track to the Gargeti Monastery and doesn't appear on maps, it's just to the north-west of the village, off the road to Russia. We birded the bushes at the entrance and then investigated the road up to the Russian Border before heading back to the valley and driving as far as we could up towards the monastery before the road deteriorated. The first 800m of buckthorn and close-grazed pasture was the best birding though.

One of the first birds we saw was a **steppe buzzard**, carrying a small snake up the valley. There were lots of water pipits with a handful of ring ouzel, black redstart, northern wheatear, and white wagtails. Overhead barn swallows and sand martins moved north while 4+ house martins were building nests on the cliff face. On the cliff face on the southern side of the valley, we picked up a **wallcreeper** which we watched for 20 minutes or more as it fed.



Steppe Buzzard with a snake

14:30-16:00 Sno Valley 42.599717, 44.643083

The Sno Valley is a long valley with various tracks in it that heads from the Military Highway (about 4.5km south of the Stepantsminda) up to a place called Juta – we investigated the first 75% of the valley.

The whole valley was lifting with water pipits two fields alone held over 100 birds, we found a single **red-throated pipit** amongst them but there could have been many more. We paused near a farm stead where there were six rock buntings amongst the cows and a sub-adult Montague's harrier was hunting. A white-throated dipper and a couple of grey wagtails were on the river, 40-50 alpine choughs circled overhead and an alpine swift bombed through.

#### 16:30-18:30 Slopes East of Stepantsminda

We returned to the buckthorn scrub to the east of the town, in search of great rosefinches and better views of Güldenstädt's redstart. On the track by the pines we saw a red squirrel which had a very grey back.

We watched a pair of red-fronted serins gathering nest material and a single male Güldenstädt's redstart was perched up on the sea buckthorn bushes. An adult steppe buzzard flew through and we watched a couple of **eastern Caucasian or Daghestan Turs** – a kind of goat-antelope. A birder told us he had seen great rosefinch here that morning.

### **Tuesday 24<sup>th</sup> April 2018**

#### 08:00-09:45 Slopes East of Stepantsminda

Low cloud but sunny conditions greeted us at dawn, so we had a more leisurely morning and breakfast before heading back to the slopes east of the town and the buckthorn.

The usual water pipits, northern wheatears, blackbirds, mistle thrushes, black redstart and ring ouzels were obvious around the scrub but the slopes were in cloud. A sparrowhawk came through which just looked like a Eurasian sparrowhawk.

A large group of Swedish birders were present and after a while they called '**great rosefinch**'. The rosefinches were out of site at first, but soon perched up to give great views as they devoured buckthorn berries – a male and two females. The male was a stunning bird and although much more dull, the females had a subtle beauty. Bird of the trip!





Great Rosefinch twitch



Record shot of the male Great Rosefinch



#### 10:10-10:55 Russia-Georgia Friendship Monument

We decided to drive south to the Russia-Georgia Friendship Monument and work our way back along the Military Highway in search of high altitude species and maybe some raptor passage as it had brightened up.

It was bright and sunny at the monument car park but windy and very cold. A mixture of red-billed and alpine choughs swirled about in the valley below and a common kestrel put on a nice display in the wind.

Just below the viewpoint a male and two female **alpine accentors** were displaying and copulating – maybe their sex lives are as complicated as our dunnocks?

A pair of ring ouzels were displaying next to the viewpoint giving fantastic views.



Displaying Alpine Accentors

#### 11:00-12:30 Various stops between Jvari pass and first tunnel on Military Highway

We headed back towards Stepansminda stopping a few times at the Jvari Pass and along the military highway on the snowfields in search of snowfinch. Water pipit were the only species at the pass (2,397m) – they must be incredibly hardy birds.

We saw (Turkish) twite at every stop we made, with over 40 birds in total. Just beyond the pass itself we found a single **Caucasian horned lark**, the birds here are of the *penicillata* subspecies which could be split. They are very different to the *flava* subspecies we see here in the UK. We saw six more horned larks at our last stop by the tunnel. Rock Doves were around the tunnels and looked very smart.

