

CENTRAL ASIA BIRDING

KAZAKHSTAN 2010



Steppe Merlin – (photo: D. Forsman)

02-05-2010 TILL 15-05-2010

PARTICIPANTS;

DICK FORSMAN

BRAD ROBSON

ALYONA SMJALENKO

CARLOS DE WAGTER

ERICA KLIM

SHAUN ROBSON

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MACHIEL VALKENBURG (TOURLEADER)

RICHARD KLIM

MARKO SALO

INARI UUSIMAKI

Sunday 02 May 2010 Arrival Almaty and departure to the Sogety Valley

The 2010 tour to Kazakhstan with Central Asia Birding was a rather international group, with participants joining from England, Belgium and Finland, and a Dutch guide resident in Kazakhstan all year round. The group arrived on two different flights. Those from the UK arrived at 04h40 on a direct Air Astana flight from London. The second group arrived at 06h11 with Turkish Airlines via Istanbul. Both flights arrived without delay at the scheduled times. At the airport the birding started, with the first Mynas and Common Swifts seen flying overhead. We departed the airport around 07h30. We soon made for the road leading eastwards towards the Chinese border. Our first stop was for breakfast, which we enjoyed outside. As we stopped, the first birds immediately got our attention, in particular two courting Long-tailed Shrikes. Several Turkestan Greenfinches, European Rollers and *poltaratskyi* Common Starlings were also seen. Siberian Chiffchaff and Hume's Leaf Warblers sang from the nearby bushes. Breakfast consisted of two pancakes each, filled with meat, supplemented with bread, salads and *aladi* (thick pancakes with potatoes, thickly spread with homemade jam). After this tasty breakfast we continued along the road, making two more stops in the agricultural fields along the highway. The most notable birds were two Azure Tits, five Siberian Stonechats, two Richard's Pipits and a Hobby. Our first major stop was at the Kokpek Pass, from where we walked into two gorges. The first seemed a bit slow at first. All morning it rained a little, and it continued as we started our climb up the gorge.slow, but when the rain stopped and the sun came through, the birds eventually started singing and taking an interest in the sounds played from the iPod. No less than three Chestnut-breasted Buntings revealed themselves, followed by a Pied Wheatear and a pair of Rock Buntings. In the sky a group of Lesser Kestrels patrolled, and a Golden Eagle also appeared. The second gorge had more of the same, with again two Chestnut-breasted Buntings and more Rock Buntings, and more interesting, a *pandoo* Blue Rock Thrush. Dick Forsman asked when we would see Black-eared Kites, as he was really interested in seeing the intermediate birds typical in Kazakhstan. Too bad, but today no kites were seen. We did however have great sightings of a close Eurasian Griffon Vulture and a *calidus* Peregrine Falcon migrating high over our heads. We left the Kokpek Pass behind and travelled on to our next spot near the Bogety Mountains, where traditionally we visit a small artesian well known for drinking Desert Finches (but mostly Mongolian and Asian Crimson-winged). But the cold wind together with light rain resulted in no sign of a Desert Finch. Only a brave Grey-necked Bunting dared to appear – in full glory for the photographers. All had great shots!! We also noted the more common species of the Sogety Valley – Horned Lark, Isabelline Wheatear, Tawny Pipit, a female Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush, plus a male Turkestan Shrike were all seen near the well. We decided to call it a day, and drove to our lodge located in the oasis of the Sharyn River. Along the way, we were stopped at a police checkpoint. After a period of discussion and persuasion, they accepted that we weren't bandits and let us go. After arrival at the lodge, we had dinner and did the checklist. Some had a beer, while others took a shower or a Russian sauna.

