

Kazakhstan

29 May–14 June 2006

Participants:

Gary and Marlene Babic
Martin and Sandra Coles
Fred and Sylvia Cooke
Jim and Vivienne Harvey
Neil and Diana Money
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Ron Herbert
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Leaders:

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Relict Gull

Day 1: Those of us travelling from London eventually enjoyed (or endured) a short flight over to Amsterdam. Described as 'interesting' by some and 'uncomfortable' by others, perhaps Diana hit the nail on the head when she exclaimed, 'the pilot was crap'. After a transit stop of seven hours in Amsterdam, we were joined by Manfred and boarded our Airbus once more for the 5,300km (6hr, 10 min) flight to Almaty.

Day 2: We arrived in Almaty to glorious sunshine at 5.00am. Any concerns about the bureaucracy of arriving in the former Soviet Union were soon dispelled. The immigration system was straightforward, our bags beat us to the reclaim area and Customs just didn't seem to exist. Our interpreter Dina and ground-agent Yelena were there to meet us, and we finally met up with Gary and Marlene who had flown in from Bangkok, boarded Nikolai's 4-wheel drive bus and were soon on our way towards breakfast in the Ile-Alatau National Park. Common birds along the highway included Common Myna, *bactriana* Eurasian Magpies (longer tailed than European birds) and the *orientalis* race of Carrion Crow (longer billed than European birds). Just as we pulled up inside the park, we briefly saw our first (of many hundred) European Rollers and a Eurasian Hobby glided past. Following very welcome bacon and eggs, pancakes and coffee we were sufficiently refreshed to really appreciate two Azure Tits and the first of many European (Grey-headed) *caniceps* Goldfinches (surely an armchair tick for the future). The sun was shining and despite the ascending altitude it really was 'tee-shirts and shorts' weather. The next hour or so was spent slowly driving up to Great Almaty Lake, making birding stops en route aimed specifically at one or two target species. Brown Dipper, Blue Whistling-thrush, Greenish Warbler and Common Rosefinch were all seen at leisure by everyone, a very bright *melanope* race Grey Wagtail perched singing on overhead wires and the strangest sight of all was a Ruddy Shelduck flying up the mountainous, conifer-forested valley and landing on the road in front of us. There is one prime target species at the lake, and what a merry dance it led us. Two pairs of Ibisbill breed on the boulder-strewn riverbeds behind the lake, but more of that later. No sooner had we left the bus than our first Red-fronted Serins sang from the tops of dwarf Turkestan junipers alongside two Black-throated Accentors. We also found both Mistle Thrush and Tree Pipits (important as they were new species for Gary and Marlene). Making our way slowly up the track bordering the south-eastern edge of the lake was a sharp reminder that we were already at a height of 2500 metres. We flushed two male Blue-capped Redstarts who were in turn vying for the attention of a dowdy female, whilst a rather chubby Coal Tit sat out calling like a Great Tit. Over the course of the next hour, one or two of the group managed extremely distant and all too brief views of two Ibisbills. Field guides will picture these birds as startling and easy to identify. The problem is that they spend much of their time sat amongst boulders, or creeping along where their camouflage plumage renders them nearly invisible. By now the cloud had come over, the wind had picked up, the temperature had dropped dramatically and it began to rain. Nevertheless, we persevered and, in the end, managed to get every member of the party watching at least one bird through a telescope. And then it was time for lunch. For this we drove further up the track to reach the Tien Shan Mountains Observatory, our base for the next two nights. Whilst we were eating, the weather really closed in – outside was cold, wet and very uninviting. Independently, both Ron and I birded the scrubby slopes behind the observatory. We both saw Red-mantled Rosefinch (probably the same individual), but then the weather turned from uncomfortable to unpleasant. However, at 2700 metres the weather changes quickly. Skies cleared, so by 3.30pm we boarded Nikolai's bus once more for the slow and tortuous drive to the rather dilapidated upper observatory, set at 3300metres. The sky remained bright, but the air was significantly colder. Yellow-billed Choughs wheeled around and their Red-billed cousins nested in a broken guttering. Parties of Hodgson's Mountain-finch and pairs of Water

