

EXPLORING TAUKUM DESERT KAZAKHSTAN 2009



Demoiselle Crane – *Grus virgo* (photo: Machiel Valkenburg)

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CENTRAL ASIA BIRDING

Introduction

During the May tours of Central Asia Birding www.centralasiabirding.com to southeastern Kazakhstan a large and luxurious yurt camp is erected in the vicinity of the village of Konshengel, approximately 220km northwest of the metropolis Almaty. A few days before the first clients will arrive we transport the camp with a large Kamaz truck into the desert where we set up the camp. During the time of erecting the camp we, Evgeney Besedin and myself both guides for CAB, will use the time of exploring 'the neighbourhood'. This rapport describes our findings during these two day in Taukum. Before leaving we have set ourselves one main goal which was finding Caspian Plover!



Steppe Eagle – *Aquila nipalensis* (photo: Machiel Valkenburg)

Day 1 - 09 MAY

We set out for Taukum at an extremely early hour- we leave at three as the Kamaz is overloaded and will drive with a maximum speed of 50km/h. Around six we arrive in the village of Konshengel during the drive we already encountered the first **Brown-necked Raven**. Near the shaslick shops great numbers of **Black-eared Kites** and **Rose-coloured Starlings** are present together with one **Steppe Eagle**. We pass Konshengel and 100metres before kilometre pole 205 we go off-road in the direction of the farm. Several kilometres from the farm we leave the workers and head out for the artesian wells nearby! The first well was very good for wagtails which pass the Konshengel area in large numbers during this time of year. The majority of the yellow wagtails present are of the race **Blue-headed Wagtail** *Motacilla flava beema* but **Grey-headed Wagtail** *M. thunbergi* and **Black-headed Wagtail** *M. feldegg* are present as well. They go along with several **Masked Wagtails** *M. personata*, **White Wagtails** *M. alba dukhanensis*, **Grey Wagtails** *M. cinerea* and **Citrine Wagtails**. In terms of waders this well is extremely empty as only one **Common Sandpiper** is found. Large numbers of larks, **Greater Short-toed**, **Eurasian Sky**, **Crested** and **Calandra Lark**, are abundant throughout the trip and will not be mentioned specially from this point on. We head further to the second well which is known to be very good for drinking Black-bellied Sandgrouses. Machiel sets up his hide to do some photography here while Evgeny takes a stroll with Bimaculated Larks on his mind. After a few looks over the well it seems rather silent with a few **Little Ringed Plovers**, **Wood Sandpipers** and **Temminck's Stints**. A dozen of **Blue-headed Wagtails** are foraging along the waterline and a **Hoopoe** starts to pose on the 'wrong side' of my hide. Also a male **Northern Wheatear** is seen but no serious items yet! After 15 minutes in the hide a couple of **Demoiselle Cranes** land on 100 metre from the well. My heart starts to pump already a little quicker! Could it be the day that a pair of Demoiselle Cranes come to drink in front of me? Yes it would be that day! Next to drinking they start 'dancing' and even mating in front of me! A couple of 100 pictures later my trip is already a success.



Demoiselle Crane – *Grus virgo* (photo: Machiel Valkenburg)

When the cranes are drinking I hear large flocks of Black-bellied Sandgrouses passing by which unfortunately for me land out of sight. After two hours in the hide and when the cranes are already long gone I decide to rap up and head for Konshengel village. The walk of Evgeney did not result in Bimaculated Larks. On the powerlines we encounter an **Ortolan Bunting** together with two **Oriental Turtle Doves**. A ring-tailed harrier is too fast to make a solid identification. In the village around 75 **Black-eared Kites** are around and feasting on the bowels of cows. We head back to see how far the camp is developed. Several 100metres before the camp we come across two **Collared Pratincoles**. After a nice lunch and a 3 hour sleep the clock is closing on four. An ideal time to head out for our main target in Konshengel. Alongside the usual larks we find several new species for the trip but no Caspian Plovers. New species include **Siberian Stonechat**, **Red-headed Bunting** and a gorgeous **Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush** which is approachable to no less than 4 metres! We head back to Konshengel where we post at the local well. Two **Gull-billed Terns** pass by and disappear immediately in northern direction. Alongside the wagtails a couple of **Black-winged Stilts** are seen foraging. In a group of wagtails Machiel discovers a **White-headed Wagtail** *M. leucocephala*, good catch! Not long after Machiel starts to play with a **Steppe Eagle** which shows himself very well. The darkness falls in and we have dinner at the camp where not long after we find ourselves tugged in our sleepingbags.



White-headed Wagtail – *Motacilla leucocephala* (photo: Machiel Valkenburg)

Day 2 - 10 MAY

Today we head back again to Almaty but the morning will be spend birding. Machiel will start again with hide photography near one of the wells. This time he is much more lucky when it comes to the Sandgrouses. Several good and satisfying pictures of **Black-bellied Sandgrouses** are the proof of this. New species seen around the well includes a **Tree Pipit**. The second well we call on is the one of Konshengel where **Garganey** is foraging together with a **Eurasian Wigeon**. As always large amounts of all types of wagtails are present. One **Steppe Eagle** is sitting not far from the ducks. The ducks however seem not bothered at all with this killing machine a few flaps away.



Black-bellied Sandgrouse – *Pterocles orientalis* (photo: Machiel Valkenburg)

In the trees of Konshengel a few **Greenish Warblers** are around but no large numbers today. In the electricity lines near the shaslick shops several 100 **Rose-coloured Starlings** show themselves very well. On the ground sits a **Long-legged Buzzard**. We go back to the camp which is erected fully by now. We head on to the clay plains east of the camp. We drive a little and then check for plovers. The first plovers seen are naturally **Greater Sand Plovers** which is common around Konshengel. We decide to split up so we can cover both sides of the plains. Not long after Evgeney starts waving – success! A male **Caspian Plover** is found. The female is clearly breeding somewhere as the male is trying to distract us with the ‘broken-wing-technique’. After a few picture for proof we head back to the camp. We have lunch and start driving back to Almaty by way of Tamgaly Tas. Along the way **Red-headed Buntings** are abundant but the amazing views steal the show. As in the beginning of May the desert is covered in poppies! **Rollers** and **Lesser Kestrels** are add to the list. Not long after also **Turkestan Shrike**, **Red-backed Shrike** and **Lesser Grey Shrike** are add. After 6 hours of driving we are finally home again from some splendid birding in the amazing desert of Kazakhstan!



Caspian Plover – *Charadrius asiaticus* (photo: Machiel Valkenburg)



Steppe Eagle – *Aquila nipalensis* (photo: Machiel Valkenburg)