Monday 03 May 2010 Sogety Valley and Charyn Canyon_____

At 06h15 several people were already up and birding. First, a Kyrgyz Pheasant was heard, and not long after, two Hobbies were seen hunting. Brad had seen the first Booted Eagle of the day – many would follow. Hume's Leaf Warblers were singing,

together with a few Greenish Warblers. Dick discovered an Azure Tits' nest. No less than six tits were having a dispute, completely ignoring the photographers who eagerly took advantage of this opportunity. Two Black Storks came over, with one turning to soar in a circle, allowing it to be eternalised before flying on. Breakfast was served, and we all went for pancakes and eggs plus bread and jams. Around 08h15 we left our lodge and went straight back to the Sogety Valley. In the valley we made several short stops along the road, seeing Desert Wheatear, Turkestan Shrikes, Tawny Pipits, Booted Eagle and a Cuckoo perched on a small bush. After several kilometres we stopped, geared-up and started to walk in the direction of the Bogety Mountains, over the impressive Sogety plains. Isabelline Wheatear, Horned Lark and Tawny Pipit were very common and approachable. When passing amongst the bushes, several Central Asian Lesser Whitethroats were discovered. Mongolian Finches soon revealed themselves – Dick flushed a group of eight which were soon refound by the whole group. A Pallas's Sandgrouse was seen by some of the group. Under a scrap of iron, a scorpion was found resting – also of course to go home on picture. Hare, souslick, agama and several other lizard species were also noted. Near some ruins we saw a gorgeous Long-tailed Shrike, which was photographed from the vehicle when we started to drive back. Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush gave some good views. Finally our walk finished with a group of five Himalayan Griffon Vultures soaring overhead, including an adult bird with all-white underwing coverts.



Rock Petronia – (photo: C. De Wagter)

After having enjoyed some Kazakh chocolate, we started our drive towards the Charyn Canyon, where we would have our lunch. Along the way, we saw more Desert Wheatears, Himalayan Griffon Vultures, a Steppe Eagle and a Golden Eagle. We arrived at the Charyn Canyon, where many photographs were taken of the scenic view. A male

'*vittata*' Pied Wheatear revealed itself and was extremely gorgeous. Marko and Inari from Finland, who work in television, met some of their Finnish colleagues who were reporting on Kazakhstan! Of anywhere in the world, what were the chances of meeting up here in Central Asia?! After a tasty lunch, we drove back to the well we had visited the previous evening. We were hoping for better luck with the desired Asian Crimson-winged Finch but, unfortunately, again no joy. The nearby river was very high, probably giving more opportunities to drink elsewhere. A few Mongolian Finches flew over, together with Linnet, and Grey-necked Bunting was heard singing. We returned to our accommodation near the river, where we had *manty* (meat dumplings) with a spicy sauce for dinner. After the meal we did our daily log and had a beer, while some enjoyed the Russian sauna!

Tuesday 04 May 2010; Sogety Valley – Qarqara – Almaty _____

As usual the birding started for some before breakfast, but with no new species this morning. Breakfast was, as always, in the cosy guest room of the lodges where we had been staying for the last two nights – this time rice porridge, with bread and jam. We said our goodbyes and left the lodge for the last time. Immediately we encountered eight Rollers on the roadside wires. We stopped in the Sogety Valley again, but this time took a walk on the other side of the valley. There were more large bushes here, and the targets were a little different than yesterday's – Sykes's Warbler and Asian Desert Warbler were the top priorities. The first *Sylvia* warblers were soon discovered – Central Asian Lesser Whitethroats.



Sogety Valley – (photo: D. Forsman)

Machiel also heard a Sykes's Warbler, which was calling not far away. A short search resulted in not only good views of the Sykes's, but also a gorgeous Asian Desert Warbler. As both targets had been seen, we returned to the vehicle and moved on to Kegen and Qarqara, near the Kyrgyz border. Along the way, groups of Demoiselle Cranes and two Saker Falcons were seen. We had lunch by a river, which produced several waders (see list). After lunch we started moving back, with just one stop in a gorge, which gave good views of Sulphur-bellied Warblers. We arrived late at the Tau-Samal Hotel – 20h00. We had dinner and all went to bed, as we'd be starting our Taukum Desert adventure the next day.

