

# Kazakhstan

19–28 May 2018

## Participants

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**Saxaul Sparrow**

## Leader Svetlana Ashby

Tour report by Julian Thomas. Header photo Alan Knight. Other photos by Nick Morgan (birds), Julian Thomas (scenery).

**Day 1** A late cancellation of the original return flight for those not taking the extension meant rearranged flights, so seven of us flew overnight from London Heathrow to Almaty, via Istanbul.

**Day 2** At Almaty airport at c. 09.00 we met the other five (including the German contingent) who had arrived earlier via Astana, and also Sveta, tour assistant Artyom, and driver Konstantin. Once all the bags were loaded into our trusty minibus it was straight out into the field, with our venue for the day being the western section of Ile-Alatau National Park, south of Keskelen. A couple of stops gave great views of our first Azure Tit and a fine adult Bearded Vulture overhead. European Rollers were everywhere, and we looked with interest at the local races of familiar birds, including the *bactriana* race of Eurasian Magpie with their even longer tails, *casiotis* Common Wood-pigeons with their pale pink neck-patch, and European (Grey-headed) Goldfinches of the *caniceps* subspecies. Our main target for the day was Meadow Bunting, here at the very western edge of its range. A singing bird at one spot remained resolutely invisible, so we tried further up the hill and eventually found another singing in the open, albeit at scope range. Plenty of other birds too, including good views of Corn Crake, several Siberian Stonechats and Common Cuckoos, and a variety of raptors including Black (Black-eared) Kite, Long-legged Buzzard, and Cinereous Vulture.



On the way back, a rock-strewn mountain stream gave us our first looks at a fine Brown Dipper. Then it was a dash back to Almaty to beat the notorious rush-hour traffic and get to our comfortably pleasant hotel south of the city. Great views of the impressively large Blue Whistling-thrush (above) at the stream

by the hotel, and as darkness fell two European Scops-owls started calling, though they were too far away to hope to see.

**Day 3** It was the customary early start (breakfast at 04.30) as we had a long journey to reach our yurt camp in the desert near Konchengil, punctuated by many birding stops along the way. Stopping for photographs of a showy roadside Red-headed Bunting proved an inspired move, as we also located a lone Demoiselle Crane (unexpectedly, the only one all trip) and up to six Little Bustards, plus our first Calandra and Crested Larks. The first of several lakes in the Sorbulak area provided 13 Great White Pelicans and a wide range of familiar wildfowl and waders, including plenty of Garganeys and Temminck's Stints, but also two Terek Sandpipers and a fine, if distant, Lesser (Mongolian) Sand-plover). Another lake held nine Dalmatian Pelicans and a few Black Terns among the Common Terns that seemed to abound in the area. On a recent reconnaissance visit Sveta had located a White-tailed Eagle nest, so we visited that next, viewing the well-grown chicks from a suitable distance – other birds there included Greenish Warbler and Lesser Grey Shrike, plus the spectacular sight of 40 Great White Pelicans circling overhead. Another lake held large numbers of Black-headed Gulls (through which I sifted in the vague hope of a passing Relict Gull without success) and also more waders, including two Black-winged Stilts, three Lesser (Mongolian) Sand-plovers, and three Whimbrels. Our final stop in the Sorbulak area was at some small reed-fringed pools by the canal, where White-headed and Ferruginous Ducks and beautiful summer-plumaged Eared (Black-necked) Grebes all showed well. The singing Great Reed Warbler remained invisible though. This was also our lunch stop, and as we feasted on the daily variety of goodies provided by Artyom and Konstantin (including cheese, cold meat, sardines, fruit, bread, yogurt, and 'pot mash' – like pot noodles but with mashed potato, much tastier than it sounds) a Black Stork flew over.

Next on to the site formerly known as the 'Magic Tree': the tree itself is now sadly dead, and we failed on Grey-hooded Bunting here, but still found Pied and Isabelline Wheatears, Tawny Pipit, and both Little Ringed Plover and Temminck's Stint. Later we visited a number of wells, where a variety of wagtails included a Citrine, three Western Yellows of the race *thunbergi* ('Grey-headed Wagtail'), and



a fine male White Wagtail of the race *leucopsis* ('Amur Wagtail' – a first for Kazakhstan, it turns out!) as well as several of the more usual *personata* ('Masked Wagtail'). I was also very happy to find my first-ever Bimaculated Lark, though we were to see plenty more over the next two days.