Pipits flitted too and fro. The roofs of the observatory buildings appeared to be the showcase for new birds: a pair of Güldenstädt's Redstarts on one (probably nesting nearby) and a Brown Accentor next door, whilst a Common Cuckoo scrambled and fluttered from rock to rock no doubt suffering from the thin air. Pride of place, and most definitely magic moment of the day goes to the adult Lammergeier swirling around the tops. The following statement can best describe how close it came to us. 'How often can you truthfully say you've seen a Lammergeier's beard?' By late afternoon, we were slowly walking the descent road, attempting to identify every call or song emanating from the scree slopes. Initially we found three more Güldenstädt's, then a fine male Northern Wheatear and then finally a frustrating 30 minutes was spent trying to pin down at least three (Altai) Himalayan Accentors that fed amongst the moss. Some of the group spent the last hour of daylight 'doing their own thing' and their notebooks became filled with names like Sulphur-bellied Warbler and Eversmann's Redstart. For the rest, it was an added incentive to be out in the field early tomorrow. A truly exceptional day. Almost every target species was seen by almost everyone. We had taken advantage of (as we were later to find out) an unusual window in the weather – a magnificent start to the tour.

Day 3: By 5.30am, the day dawned overcast, but dry with no wind. However, within an hour the wind picked up, the rain started and low cloud swirled in. Nevertheless, by that time we had enjoyed protracted views of a male Himalayan (White tailed) Rubythroat singing away atop a conifer, and some of us had briefly seen a pair of White-winged Grosbeaks. A brief window in the weather saw us out again around 7.30am. All that we managed before breakfast were two *meena* Oriental Turtle-doves. The remainder of the morning was spent walking the juniper-clad hillsides behind the observatory. Slowly but surely our target species gave themselves up. We all had absolutely stunning views of a male Eversmann's Redstart, and rather distant but still good looks at Sulphur-bellied and Hume's Warblers. Everyone caught up with Red-mantled Rosefinch and White-winged Grosbeak, enjoyed several repeat showings of Himalayan Rubythroat, Black-throated Accentor and Red-fronted Serins – we even had a pair of Ruddy Shelducks feeding in one of the water meadows. By midday, the heavens opened once more and thunder rolled around the hills. The early afternoon was spent (by most) surveying the insides of their eyelids, whilst the rain fell. Shortly before 4.00pm, the weather cleared and the Himalayan Snowcock quest got underway. With 17 pairs of eyes scanning the scree slopes, crags and grassy banks, House Points, Gold Star and copious amounts of alcohol are due to Nigel for finding a pair feeding high up, maybe 80 metres from the tops. We then spent an uninterrupted 30 minutes watching these magnificent creatures through our telescopes (occasionally knowing exactly where they were, but still unable to pick them out against the rock strewn hillside!). Eventually we slowly made our way back to the juniper slopes surrounding the observatory. A pair of Eversmann's Redstarts came to within 15ft of us before the female scurried into the undergrowth, leaving the male on guard – a nest site no doubt. As dusk gathered, Gary and Marlene took the scenic route back to our lodgings and were rewarded with frustrating views of a large owl flying away from them. By elimination, there is every chance that this was a Northern Hawk-owl. The weather did everything possible to thwart us today, but with one pre-breakfast period left, there remained just one high-altitude Tien Shan speciality to be found.