Wednesday 05 May 2010; Almaty to Taukum Desert via Sorbulak Lake _

Before breakfast, we took a gorgeous walk in the vicinity of our hotel, located in the Ili Ala-Tau National Park. Corncrakes were calling, while Coal and Songar Tits were singing from the nearby pines. A White's Thrush was heard giving its distinctive song. We descended from the mountains onto the lowlands to the east of Almaty. This way we avoided the heavy city traffic, giving us more birding time in the field. We drove to Sorbulak Lake via Komsomol. The first stop of the day was near the Sorbulak Dam. On getting out of the vehicle, it was very windy and rather chilly – quite unusual for this time of year. The first birds were Caspian Gull, Ruddy Shelduck, Shoveler, Garganey, and several Dalmatian Pelicans sitting on a mud bank. Scanning the water delivered Great Crested and Black-necked Grebes, together with more Dalmatian Pelicans. On the mudflats at the end of the dam, we saw good numbers of Black-winged Stilts, gorgeous Spotted Redshanks in summer plumage, Common Greenshank and a Common Snipe. Two Little Terns and a single Whiskered Tern were seen hunting over the lake. Dick had some fun with his beloved raptors – a group of around 30 Black-eared Kites became his target for a photo session. We continued further into the desert, with trees becoming smaller until eventually they were completely absent. The next stop was at the Wish Tree near the small village of Bozoy. At first the tree always seems empty, but when one starts looking, many species can be found. We set up our chairs and tables, and had a large lunch while watching the tree. Siberian Chiffchaff, Hume's Leaf Warbler, a Black-throated Thrush, three Sulphur-bellied Warblers (!!), Hoopoe, Pied Wheatear and Sykes's Warbler were the most notable species. We wandered around and came across several Sykes's Wagtails and many migrating Indian House Sparrows. We continued to Konshengel, where we did some birding around the houses. Greenish Warbler and many Hume's Leaf Warblers were seen, as well as large groups of Rose-coloured Starlings and Common Rosefinches. At a great distance, an eagle was seen sitting on top of a *barkhan* (dune). Together with Shaun, we approached the bird slowly but it flew several kilometres into the distance. We took some pictures, which were later identified by Dick Forsman as Steppe Eagle. We set sail for Central Asia Birding's yurt camp. First, at the nearby well, we saw 22 Mongolian Finches drinking. We then arrived at the camp, which is an oasis in the desert – a resting place for everyone. While drinking a cold beer and eating pistachio nuts, we enjoyed the landscape and even had four Pallas's Sandgrouse fly past. Machiel mentioned before arrival that he'd seen large numbers of Pallas's Sandgrouse (138) near the well several days before starting of the trip. We were served

shashlik meat with French fries, and rested in the traditionally-decorated yurts. We really were on holiday! We finally did the checklist and went to bed.



Sulpher-bellied Warbler – (photo: D. Forsman)

Thursday 06 May 2010; Konshengel – Tamgaly Tas – Konshengel _____

An early wake-up at 05h00, as Machiel wanted everyone in the bus at 05h30 to bird the desert specialities without heat-haze. We'd planned to have some tea/coffee and cookies at 05h15, before our early start. Before we'd sat down, Machiel was already calling from the top of his 4WD that he'd found two wolves running away. Several of the group climbed on top of the car to see the wolves in the rising sun. After the cookies, we set sail for the area to the north of the camp. The first scan immediately revealed several Black-bellied and Pallas's Sandgrouse resting on the ground. A Macqueen's Bustard was displaying on top of the *barkhan*, and several Greater Sand Plovers were also running around. The males are especially gorgeous, with their reddish-coloured chest and white cheeks. The second stop immediately provided rather distant views of Caspian Plover females. When we got closer, several males also appeared on-stage, giving great views! We then returned, past the camp, and drove to one of the wells where we'd been promised that more Pallas's Sandgrouse would come in to drink. We sat on chairs on top of one of the dunes with scopes in front of us. Good numbers of Pallas's Sandgrouse duly