#### 13:00-14:00 Wet grassland and buckthorn scrub around Pansheti 42.633093, 44.627067

Just before Stepansminda we stopped at some nice looking habitat opposite an industrial site at Pansheti, where there was some open grassland, pools, a stream and buckthorn scrub to explore. On the grassland there were over 50 water pipits and in the bushes we found our first warblers of the trip – they were all common chiffchaffs, which were all closely scrutinised for mountain chiffchaffs but without luck. Also in the bushes was a smart male **Ehrenberg's (*samamisticus*) redstart**.

The shallower pools were popular with Caucasian brown frogs (*Rana macrocnemis*).

#### 15:00-1720 Chkheri river valley

After a quick snack in Stepantsminda we returned to the pasture and buckthorn in the Chkheri river valley. It was warmer and sunny and the **Güldenstädt's redstarts** were posing nicely on top of the bushes. As well as the usual species we had seen there before, we found our first ortolan bunting of the trip and a peregrine flew along the cliffs to a perch.

#### 17:35-18:30 Slopes East of Stepantsminda

We headed up to the slopes for the last hour of the day, seeing the usual species for that area.

### **Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> April 2018**

The day started bright and cold. As we packed our things a great-spotted woodpecker drummed on a telegraph pole outside the guest house. We departed Stepantsminda for the long drive to the south-east of Georgia.

#### 08:30-08:50 Jvari pass

We took a last chance to find snowfinch at the Jvari pass and failed again. There were about 15 twite and we did see some raptor passage between the clouds with eight steppe buzzards and a black kite over the pass and down the valley, northbound. As we headed back to the car we heard a Caucasian snowcock singing but we couldn't locate it.

#### 09:00-09:30 Russia-Georgia Friendship Monument

We called briefly at the friendship monument for one last time. It was very cold, -5 degrees with light SE winds. A few raven and chough circled and six ring ouzel were all of note.

11:00-12:00 Ananuri Fortress 42.163821, 44.703651

By the time we had descended down the Military Highway to Ananuri it had warmed up nicely. Several trip reports said they had stopped off at the Ananuri Fortress *en route* and had found some good birds. The fortress is popular with sightseers, we didn't go in but birded the trees around it and down to the river bank.

A thrush nightingale was singing in cover and willow warbler, blackcap and lesser whitethroat were in the trees to the south of the fortress. I spotted something on a branch which turned out to be a roosting **European nightjar**.



Roosting Nightjar

We continued down to the river noting robin, Ehrenberg's redstarts, and greenfinches in the bushes and six whinchats on the shore. As we climbed back up towards the car we got onto a phylloscopus warbler in the bushes near the roosting nightjar. It was generally grey with no green or yellow tones. A short-primary projection made it look long-tailed and it had a decent supercilium - all good form **mountain chiffchaff**. One of our target species for the trip.





Mountain Chiffchaff



Ehrenberg's redstart



We bought some freshly squeezed pomegranate juice and headed south for Tblisi. There was bit of traffic in Tblisi but nothing too bad and we managed to find the roads we needed to get out the other side and continue south-east for Dedoplistskaro – our base for the next three nights. We arrived into town at about 15:30 and checked into the Hotel Dedoplisa. The next job was to find the HQ of the Protected Areas which was in town, to get our permits to enter the Chachuna Protected Area. The lady spoke good English and the paperwork didn't take too long, we then had to go to the HQ of the Border Police on the outskirts of town. Because Chachuna is very close to the border with Azerbaijan a permit from them is needed – we were never asked for either permit again, but at least we had them. (see logistics section below)

17:00-18:00 Quarry area west of Dedoplistskaro 41.485343, 46.080494

From the Border Police HQ we explored some track to the west, which took us beyond some quarries to a wooded area overlooking a wide valley and views across to the Greater Caucasus.

Corn buntings were everywhere! We also saw hoopoes, **black-eared wheatear** (a stunning male bird), red-backed shrikes and stonechat. We scoped some raptors on the thermals over the valley, many were just dots but we identified the closer ones as **short-toed eagles**, black kites and a griffon vulture. Common and alpine swifts were also high above the valley.



female Red-backed Shrike

### 18:20 Dedoplistskaro

Near the hotel we added collared dove to our list before heading into town for some food. We later found out the hotel do evening meal for an extra cost, which we took on our last night and was excellent.