At last we arrived at the yurt camp (left). Sveta was a little dismayed to find that not all of her precise and detailed instructions had been followed, and there was some sorting out to be done (we were one yurt short, for instance, so I ended up sleeping in the dining yurt, which was fine by me),

but after another tasty meal and a beer or two we settled down for the night. Eventually the camp staff did too, after some stern words from Sveta; they were conspicuously helpful for the rest of our stay.

**Day 4** Another early start failed to find any bustards, but we did see four Persian Gazelles and lots of larks – the density of Calandra Larks in particular was astonishing. After breakfast we headed out in the minibus for an excellent morning's birding around the area, which included a group of four Caspian Plovers, six Greater Sand-plovers dotted around, several groups of Black-bellied Sandgrouse, and three majestic Macqueen's Bustards. Larks once again abounded, and the whole group was elated to get good views over the course of the morning of up to a dozen White-winged Larks – a semi-nomadic species that can be tricky to find here.

A small area of bushes near an old farm building and well was very productive, with Rufous-tailed Scrub-robin, Sykes's, Eastern Olivaceous, and Greenish Warblers, Blyth's Reed Warbler, 'Indian' House Sparrows, and a Red-tailed (Turkestan) Shrike of the pale race *karelini* all being recorded, as well as the by now regular Red-headed Buntings (right), Isabelline Wheatears, Eurasian Hoopoes, and Tawny Pipits. Later in the morning we tried a different area, locating a fine Southern (Steppe) Grey Shrike, and a group of Eurasian Griffons overhead there included at least one Himalayan Griffon. Our final stop of the morning was at an isolated tree in a truck rest area – sounds (and was) insalubrious, but that tree was full of birds! A European Turtle-dove alongside its Oriental congeners provided an interesting comparison, Spotted Flycatchers abounded, and warblers included Lesser Whitethroat and European (Caspian) Reed Warbler. We headed back to the yurt camp for lunch buzzing about the quality of the morning's birding.



Later we headed south to an area of very different habitat – foothills with small rocky gorges. The journey started well with a very unexpected flock of about 70 Glossy Ibises flying over, but perhaps inevitably after such a good morning, the afternoon felt like a bit of a let-down, as we could not find Eastern Rock (Persian) Nuthatch no matter how hard we tried. The Bronze Age petroglyphs at Tamgaly gorge were interesting, though, and we did see more Pied Wheatears etc. Another gorge nearby had been taken over by an astounding number of Rosy Starlings, which may not have helped with finding other birds but was an impressive spectacle in itself. Heading away from there we briefly saw a *Perdix* partridge, which after much discussion and study of photos taken we had to reluctantly conclude was a Grey rather than the hoped-for (and scarce and difficult) Daurian. Back at camp there was a surprise for me as a new and rather spacious tent had been spirited in from Almaty during the day. Secretly I was a little disappointed at not actually sleeping in a yurt, but I was very appreciative of the extra effort made by Sveta and Artyom.

**Day 5** The wind got up during the night; while it made for a restless night, an early morning wander round camp showed that it had its compensations too – a small number of northbound migrants had dropped in, including a Dusky Warbler (which promptly hopped into one of the loo tents), a Sulphur-bellied Warbler, a Common Chiffchaff, and two *blythi*-type Lesser Whitethroats.

After breakfast it was time to bid farewell to the desert camp and head northwest towards Lake Balkhash. A visit to an area of barchan dunes did not provide the hoped-for Asian Desert Warbler (strangely missing so far) but was very productive otherwise, with Sykes's Warbler, *halimodendri* Lesser Whitethroats, plenty of Bimaculated and Lesser Short-toed Larks, a female European Nightjar, and a Bluethroat among the highlights. Further along we passed through an area of barchan lakes, mostly smallish reed-fringed pools – fascinating habitat which I would have liked to have had time to explore properly, but there were very few wildfowl on the pools (normally packed with Red-crested Pochards, Sveta told us) and we knew bad weather was forecast for the afternoon, so we felt the need to press on.

At the village of Topar we reached a major road junction and the most north-westerly point of the tour – it was also a stakeout for the gorgeous Saxaul Sparrow, several of which duly showed very well. Quite possibly the best sparrow in the world. Clouds were starting to build though, so after a brief stop at a reed bed where Black-headed Penduline-tit failed to show, but a pair of Black-headed Wagtails

(*melanogrisea*) gave good views (and a Shikra rather briefer ones), we moved on again to get to another important site, the Turanga grove at Zheltoranga (below). The weather was still glorious when we arrived, and we saw two of the specialities there – Turkestan Tit (now lumped back again with Great Tit) and White-winged Woodpecker – almost immediately. The other speciality, Pale-backed Pigeon (also known as Yellow-eyed Stock Dove), played harder to get, but everyone eventually managed to get good flight views. In a couple of hours there (including lunch) we also noted Indian Golden Oriole, Common Cuckoo, Sykes's, Greenish and Hume's Warblers, Blyth's Reed Warblers and Shikra.