Day 4: Our efforts this morning were concentrated on trying to get to grips with our last target bird: Severtzov's Tit-warbler. Before breakfast we scoured various juniper slopes, but to no avail. There were still plenty of birds on view: both male and female Himalayan Rubythroat, a number of White-winged Grosbeaks and Black-throated Accentors and the 'resident' pair of Eversmann's Redstarts were all showy. Nigel spent the time solo birding and added to the 'owl frustration' by glimpsing what was obviously the same bird heading away towards the scree slopes. The fact that there was not a single tree in that direction adds to the mystery. The remainder of the morning was spent in and around the Tien Shan Spruce trees close to Great Almaty Lake. We enjoyed excellent views once more of Blue-capped Redstart and Red-fronted Serin but the only new species to the trip list was a female Goldcrest. Immediately after lunch, we bade farewell to the observatory and headed back north down the valley. At one stop, we were able to call in a Spotted Nutcracker, at another a fine male Blue-capped Redstart sat right out in the open. We even heard a Eurasian Pygmy-owl calling. Back at the park entrance we changed vehicles, said goodbye to Alexei and boarded a rather cramped affair driven by Yuri. Rush-hour in Almaty is as tedious as any other large city but we slowly made our way through, eventually heading east along the Silk Road. Once away from suburbia, we quickly added roadside birds to our checklists including Collared and European Turtle-doves, Masked Wagtail, Lesser Grey Shrike and Eurasian Golden Oriole. We planned to take just a brief 'leg stretching' stop beside a roadside bridge to look for Red-rumped Swallow. However the area was alive with birds including a Long-tailed Shrike, European Bee-eater, Eurasian Hoopoe and Eurasian Hobby. Sparrows were everywhere, not just Tree Sparrows but the rather bright and migratory *bactriana* House Sparrow. As the light started to fade, we continued driving passing large roosting flocks of Rose-colored Starlings along the way.

Day 5: An early start saw us driving south with Lesser Grey Shrike becoming a familiar roadside bird. Having left habited areas, we crossed open plains before heading up a winding road through a steep sided gorge. The local *soemmerringii* race Eurasian Jackdaws showed distinctive whitish patches on the sides of the neck, our first Pied Wheatears sang from exposed crags and our first Red-headed Buntings from roadside scrub. Our first stop was high up in the Kokpek Pass investigating a sparsely shrubbed canyon. First to show were both Rock and White-capped Buntings. Two pairs of Hume's Lesser Whitethroats (larger, darker, longer tailed with much more white in the tail than European birds) chased each other around the gorge, as did both male Blue and Rufous-tailed Rock Thrushes. We then gradually descended into the vast Sugaty Plain where numerous Isabelline Wheatears fed close to the road. Here we found two 'Black-eared' Black Kites, so called because of their darker ear coverts, an adult Steppe Eagle and our first Long-legged Buzzards. A couple of Tawny Pipits performed their parachute song display flights and, set back some way from the road, a party of at least 75 Lesser Kestrels fed on an abundance of grasshoppers. At the southern edge of the plains, we climbed to a vantage point overlooking the Charyn Gorge. Here our target species was Grey-necked Bunting, which were calling incessantly, and seen within five minutes. We had

watched rain squall showers all around us for most of the morning, and finally the weather caught up with us. After no more than 30 minutes, the rains passed and we moved on to a vast area of upland semi-desert. The sun broke through, the temperature immediately warmed up, thermals were created and over a spell of an hour or so, whilst we had lunch, no less than three Monk Vultures, five Himalayan Griffon Vultures, two Egyptian Vultures and single Long-legged Buzzard and Eurasian Hobby soared overhead. Walking away from the road produced a *phoenicuroides* race Isabelline Shrike and more Grey-necked Buntings and Pied Wheatears, whilst two Black-bellied Sandgrouse flew over calling. We then retraced our steps northward. At the lookout we found an *albigula* race Shore Lark and from the main road across the Sugaty Plain, we added Common Raven plus close views of perched Eurasian Hobby and Long-legged Buzzard. Needing to 'work off' our picnic lunch, we walked 15 abreast in a large arc east of the road. Sadly this did not produce the hoped for Pallas' Sandgrouse (two had been found in the general area a few days previously) but we did find a Southern (Steppe) Grey Shrike, several Short-toed Larks and another Shore Lark. 'Tea time' was spent overlooking a water hole set several kilometres back from the road. Over the course of 90 minutes, visitors coming into drink included 55 Mongolian Finches, 10 Grey-necked Buntings, a Rock Sparrow and an adult male Black-bellied Sandgrouse. There followed what could best be described as a traumatic return journey to Almaty with not one, but two flat tires. Our eternal thanks are due to Yuri whose innovation and improvisation enabled us to get through. The appearance of a European Nightjar flying alongside the bus softened the blow somewhat, but after arriving at our hotel shortly before midnight, all we wanted was a drink, shower and bed – not even the Eurasian Scops Owl calling from the hotel grounds could entice us out.