### **Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> April 2018**

Some groups of birders opt to stay in the very basic accommodation within the Protected Area, near to the Dalis Mta Reservoir. The benefit of this strategy is to be near the dam earlier to maximise the chance of black francolin. Other groups choose to commute in to the area from Dedoplistskaro – we chose the latter, which involves an early start and a long drive along a bumpy track, the bonus is the birding along the drive, across the steppe is very very good.

06:45-17:45 Chachuna Protected Area and access track 41.307844, 45.993850

By 06:45 we were on our way along the track towards the protected area, the track is good in places, but rather bumpy and potholed in others. Once on the track, there are grass planes as far as the eye can see – perfect for larks. Crested larks were everywhere, whilst less common but still plentiful were **calandra lark** and skylark and a few short-toed larks. The other common species was corn buntings – every plant, stick and bush had a corn bunting perched on top, singing. **Tawny pipit** replaced the water pipits we saw everywhere in Kazbegi and were common.



Corn Bunting



Calandra Lark



Crested Lark



The track was also good for raptors with **steppe eagles**, **pallid harriers**, **long-legged buzzards**, **steppe buzzards** and **cinereous vulture**.



Pallid Harrier



Long-legged Buzzard

Further along the track the grassland gave way to cultivated land and then more arid, barren land, with bushes. In the cultivations tawny pipits were obvious and we found our first **black-headed buntings**. In the arid scrub, red-backed, woodchat and lesser grey shrikes were seen regularly as were rollers, hoopoes and Spanish sparrows, isabelline wheatears and an **eastern orphean warbler** was a nice find.





Roller

We soon reached the dam and parked by it to eat our packed breakfasts, looking out over the bushy area either side of the stream that runs from the reservoir. **Black francolins** were calling and we picked up a displaying bird perched up on a mound of soil, at least five were calling in the surrounding areas. Hirundines were feeding above the dam and a pair of **lesser kestrels** were displaying and calling.

After breakfast we continued over the dam and travelled west a short way beyond it to a rocky area with sheltered cultivated areas where we saw a second adult cinereous vulture. On the track here we found a male **Finsch's wheatear**, flitting about the bunds at the edge. We watched the bird for a while until it disappeared out of site, it showed the white back which is distinctive of the species, it also showed some buff colouration on the crown and silver flight feather when it flew. A stunning bird.

(On returning to the UK, a local birder claims that true Finsch's wheatears do not occur here and that any that look like Finsch's are hybrids with pied wheatears. Our bird looked very like a standard Finsch's so it has gone into this report as such).

The small cultivated areas were bounded by scrub and it was here we picked up our first singing **Menetries's warbler**, flitting between the bushes.

On the reservoir itself we found six **Armenian gulls**, 12 great-crested grebes, cormorants and 5 common sandpipers and some white wagtails on the shore.

We explored the greener area below the dam and found a few warblers, great and long-tailed tits and a nice male **levant sparrowhawk** and a little owl at the farm.



The wide-open grassy steppe of Chachuna

We then had a slow drive back towards Dedoplistskaro stopping whenever we saw birds and to take photos. Nearer town, long-legged buzzards and two juvenile pallid harriers were hunting in the grassy plains.

1810-1845 Kochebi Lake 41.442036, 46.143018

When we got back to the hotel, I left Janet behind and headed back out of town, to a small lake called Kochebi, which we had seen near the turn-off to Chachuna. It was very shallow and there were a few waders on it including greenshank, **marsh sandpiper**, spotted redshank, common redshank, little ringed plover, black-winged stilts and nine **red-necked phalaropes**, bobbing about in the middle of the lake.

Our first rook was recorded and quail were calling around the edge of the lake. I returned to the hotel and we headed into town for dinner.

00:00 Midnight – Dedoplistskaro

A **scops owl** was calling in the trees outside the hotel.

## **Friday 27<sup>th</sup> April 2018**

06:45-18:15 - Chachuna Protected Area and access track

Packed breakfasts collected, we headed back down the track to the protected area. Bird species were very similar to the previous day with the addition of a female marsh harrier on the plains. We had remarked the previous day that we hadn't seen any yellow wagtails and it wasn't until we came across roving shepherd and his flock that we found them – lots of them.

We counted about 50 most of them were *beema* and *thunbergi* with a few *flava* and one or two *lutea*.