Soon after we left Zheltoranga the storm broke. We had a long drive ahead to get to our overnight stop, so it cost us no birding time, but the dust storms and occasional heavy rain made for unpleasant driving conditions.

We got away very lightly compared to the scenes we saw online from Astana the day before, but it was blowing a 'hoolie' when we arrived in the town of Kapshagai. Here the contrasts created by the rapid conversion from communism to capitalism were at their most stark – a succession of newly built, brightly lit casinos, but behind them the old and run-down tenement blocks. Our hotel clearly catered mainly for 'average punters' visiting the casinos and was hardly picturesque, but relatively new and comfortable. The food was good, but we found it tricky to buy a beer as the hotel staff would not take any of the large-denomination notes given to us at the airport bureau de change (a problem we encountered elsewhere too – the trick, we later found out, was to make small purchases at petrol stations, which carried enough cash to change the bigger notes). Tonight Artyom came to the rescue again, though we cleaned him out of small bills.

**Day 6** The storm blew itself out overnight, so the morning dawned bright and clear. After another early breakfast we left Kapshagai and headed south then east, along a new, fast major road linking Almaty with China. The road passed through agricultural fields with occasional pools, and roadside birds included Black-crowned Night-herons, Great Egrets, Stock Doves, European Rollers, Oriental Turtle-doves, large flocks of Rosy Starlings and corvids. At a roadside stop in suitable habitat, a pair of White-crowned Penduline-tits responded very quickly to the tape and gave excellent views. Good views also of a Common Nightingale, of one of the eastern races (*golzi*) and noticeably paler than European birds, with pale fringes to the wing feathers – an instructive bird. It felt slightly incongruous to hear the familiar sound of a Cetti's Warbler singing here too.

After Chelek we turned towards the hills, but a little bit of bonus gen from Konstantin had us stopping first on the edge of the village of Bayseit, where we enjoyed sumptuous views of up to four Long-tailed Shrikes, plus Indian Golden Oriole, Common Rosefinch, European (Grey-headed) Goldfinch and Great Spotted Woodpecker.

Up then into the scenic Kokpek Gorge. The first ravine we tried gave close views of Rock Bunting, but had been taken over by another large colony of Rosy Starlings. At the second we hit paydirt, with excellent views of a singing male Chestnut-breasted Bunting and several more Rock Buntings. Hume's Whitethroat took a little more searching for, but eventually gave itself up, as did a pair of Blue Rock-thrushes and a few Eurasian Crag-martins. A little further up, the drive out across the plain towards Bartogay reservoir was quiet, though a Lesser Kestrel mantling prey and a smart male *werae* Citrine

Wagtail livened things up a bit. Back to the hills, then, and our lunch stop, where we enjoyed great views of several Grey-hooded Buntings (right), Pied Wheatears, and two Steppe Eagles. Nick, Steve, and I nipped around the corner for a 'comfort break' and were watching a Tawny Pipit when suddenly a large, scythe-winged falcon appeared from nowhere to attack it – 'Saker! Saker!' All too quickly it was gone, though luckily for the rest of the group we saw it or another briefly a bit further along the road.



A visit to the spectacular Charyn Canyon was largely a photo opportunity, much appreciated by the group, though I also saw Booted Eagle and the inevitable Black (Black-eared) Kites. Our last stop of the day was at a well in the mountains where finches come to drink. At last we got Asian Desert Warbler for the trip, with an adult feeding three fledged youngsters, and our first views of the attractive, monochrome steppe race of Horned Lark, then we settled down overlooking the well to see what came in. In truth not many birds did that evening, though several Mongolian Finches and a fine male Asian Crimson-winged Finch made the visit very worthwhile. After an unusually early spring, several pairs of Isabelline Wheatears were already feeding fledged young.

Our hotel was correctly billed in the itinerary as 'basic', but it was also comfortable and quite possibly the nicest place we stayed all trip, with certainly the best meal for the two vegetarians on the tour (Tui and myself). We all slept well that night, after another excellent day's birding, safe in the knowledge that we had done so well that we could afford a bit of a lie-in in the morning.