appeared on-stage. Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Bimaculated Lark, Ortolan Bunting, Red-headed Bunting, Long-legged Buzzard and Hoopoe were also around. In total we saw c70 Pallas's Sandgrouse that morning, not bad for pre-breakfast birding!! We returned to the camp, where we enjoyed a delicious European-style breakfast, with home-made cherry juice, strawberry jam, toast and bread. After breakfast, Machiel, the tour leader, asked everyone what they'd like to do, and came to the conclusion it would be possible to split the group to accommodate everyone's preferences. Four went with Machiel to try for Eastern Rock Nuthatch at Tamgaly Tas, a known breeding site. They travelled in Machiel's Mitsubishi Pajero, avoiding a few potholes, to this petroglyph site. Walking up to the site, Richard heard the sound of a Quail. Red-headed Bunting and Siberian Stonechat were common. Two Kyrgyz Pheasants were flushed, and Chukars were heard. But the nuthatches wouldn't respond to Machiel's tape. Trying three different cliff sites resulted in no sign of our target species. We started to return, but suddenly Machiel heard the call!!! We walked quickly back, and had great views of two birds bringing food to a nest. We watched the birds carefully, without disturbing them. We finally walked back to the parking lot, where we had a tasty sandwich, and then drove back to the yurt camp near Konshengel to meet up with the rest of the group (who'd been birding in Konshengel village with Alona, the tour manager). We enjoyed another great meal together at the outstanding camp!



Demoiselle Crane – (photo: D. Forsman)

Friday 07 May 2010 Konshengel – Topar – Zheltorangly – Almaty_____

The longest day of the tour itinerary lay ahead of us today, as we travelled in a northern direction from the Taukum Desert to the Zheltorangly Turanga forest, via the Topar lake system. From here we were to travel south again, towards the mountains of Almaty. Before breakfast, Brad again scoped the desert from Machiel's car, which rewarded him with another wolf near the camp. We drove away after breakfast, noting five more

Pallas's Sandgrouse and another Macqueen's Bustard. The road towards the Topar lakes is, to say the least, 'not great', but the birding is superb. Numerous Turkestan Shrikes were perched in the tops of small bushes along the road – a total of 45 birds were noted by the group. Five Steppe Grey Shrikes were also seen. The thick bill and larger primary patch distinguishes them from European Great Grey Shrikes. '*Melanogrisea*' Caspian Wagtails were common in this area, as were Red-headed Buntings, Lesser Whitethroats and Sykes's Warblers. Dick Forsman's finds included a Greater Spotted Eagle and, shortly after, a fly-by Short-toed Eagle. In this dry area two Brown-necked Ravens were also seen inspecting the roadside for road-kill. Near the village of Topar we stopped at Machiel's site for Black-headed Penduline Tits. Unfortunately for us, the wind was blowing extremely hard today! We tried for an hour to find the birds, but were treated only to a few calls from a male responding to tape. The birds stayed in the reeds and wouldn't come out. We did see a *pyrrhuloides* Thick-billed Reed Bunting. Machiel and Richard also came across a couple of Little Bitterns flying rapidly away. We travelled further on to Zheltorangly, where there was much less wind, resulting in hot weather with high temperatures. By now we were not far from Lake Balkhash, one of the largest lakes in Asia and the 12th largest continental lake in the world. A great place for breeding White-tailed Eagles – we saw two individuals.



Saxaul Sparrow – (photo: D. Forsman)

In the *Populus diversifolia* forest the search started for some of the most-wanted Central Asian species. Pale-backed Pigeon, a species classified as vulnerable by BirdLife International, was seen on stepping out of the bus. Within a minute, several Saxaul Sparrows were also found, and a White-winged Woodpecker gave great views – the photographers in the group had a blast with this individual as it foraged at close range in a poplar. We enjoyed our lunch in the forest, in the shade of the trees. After lunch, we started the drive back to Almaty. In the endless landscapes of Kazakhstan, we saw more large groups of Rose-coloured Starlings, and Black-eared Kites patrolling the roadsides. In the evening, we arrived back at our cool hotel, where we were welcomed by two Azure Tits and calling Corncrakes.