A few more black-headed buntings were noted as was a flock over 30 linnets, a few cuckoos, hoopoes and rollers. We counted over 30 isabelline wheatears including a pair feeding chicks.



Isabelline Wheatear



Breakfast was again taken on the dam and we heard more black francolins calling and a couple Caucasian agamas entertained us.



Caucasian Agama

We continued across the dam and on the track that headed west. Not far along this track we picked up a couple of **chukars** and managed to get a group of birders onto them – they were grateful and enthusiastic for these lifers.



Chuckar

We decided to follow the track towards the mud volcanoes, the track was challenging in places and we were pleased it was dry. Rollers were nesting and were common and we saw a few bee-eaters. We drove on but birdlife became less and less, the track became less obvious and we were a long way from civilisation in baking heat so we decided to head back for the dam area.

We cut across-country through a farm for an area south of the reservoir, which was more vegetated with boulder-clay hills. We explored a small area and found a breeding pair of western rock nuthatch – a new bird for Iain. We drove and stopped in a few places for short walk. We found more **Menetries's warblers** and some rock buntings. On the edge of a wooded area we heard **common pheasant** calling – they are native to this area so we had hoped to see them but we couldn't locate them.

Back at the reservoir we found purple heron, great and little egrets, 50+ Armenian gulls, and seven white-winged terns. The **Finsch's wheatear** was back in the same spot on the track near the dam.

Again, we had a slow drive back along the track to Dedoplistskaro. Two little ringed plovers were in a puddle on the track with bathing linnets and corn buntings. A pair of **long-legged buzzards** were copulating – they were both very pale individuals.



#### 18:15 – 18:40 Kochebi Lake

We returned to Kochebi Lake on our way back to the hotel, it wasn't as productive as the previous evening however. Most of the waders had gone, but there were 18 greenshanks, there were also a pair of **ruddy shelduck**.

We spent the evening in the hotel eating home-made food typical of the region as well as wine from our hosts own vineyards – this was wine country after all. The owner is also the local MP and was keen that Dedoplistskaro should develop an ecotourism offer. The food and wine were excellent, we wished we had known about the offer two days earlier!

#### **Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> April 2018**

##### 07:00 – 07:30 Dedoplistskaro Town Park 41.464258, 46.107264

We had read that green warblers occur in a small park adjacent to the main road through the town, so we went for a look. It looked unlikely, a narrow belt of mixed ornamental trees next to the road. We found a couple of blackcaps, chaffinches and long-tailed tits and then heard a bird singing from high in a pine, a small green phylloscopus warbler with a good wing-bar – our target – **green warbler**! We watched it for a bit as made a small circle of the adjacent trees, always high and mostly singing. Bonus!

Happy, we were back on the road headed for Tblisi. We had a couple of planned stops enroute, the first being the David Gareji Monastery.

##### 09:15-09:30 Kapatadze lake 41.574581, 45.316986

We came across a small, shallow lake on our way to the monastery and stopped for a look as there were a few waders on the pool. No sooner had we stopped that a **demoiselle crane** flew over SE – a new bird for us both!

On the lake there was a decent collection of waders including 16 black-winged stilts, 19 ruff, 13 red-necked phalaropes, four greenshank, two spotted redshank, six dunlin and a black tailed godwit. As we scanned I picked up a second demoiselle crane in a field beyond the pond and **red-throated pipit** flew over, calling.

##### 10:00 – 12:15 David Gareji Monastery 41.447533, 45.376194

From the lake, we followed the road up the hillside to the David Gareji Monastery and parked in the car park, we were some of the first visitors to arrive which was good as we had read it can get very busy at weekends.

The monastery was closed for renovations, which didn't bother us, it was the wooded grounds we had come for. As these are the only trees in the area they were a magnet for migrant birds. From the car park we saw a **chukar** before we headed up the a path to the right of the main monastery. Amongst the low scrub was lesser grey shrike, **eastern orphean warbler**, blackcaps and nightingale. In the more mature trees we found a singing male **green warbler**, chiffchaff, and at least three pairs of **red-breasted flycatchers**. On the edge of the monastery buildings we found western rock nuthatch, a pair of blue rock thrushes and a few rock sparrows.



Green Warbler



Red-breasted Flycatcher

We had a good couple of hours birding at the monastery, it was well worth the drive.