**Day 7** Not that that stopped me getting up at 05.00 anyway, and some others of the group only a little later – the grounds of the hotel looked birdy, and so they were to prove. In two hours up to breakfast we recorded two Indian Golden Orioles, three Common Nightingales, a Red-tailed (Turkestan) Shrike of the nominate race *phoenicuroides*, two White-winged Woodpeckers, Eurasian Hoopoe, Common Cuckoo, European (Grey-headed) Goldfinch, and a brief *pallidus* race Merlin, as well as the Common Mynas, 'Indian' House Sparrows, and Common House-martins nesting on the hotel itself.

Back near the Charyn Canyon a fine male Desert Wheatear posed for us on the roadside, but the main aim for the morning was to go back to the well in the mountains and see whether we could add anything more there – there was a chance, though no more than that, that Pallas's Sandgrouse would come in to drink. In the end, despite much effort, we failed on Pallas's, but it was fun trying. At the well we had more excellent views of Mongolian and Asian Crimson-winged Finches, several Black-bellied Sandgrouse were on show, and I found a distant Little Owl. We tried another drinking pool nearby – Grey-hooded Bunting and six Chukars the best there – then fanned out either side of the access track to search the area. Between us we found four more Desert Wheatears among the abundant Isabellines, Asian Desert Warbler, a surprise Eurasian Wryneck, and plenty of larks (mostly Horned and Greater Short-toed, though I also had another Lesser Short-toed).

The rest of the day was mostly spent travelling back to Almaty and on to our home for the next three nights back at the hotel near Almaty. Both European Rollers and European Bee-eaters were plentiful on roadside wires and our lunch stop was at a roadside colony of Pale Sand Martins, where we also saw Booted and Golden Eagles. Once back at the hotel, several of us could not resist going down to the stream to reacquaint ourselves with the obliging and photogenic Blue Whistling-thrush. A quiet but pleasant day and an opportunity to relax a little. Tomorrow we headed into the high mountains.

**Day 8** A White's Thrush that flushed up off the road was an unexpected bonus for some as we headed up further into Ile-Alatau NP early next morning, with the first Hume's Warblers, Tree Pipits, Fire-fronted Serins, and Black-throated Accentors following soon after. Soon we were at Big Almaty Lake,



at 2500m (8200ft) and anticipation (mine at least) built considerably. Below the dam we heard a Common Grasshopper-warbler and saw our first stunning male Rufous-backed Redstart, and we had only just started scanning the near shore of the lake when Helmut located our main quarry – Ibisbill! We had expected a long and painstaking search of the delta for this prime target species, but here one was just by the dam and giving very good scope views (left). I was in raptures, and the

wide grins on others' faces told me they were pretty pleased too. Eventually it flew a little further away, then off towards the delta. Wow! The pines and juniper scrub by the shores of the lake also held a number of other highly-desirable species, though, and memorable moment after memorable moment followed – a close male White-tailed Rubythroat spreading his tail as he sang, more Rufous-backed Redstarts and Fire-fronted Serins, White-winged Grosbeaks, Red-mantled Rosefinch, and a singing male Blue-capped Redstart. Even an immature Bearded Vulture got in on the action. Fantastic birding!

Time to head further up though, past the border guard checkpoint, where a minor bureaucratic hold-up was, I suspect, more for show than anything else; I was in any case confident that Sveta, a former border guard herself, would be able to get us through. Above Big Almaty Lake and the Astronomical Observatory (right) the road goes into a succession of hairpin bends which Konstantin negotiated with ease. The views just got better and better, and we spent a while on a bend scoping the mountainsides for Himalayan Snowcock – one was calling distantly, but not showing. On again, and we finally reached the highest point of the road, the old Kosmostation at 3300m (10800 feet) – high enough for us to notice and move around a little more slowly, though no worse than that. We had expected it to be cold, and had dressed accordingly, but the bright, warm sunshine meant that we quickly started shedding layers. The first bird we saw was a female White-winged Redstart (and later a stunning male), a Himalayan Accentor showed briefly for some, and a Brown Accentor posed beautifully singing on a wire. Red-billed Choughs were breeding in one of the old buildings, and several Plain Mountain-finches were seen too. Just as we came away I located another Himalayan Accentor distantly on a rock across the valley, but it too was too brief for some to see it.



We had done well, though, with most target species seen well by all, so we descended back to Big Almaty Lake for another excellent picnic lunch, and good views of another Azure Tit and a pair of the local *rufipectus* race of Coal Tit, plus the inevitable Hume's Warblers. As it was Saturday, and now well into the afternoon, the park was very busy with visitors. We worked a few areas on the way back down looking for various species such as Spotted Nutcracker and Songar Tit (now lumped back as the local race of Willow Tit) without much success, though both Mistle and White's Thrushes were seen (the latter all too briefly). A visit to one of the many streams in the area gave excellent views of Brown Dipper, though we could not find the hoped-for *leucogaster* race of White-throated Dipper. At last we returned to the hotel in the early evening. As darkness fell the local frog chorus was once again joined by the two European Scops-owls.