Shikra – (photo: D. Forsman)

Saturday 08 May 2010 Almaty – Big Almaty Lake

In the surroundings of our hotel, birding before breakfast is always good. Again, White's Thrush was heard. At 07h30, our next transport, 4WD Mitsubishi Delicas, arrived in front of the hotel. We loaded-up the vehicles and started to drive down to Almaty. Several Rollers and a Black-eared Kite were seen. The centre of the city was quite different from what we'd seen so far – Almaty is booming and businesses are performing strongly. We were stopped several times by police, who wanted to check the vehicle documents (which has an effect, as one sees nobody speeding on the wide city streets!). When we

tried to take the road to the National Park, the route was temporarily closed for a cycling event – we had to wait 10 minutes at a nearby parking place before we could continue our journey. When driving up the steep road, one of the 4WDs overheated. We had to stop and wait for 15 minutes before we could continue. Construction teams were working extensively on the road upwards. The previously dreadful road was being replaced by a fairly good surface, which made our drive easy and smooth. We drove immediately to Big Almaty Lake, with a few stops which produced Golden Eagle, Blue Whistling Thrush and Tien Shan Goldcrest. We parked the vehicles near the lake and started walking along the lakeshore, our main goal being Ibisbill. Richard found the bird after only a minute of searching – an individual was foraging at a great distance in one of the small streams. We walked further and did some more birding, checking the nearby slopes. First, Brad discovered a Blue-capped Redstart sitting in the top of one of the spruces – he followed immediately with a shout, ‘Amazing, a snowcock in the background!!’. A Himalayan Snowcock was foraging and calling, giving great views of this magnificent bird. There were several White-winged Grosbeaks and Red-fronted Serins, and two Golden Eagles also flew over. A *lymani* Merlin was seen perched. We finally went a little closer to the Ibisbill, where we could see it perfectly without disturbing it, and had a never-to-forget moment. The picture speaks for itself, we think. We walked back and immediately drove up to have lunch at the Astronomical Observatory (which would be our home for the next two nights). A large lunch of sausages and baked potatoes together with some great salads, and tea and cookies, made us feel fit for some more birding. Although it was raining a little, we went out to see some more of the jewels that were out there.



Himalayan Snowcock– (photo: M. Valkenburg)

A hike through sometimes deep snow took us to the other side of the valley. Not long after, the first Black-throated Accentor and White-tailed Rubythroat were seen. A Sulphur-bellied Warbler foraged between the rocks, and 10s of Plain Mountain Finches were active on the meadows. More White-winged Grosbeaks were flying around, and snowcocks called from every surrounding hill. Life can be so beautiful on some days! But soon it then started to rain heavily. So we walked back for a cup of tea with our Delica drivers, who'd made a fire to boil some water. Dick took another stroll, and returned with splendid pictures of Eversmann's Redstart and Red-mantled Rosefinch. But the rain wouldn't stop pouring down – our birding day had come to an end!