Day 6: A new day, a new bus and the owner of the transport company as our driver. After breakfast at the civilised hour of 7.30am we set off for Sorbulak, some way north west of Almaty our main birding site for the morning. Roadside birds included numerous European Rollers, European Bee-eaters, Eurasian Hoopoes and Red-headed Buntings whilst large flocks of Rose-colored Starlings were almost continuously on view. As we approached Sorbulak Lake, Calandra Larks were much in evidence and the fields became a sea of red poppies, interspersed with more than the occasional cannabis plant. Pelicans had obviously enjoyed a successful breeding season. We saw at least 150 Dalmatian including many juveniles, and perhaps as many as 75 Eurasian White. Far rarer at this site were four adult breeding-plumaged Whiskered Terns (it's quite possible that this is the first record of this species at this site). Also of note were over 70 Ruddy Shelducks, drake Garganey and Northern Pintail whilst an extremely tatty juvenile Booted Eagle flew over. We made our way around the lake to the dam and spent a few minutes marvelling at the huge colony of Rose-colored Starlings – there may be as many as 10,000 pairs in this area alone. From Sorbulak, it was one straight road (leading eventually north beyond Astana and into Russia). We took lunch by an isolated roadside tree, affectionately known as 'the magic tree', which held several Blyth's Reed Warblers and single Hume's Warbler, Eurasian Hoopoe and Eurasian Golden Oriole. Nearby bushes sheltered a *meena* Oriental Turtle-Dove and the stream held a pair of Little Ringed Plovers. Nigel had briefly seen a couple of Demoiselle Cranes in the adjacent semi-desert. Having driven up to a vantage spot, we quickly located his two, and were more than a little surprised to flush another nine! The afternoon was spent driving further north to the village of Konchengil and then out into the Taukum desert. Everywhere we looked there were Isabelline Wheatears. Close to our tented camp, a water hole held an extremely-late Collared Pratincole and several Desert Finches came into drink, whilst the adjacent semi-desert produced two exquisite Bimaculated Larks. A pair of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse flew over our heads as did three Black bellieds and a distant circling raptor was almost certainly a Short-toed Snake-eagle. It was then back to camp, sorting out the tent allocation and enjoying an excellent meal washed down with several beers – a fitting end to an excellent day, the trials and tribulations of yesterday evening well forgotten.

Day 7: A personal view for a moment. I have always hated everything to do with camping with a passion; a degree of comfort is my thing. Nevertheless the tented camp at Konchengil is fabulous and I loved it. By 4.00am larks were singing all around us; by 5.00am it was birding light, and absolutely freezing! The nearby water hole is obviously not an early-morning experience as virtually nothing came into drink, so it was back to camp for breakfast. At 6.30am we departed 'off road' across the Taukum desert looking for Macqueen's Bustard. It took less than 30 minutes to obtain excellent views of a male strutting along a ridge at the edge of the Barkhans. There followed a truly magical hour. Standing a safe distance from the camp waterhole, the first of many parties of Black-bellied Sandgrouse flew over; a male black-backed *calcarata* Citrine Wagtail fed amidst the grassy fringes and then Jim spotted a single sandgrouse just before it landed some 100 metres distant. Despite being half hidden behind a tussock, it appeared small, with an unfamiliar orange facial pattern. A number of Black-bellieds flew over calling and it blatantly ignored them. Then it moved out. It had a long thin tail. It took flight showing an oval shaped black belly patch – Pallas's Sandgrouse! It flew just a short distance before landing in profile on a mud mound, where it stayed for some time, close enough even to see the feathered tarsi. Over the course of the next 30 minutes, several Pin-tailed Sandgrouse flew over calling together with perhaps as many as 100 Black bellieds. The remainder of the morning was spent driving dirt tracks way out into the desert, continually flushing Isabelline Wheatears, Short-toed, Crested and Calandra Larks. We specifically stopped to identify our first Lesser Short-toed Lark (having seen literally hundreds of lightly-streaked immature Short-toeds) and enjoyed a Bimaculated Lark, which sat in the middle of the track. Dina then urgently pointed to the right – a female Macqueen's Bustard no more than 30 metres away walking down into a gully. Within a couple of minutes, she lazily flew off to be followed by her mate (which we hadn't seen on the ground at all!). Some 10km further on, an area of shorter grass held at least 14 Greater Sand-plovers including several fine adult males. Shortly after, a small rather non-descript passerine with white outer tail feathers shot across in front of the bus – Asian Desert Warbler, which after some searching and much patience showed itself well to everyone. The remainder of the morning became a single-minded quest for one speciality bird – Caspian Plover. Having scoured several suitable areas, we finally found a pair that initially scuttled off into the heat haze. However, having assessed that we presented no threat, the male (in absolute stunning plumage) headed straight back towards us, before settling down in the sand, presumably on a nest. A morning of outstanding success, and we returned to camp for a leisurely lunch not setting out again into the desert until mid afternoon. A grove of trees at the edge of the Barkhans