**Day 9** The day started with a bit of a surprise when I flushed a Blyth's Reed Warbler off the steps of the hotel in the half-dark. We had a small list of remaining targets and knew the park would get busy

later, so headed up the mountain road quickly. No sign of yesterday's White's Thrush on the road, but a Blue Whistling-thrush showed at a river crossing, and a similar selection to yesterday's drive up were seen again. We tried early near Big Almaty Lake for White-browed Tit-warbler, which seems to be on



a bit of a downswing in population in the area at the moment. Sveta and Artyom searched hard for it without success, while we waited for their call. Much botany and photography was going on, but plenty of birds were seen too – White-tailed Rubythroat, Red-mantled and Common Rosefinches, Greenish and Hume's Warblers. We also managed to distantly scope Ibisbill on the lake and three Ibex on the mountain opposite! A huge adult Bearded Vulture (left) appeared close by and almost at eye-level – stunning views.

We tried a slightly higher spot for Himalayan Snowcock today – after much scanning, panic set in when Roger calmly announced 'I've got one'. Happily it made things easier by appearing on the skyline, and then was tracked for the next 10 minutes or so walking across the snowfields and standing on rocks calling. Given the range it was surprisingly easy to pick out the chestnut stripes on the head and neck, though we were once again blessed with bright sunshine, which helped. Helmut also picked out a Northern Raven – the only one of the trip, surprisingly.

A flock of 21 Yellow-billed Choughs and a pair of Northern Wheatears were seen just before the Kosmostation, where two Himalayan Accentors showed, much to the relief of those who had missed out yesterday, though neither would come close. The birds seen were much the same as yesterday, with a pair of White-winged Redstarts, a Brown Accentor, and plenty of Plain Mountain-finches notable, but then an unfamiliar call came from a couple of finches with very pale underparts flying over – Black-faced Mountain-finches! One of the small suite of species that live even higher up the mountains, they only occasionally descend to this altitude, so this was a real bonus for the few of us that saw them. Another one flew over a little later on and landed on a rock just below the road – only a brief silhouette there in my scope, though it was directly below Roger and Jean, who had excellent views.

It was still only 10.00, but we headed back down to the border guard post, as Sveta had a 'cunning plan'. Her best spot for White-browed Tit-warbler, close to the Astronomical Observatory, had been declared off-limits by the border guard, but she managed to wangle our way in. Unfortunately, and again despite her best efforts, we never did locate one of these special birds. Hardly a wasted visit, though, with highlights including more White-winged Grosbeaks, a brief male Red-mantled Rosefinch (which I missed, sadly), the strikingly marked local *karelini* race of Common Buzzard, and another adult Bearded Vulture. After quite a long walk at the altitude (2700m or 8900ft), it was a tired group that returned to the minibus, though we livened up when lunch was suddenly very pleasantly interrupted by two calling Himalayan Snowcocks flying along the mountainside opposite.

The park lower down was heaving with people again, and we knew by now that the chances of seeing our final (and much-wanted) target were increasingly slim, so we reluctantly gave it best and headed back to the hotel, arriving around 15.30 for an afternoon of relaxation, packing, and casual birding. Nick and I paid our respects to the Blue Whistling-thrushes again, and then looked a little further up the stream. I had just said 'It looks good for a dipper' when a sharp 'zik' call heralded a very fast brown-and-white shape whizzing by. I had at last seen a *leucogaster* White-throated Dipper, though it was only a fleeting view and we could not relocate it.

And so the tour came to an end. Lots of thanks to the team, Konstantin, Sveta and Artyom (right) that made it all happen, then our final dinner, complete this time with cake and vodka, and laughter as Tui and I were served cold cucumber soup, again.

**Day 10:** A very early start the next morning (03.30) got us to Almaty airport in plenty of time for our flights back home (or for some, the extension) with lots of excellent memories: fantastic birding, great company, and spectacular scenery.



### **Trip top 10**

This is a personal selection and the order changes every time I think about it, but I think most other participants' selections would include most of the same birds.

1. Ibisbill
2. White-winged Lark (right)
3. Saxaul Sparrow
4. Azure Tit
5. White-winged Redstart
6. White-tailed Rubythroat
7. Rufous-backed Redstart
8. Brown Accentor
9. Himalayan Snowcock
10. Saker