Sunday 09 May 2010 Big Almaty Lake _____

In the early morning everyone went their own way and birded around the accommodation on the nearby hills, which were covered with Turkestan Juniper. I personally took a short walk which gave a great view over Big Almaty Lake. I played the sounds of White-winged Grosbeak, and several birds responded instantly. After five minutes, a bird came and perched in front of me at a distance of three metres, poised naturally but with the sun behind – I therefore have great pictures of an all-black bird in the shape of a White-winged Grosbeak! I also saw a male Red-mantled Rosefinch, plus White-tailed Rubythroat, Black-throated Accentor and several Coal Tits. We had breakfast and then started driving up to the Kosmos Station, for high-altitude species. During the ascent, Machiel saw a Red-spotted Bluethroat, which is quite uncommon in this environment. In 30 minutes we arrived at the station, and started walking around the buildings. Very quickly, the first Gldenstdt's Redstart was seen – a gorgeous male, perched on a wire. Large numbers of Plain Mountain Finches were present on the nearby slopes, which had just recently become snow-free – we counted 288 individuals. Alpine and Red-billed Choughs were playing in the sky, and Dick discovered a Brown Accentor. Unfortunately the bird disappeared as quickly as it has been discovered. Altai Accentors were seen in good numbers – nine birds in total. After wandering around for several hours, we decided to descend. Some elected to walk back down, while the others joined Machiel for another viewing of Blue-capped Redstart. We did this before lunch as it seemed likely that the weather was going to change. It was already cloudy, and more dark clouds were appearing. We drove down to Big Almaty Lake and walked around the lake to the Blue-capped Redstart site. After playing a tape for 30 seconds, the first bird appeared – we were blessed with a handsome male. We saw a total of four birds (two pairs). Of course, we had another scan for Ibisbill, and naturally Richard was again first to see the bird! We walked back to the vehicles, feeling very good. We drove back up to the observatory, where we met the others. We had lunch together at 15h00, and discussed the plan for the remainder of the day. The general consensus was to spend some time birding individually. So, after lunch everybody spread out and did their own thing. Around 19h00, we had dinner and shared our sightings. Around 21h00 we departed for a night excursion in search of owls. We drove downhill in our 4WDs. At the first stop, Machiel started by playing the sounds of Woodcock – a male responded immediately, flying over the forest, calling loudly. Next we tried for Tengmalm's Owl – nothing. But we played the sound for a couple of minutes, and finally a male was heard responding from the forest nearby. To our surprise, a White's Thrush was also singing!! Another Tengmalm's Owl was heard at a great distance – somewhere on the other side of

the valley. The second individual was rather excited, judging by his rapid call. We returned to the observatory and headed for bed, hoping to return to the Kosmos Station next morning (weather permitting).

Monday 10 May 2010 Big Almaty Lake – Kosmos Station – Almaty _____

Around 07h00, we drove up to the Kosmos Station for the second time. The weather was great, with a clear, blue sky. When getting out of the vehicles, the first of four Gldenstdt's Redstarts was seen immediately, perched on the wires.



Gldenstdt's Redstart – (photo: D. Forsman)

Altai Accentor was also spotted within minutes. The photographers were having a blast, with the redstarts posing gorgeously against the snow. At this high altitude, snow is always present, and people in Almaty enjoy skiing here, even in the summer. A woman descending a slope flushed a pair of Himalayan Snowcocks, which then flew by at a distance of 40 metres – simply superb!!!! We'd been really lucky over the last few days with sightings of this enigmatic bird! Between the buildings we found four Brown Accentors (which proved to be much easier compared with the previous morning, when only a few of the group had brief views). We headed back down for breakfast. Before the meal, we packed and ensured that our luggage was ready. This allowed the drivers to load the vehicles while we were eating, to maximise birding time. After breakfast, we started descending to Almaty, with birding stops along the way. During the descent, we came across *tianschanica* Common Crossbill, Eversmann's Redstart, Blue-capped

Redstart and Songar Tits. Near a fast-flowing river we tried for Brown Dipper, which was still missing from our list. No Brown Dipper, but a fantastic Blue Whistling Thrush appeared by the track. The bird gave a great show, granting good views to all. We moved further on and stopped at another known site for Brown Dipper, and soon we saw two individuals perching and feeding approximately 30 metres away. Again, great views through the scope! We had lunch at a forest, where Richard in particular was extremely pleased to add Tien Shan Goldcrest to his list. It had passed noon and was clearly getting warmer, and raptors were starting to soar. During lunch we saw Golden Eagle, Booted Eagle and Steppe Buzzard pass overhead. After lunch, we drove to our hotel, via Machiel's home on the other side of the city. We visited Machiel's local birding patch, as we still hadn't seen White-crowned Penduline Tit. We'd been assured that several pairs were breeding there. And yes, no less than five birds were quickly found, near their nests in the willows. We arrived at the hotel early in the evening, where we had a relaxed dinner and prepared for the next day's domestic flight to Astana.