13:30 – 15:30 Jandara Reservoir 41.432541, 45.198126

Jandara Reservoir or Jandari Lake (depending on which map/report you read) is a large waterbody on the border with Azerbaijan to the south-east of Tblisi. We arrived on the north side of the town and started birding the north-east shore not too far from the border near some pinewoods. As we arrived there were a flock yellow wagtails with some cattle which included *flava*, *beema*, *thunbergi* and *feldegg* races, there was also a flock over 80 rosy starlings with over 100 starlings which moved off beyond the pines. We scanned the lake and reedbed on the shore and picked up about eight white-winged terns and two whiskered terns as well as slender-billed, and black-headed gulls. A great reed warbler sang from the reeds.

We moved around to the northern shore, over a large, flat grassy area, popular with picnickers and fisherman. We watched some marsh harriers carrying nesting material into the reeds and on the lake were Armenian gulls, and a drake garganey. We also noted kingfisher, glossy ibis, shoveler and black-tailed godwit.

We headed off for Tblisi, on a road through heavily industrialised area, which eventually got us to the Hotel Marcos where we had stayed on our first night. They had a hosepipe and a brush so we

gave the car a wash (to avoid the excess cleaning charge – it was filthy) before heading out for food nearby and to drop the car back at the airport.

We had few hours sleep before heading back to the airport at 02:30 am for our 04:30 am Turkish Airlines flight to Istanbul. The hotel owners' son took us to the airport and was much more reasonable than the local taxis.

Compared to our outbound journey, Istanbul airport was bit chaotic on the return leg – seemingly because of additional security demanded by the US and UK. We got through okay after a bit queue jumping and landed at Manchester on time.

## Summary

Georgia is a great country and the birding is amazing, The people are friendly, it is easy to find the birds and get about without a guide. We would definitely recommend going down to the Chachuna area as well as Kazbegi as the birding down there was also first-rate. We saw 150 species and more new birds than we could get anywhere else in the Western Palaearctic.

## Logistics

### Flights

Flights were with Turkish Airlines from Manchester via Istanbul. Most flight connection from the UK into Tbilisi seem to land and take-off in the early hours of the morning.

### Visas

No visa is required for UK citizens

### Car Hire and Driving

We hired a Renault Duster 4x4 with Budget who are part of Avis. Even though we had no rain, 4x4 was essential in both areas. Driving was no problem, although the military highway to Stepantsminda was a bit hair-raising at times. We used maps.me with pre-loaded sites for navigation which worked well. We didn't need an international driving licence.

### Accommodation

**Tbilisi** – we used the Hotel Marcos which is just off the Kakheti Highway, about 5 minutes from the airport for our first and last nights. We booked it via booking.com. The manager spoke very little English but we got by. Her son will do pick-up and drop off at the airport (we wished we known this on arrival as we were over-charged by our taxi driver).

**Stepantsminda** – We stayed in the Anano Guest House which had been recommended to us by other Northumberland birders – it was cheap and did the job. The large tour groups stay at a posh place up the hill – The Rooms Hotel.

**Dedoplistskaro** – We stayed in the Hotel Dedoplistsa on the South-eastern side of town. It was done out to a very high standard and the owner is very helpful and speaks excellent English. Because of early starts they sorted us out with a packed breakfast each morning which lasted us all day! They also do evening meals, which only discovered on our last day (the choice in town is minimal) – the food was local specialities and excellent. Make sure to book in advance.

### Access to Chachuna

Because Chachuna is a protected area and close to the border with Azerbaijan two documents are required, a permit and an authorisation from the Border Police. You must have the permit before you can get the border pass.

The protected area permit is available from the Administration of Vashlovani Protected Areas office in Dedoplistskaro (41.462649, 46.103684). This office covers two protected areas so make sure you get a pass for Chachuna (there were two separate people for each park when we visited, but only one spoke English) You will need your passports.

Once you have your permit, you go to the Border Police Station (41.473117, 46.084638) a large building just out of town towards the north-east. Take your permit and passport and they will issue the paperwork.

We were never asked for either whilst we were in Chachuna.

## **Photos and Lists**

All of my photos from the trip can be found on my [Flickr page](#)

Lists for all of the sites we visited can be found on [eBird](#)