held a mixed House and Spanish Sparrow colony and also provided shade for several Eurasian Golden Orioles and a couple of *meena* Oriental Turtle Doves. Our last two stops were to check the drinking pools near to the village, which added little to the day's proceedings.

Day 8: Following a 6.00am breakfast, we said our goodbyes to the camp staff who had looked after us so well, and set off in a wide northern loop, before the long drive back to Almaty. Less than a mile from camp, two beautiful Demoiselle Cranes fed gracefully no more than 100 metres from the road. Having reached Konchengil village, we turned north onto a narrow road running through the Barkhans. A number of Isabelline Shrikes sat atop roadside scrub, some of them the much greyer race *karelini* and Short-toed Larks continuously flew up from the track as we passed. A speculative roadside stop to view slightly taller scrub in hope of Sykes's Warbler took an unexpected twist. No Sykes's were calling, but we all had superb views of a displaying *familiaris* Rufous-tailed Scrub-robin, greyer in body plumage than I recall Western European birds. A little further on, our first Brown-necked Ravens (looking confusingly like Carrion Crows until you got your eye in) began to appear, and atop 'Manfred's Eagle' sat a pale sandy-coloured *bactriana* Little Owl. After driving for about an hour, we came upon a series of shallow roadside lakes fringed with rich riparian vegetation. These are basically seepage pools from Lake Balkhash, many kilometres to the north, and made for a wonderful two hours birding. By walking the road, we found a number of both Sykes's and Paddyfield Warblers perched right out in the open. A male Shikra was seen at such close range its red iris could clearly be seen through binoculars as it glided past, and rather obscure races of common birds caused a bit of a stir. Firstly *pyrrhuloides* Reed Buntings appeared much paler than nominate birds and secondly *halimodendri* Lesser Whitethroats that sounded like a Common Whitethroat. Black-headed Wagtails were ever present, as were up to a dozen Common Terns. Try as we might to find White-crowned Penduline Tit, the strong breeze thwarted our efforts. We did however find our first Turkestan Tit and had close views of rather duller grey-brown *hafizi* 'Eastern' Nightingales, which certainly have less rufous in the tail than European birds. A flock of Red-crested Pochard flew over and up to 20 Black Terns quartered too and fro. A big surprise, in every sense of the word, came in the form of a 3rd-year White-tailed Eagle flapping along; then a second bird and immediately thereafter amazingly a third soared over, much to the annoyance of the breeding Common Terns. Yet another individual, this one a 1st-year bird, was found about 10km further east. Lunch was taken in the shade of a Turanga grove – a specialised and severely threatened habitat, home to at least six White-winged Woodpeckers and perhaps as many as 15 Turkestan Tits. The real rarity sought after here is Eversmann's Dove. Despite a concerted effort, the best we could manage was brief flight views of several birds. Also seen in the wood were a sub-adult and a first year pale-phase Booted Eagle, and in the trees, a couple of Eurasian Golden Orioles kept themselves partially hidden in the canopy. Our final scheduled birding stop was a further hours drive to the east. En route we finally managed to 'nail' Eversmann's Doves with two birds perched on utility wires (indeed a number of birds further on, again on wires, could well have been this species). The small Muslim cemetery is home to perhaps the most beautiful of all sparrows, Saxaul Sparrow and after a frantic 30 minutes, we managed to locate five pairs of this enigmatic species together with a few Pied Wheatears and Eurasian Hoopoes. The long drive south to Almaty took up the remainder of daylight hours. Calandra Larks frequently appeared beside the road; the wires held (probably) over a hundred European Rollers; a genuine wild *mongolicus* Common Pheasant flew across our path and a fine male Montagu's Harrier harrying a Rose-colored Starling flock brought to a close a long but extremely successful day.