Tuesday 11 May 2010 Almaty – Astana – Korgalzhyn _____

We had breakfast at around 08h00, which gave us time to do some birding before – White-bellied Dipper, Eastern Grasshopper Warbler and Azure tit being the best species noted. We drove to the newly-renovated Almaty airport. We took off at around 10h00 on the domestic flight to Astana, the new capital of Kazakhstan. Shortly before 12h00, we arrived at the completely new airport – one can clearly see that Kazakhstan has some oil dollars to spend. From the suburbs of the city, we travelled into the vast steppes that make this region so interesting for birders. The first stop was for a pair of Red-footed Falcons perched on the roadside wires – during the drive towards Korgalzhyn National Park, we found no less than 30 birds.



Black Lark – (photo:C. De Wagter)

The first lakes harboured great numbers of Ruffs, Marsh Sandpipers and Black-tailed Godwits. In nearby bushes, a Willow Warbler was heard. 10 Whooper Swans and two Dalmatian Pelicans were feeding in the shallow water. This was a fantastic area for harriers! We saw 11 Western Marsh and 6 Pallid Harriers flying by. Steppe and Great Spotted Eagles were also seen, while Sykes's Wagtails and Northern Wheatears (very pale individuals!) were everywhere! While driving towards Korgalzhyn village, a sudden stop was made – we'd come across our first Black Larks – these wonderful birds are amazing! Sociable Lapwings were seen in the vicinity of the village. Fields full of Sociable Lapwings, with Black Larks flying around, definitely made a 6000km journey worthwhile! We also saw five Golden Orioles migrating northwards through the steppes towards Siberia. We stayed at two guest houses in Korgalzhyn for our three-night visit. The next days' excursions into the National Park would be with friend and guide Alexei Koshkin. We had a wonderful dinner at Nadia's guest house – friendly people, great food and superb birding – what more could one want? We then went to bed, as the next morning a full day of birding awaited us.



White-winged Lark – (photo: D. Forsman)

Wednesday 12 May 2010 Korgalzhyn National Park _____

We started driving towards Karazhar village, located close to several large lakes within the park. We birded for the entire day, on the steppes and near the steppe lakes. Like the previous day, the harrier festival continued – throughout the day, we saw large numbers of all three local harriers, eg, 13 Pallids were seen. The first stop delivered a group of feeding Gull-billed Terns. However, this wasn't the site's star bird – that was White-winged Lark! 27 birds were counted and admired by all. During migration, millions of birds (waders in particular) pass through this fantastic birding area. New waders for the trip included Pied Avocet, Kentish Plover, Common Ringed Plover, Grey Plover, Little Stint, Curlew Sandpiper, Dunlin, Ruff (amazing numbers of males in breeding plumage),

Eurasian Whimbrel and Red-necked Phalarope. The sight of 400 Greater Flamingos was also not a bad moment! On the lakes we found several Slender-billed Gulls. These gorgeous gulls breed here – rather amazing considering that Korgalzhyn is located on the same latitude as Brussels! Steppe Gulls were common, with numbers of birds reaching 100. At Karazhar, several Booted Warblers were seen during our lunch stop. For Dick Forsman, the star bird of the tour appeared – an eye-to-eye encounter with the handsome *pallidus* Steppe Merlin!! The pictures speak for themselves – as shown on the front cover! Also noteworthy, Sykes's Wagtails and Black Larks were common throughout the day. It was impossible to count them all, but we estimated that we'd seen c300 Black Larks and c500 wagtails. Machiel was very pleased, to say the least, to view his first-ever Saigas. In the Ice Age, this antelope ranged from the British Isles all the way to Alaska, but now it only occurs in small numbers in Central Asia. In the evening we enjoyed some cold beers and heard some amusing stories about ringing Northern Hawk Owls in Finland. Not quite the expected topic when birding the Kazakh steppe. ☺

Thursday 13 May 2010 Korgalzhyn National Park _____

Today we entered the park via another area, visiting several lakes near the village of Abai (named after one of the most famous Kazakh writers). The group decided to do some birding individually. Some concentrated on photography close to the lake, but most birded along the lakeshore and on the steppe areas nearby. During lunch the new species encountered were reported – White-headed Duck 6, Long-tailed Duck! 11, Goldeneye 27, Red-necked Grebe 1, Black-necked Grebe 7, Slavonian Grebe 2, Ruddy Turnstone 1 and Little Gull 4. Again, the large number of Ruffs was notable – more than 2000 birds were seen! That it was a very good year for Pallas's Sandgrouse was again underlined by a sighting of five birds this far north. The photographers in the group greatly enjoyed the 600 White-winged Black Terns which were feeding along the shore. They didn't bother the big lenses at all! After lunch the group decided to forego a visit to a site for Asian Twite, and instead stay in the vicinity of the lake to do some more birding! Later we returned via another lake, where Black-winged Pratincoles were known to breed – about 50 birds could be observed at quite close range. The group had a great time, and were fully satisfied when we arrived back at Korgalzhyn village for dinner.

Friday 14 May 2010 Korgalzhyn – Astana – Almaty _____

Today we travelled back to our base in Almaty. However, the morning was spent in the vicinity of Korgalzhyn village. Machiel knew some good bushy areas which he believed should be productive for migrants. As we stepped out of the vehicle, Machiel heard the first Booted Warbler. A Cetti's Warbler was also singing. When we walked into the bushes, we realised that they were teeming with a newly-arrived wave of Booted Warblers – a minimum of 100 birds were singing and skulking all around us. Several Blyth's Reed Warblers were also singing. They have a very different song to Booted. Booted sounds like a boiling kettle, while Blyth's has a more typical *Acrocephalus* song, repeated five to 10 times, and then switching to another phrase. The rattle of a Barred Warbler was heard, before it appeared in display flight. We had a great morning before travelling back to Astana. Of course, on the road to Astana we didn't stop birding – several stops were made near lakes, although no new ducks or waders were encountered. But we did see three hunting Short-eared Owls! Brad and Shaun returned

with the news that they'd just seen a Whinchat. Machiel has seen this species only twice before. Naturally, it goes without saying that harrier numbers were high again, as always! At around 16h00, we arrived in Astana, and stopped to see the Bayterek Monument. We all agreed that the city looked rather surreal – more like Dubai than any other city we'd seen on the tour. We travelled to the airport, and boarded our evening flight back to Almaty. Two hours later at Almaty airport, we loaded our luggage onto the bus and were taken to a local *shashlik* restaurant, where we enjoyed our final dinner. Madina, Machiel's wife, was also present – they run their birding company together, offering tours in Central Asia and Siberia. The meal tasted great, and over several beers a local tradition was followed – toasts! After a fun evening we said goodbye to our Belgian and Finnish friends, who had to depart for the airport immediately as their flight was scheduled to leave that night. The UK contingent travelled with Madina to the hotel, where they could enjoy a long night before leaving for the airport at 09h00.



Booted Warbler – (photo: D. Forsman)

Saturday 15 May 2010 Almaty – Europe

We said goodbye to Shaun, Brad, Erica and Richard at the airport. They would have no problems getting home – the infamous volcanic ash cloud no longer held Europe in its grip. Finally, I want to take this opportunity to thank the entire group for participating in this great tour and for their pleasant company!

Next years tour of Central Asia Birding will take place from 01 May till 14 May 2011. For more information please visit our website on www.centralasiabirding.com.