Day 9: The entire focus of today was long drive from Almaty to the shores of Lake Alakol, which included brief birding and lunch stops, a journey of 12.5 hours. We were now split into two minibuses driven enthusiastically by Alexei and Ruslan, two young guys who were to become firm friends. Fortunately the weather was conducive to a long drive, predominantly overcast skies and warm, rather than hot. Once we had cleared the dam at Kapshagai, European Rollers and Lesser Grey Shrikes began to appear on roadside wires (we were to see at least 130 and 50 respectively throughout the day). The only scheduled birding stop was at mountain pass. Here we scanned the rocky cliffs finding a pair of Eastern Rock Nuthatches at their nest hole, up to four Chukars calling from exposed crags, a couple of pairs of Pied Wheatears and single Tawny Pipit, Rock Sparrow and Grey-necked Bunting. Highlights for the remainder of the drive included a 1st-summer Black Stork, three Montagu's Harriers, four Eurasian Hobbys, family parties totalling at least 50 Lesser Kestrels, at least 50 (and probably double that) European Bee-eaters and a new bird for all of us, Pale Martin; a dusky hirundine recalling a Sand Martin but with side neck blotches rather than a complete breast band. Much of the drive was along the plains running west of the snow capped Zhongar Alatau mountain range – on the other side is China. Finally we arrived on the south-western shore of Lake Alakol. Our dusk arrival at our accommodation saw several adult Great Black-headed Gulls drifting over the water's edge, a taster for what lay ahead tomorrow.

Day 10: The main components of the dawn chorus this morning were Eurasian Golden Oriole, Common Nightingales (which had actually sang all night long) Eurasian Hoopoe and Eurasian Tree Sparrow. Rather oily looking *porphyronotus* Common Starlings (actually looking more like Spotless Starling) were everywhere and we even managed to add European Greenfinch of *turkestanicus* race and Common Chaffinch to our trip list. The day broke with clear skies; cool but certainly not cold. Pre-breakfast birding was very much an individual thing. In the grim light of pre-dawn, I looked out to see Neil striding along the shingle bar – he was on a one-bird quest, but more of that later. Most of us went out vaguely in that direction in dribs and drabs finding a number of adult Great Black-headed Gulls, up to six Black-necked Grebes in summer plumage and parties of Eurasian Oystercatchers (surely this site must hold the title of the most inland breeding place for this species – the nearest coastline is many thousand of kilometres away). After breakfast, we drove a few kilometres along the shore, left the buses and stomped across the fields seeking out roosting small-gull flocks. The target species at Alakol is Relict Gull – one of the rarest gulls in the world. Our problem was basically twofold: heat haze and the lack of reference material describing non-adult plumages. For sure, there were no adults in the flocks of Common Black-headed and Caspian Gulls. There were several 'contenders' amongst 1st-summer birds, especially if you ignored the fact that dark primaries could be due to normal wear and

tear. So great was our concentration that we all but ignored the 14 Demoiselle Cranes and two Black-bellied Sandgrouse close by. And the less said about the possible Stone Curlew in my telescope, the better! Beyond the fields lay several reed beds and adjacent freshwater pools. On the fringes we found up to six each of Red-spotted Bluethroats and male *maura* Siberian Stonechats. Over the reeds, several exquisite summer-plumaged White-winged Black Terns sallied too and fro and on the water were over 100 Red-crested Pochard together with perhaps 30 Northern Pintail, 15 Gadwall and a drake Garganey. Fred found a party of Black-tailed Godwits flying over and a juvenile Dalmatian Pelican slowly glided along the shoreline. Along the shingle spit, several pairs of Little Ringed Plovers were obviously nesting. More surprisingly, six Collared Pratincoles expressed similar behaviour. By late morning, it really was getting pretty warm and we decided to walk back along the shoreline. Nigel had maintained a rearguard vigil and was rewarded not only with a full-adult Relict Gull that (embarrassingly) had flown right over our heads but also had found a pair of Kentish Plovers. After lunch, we boarded the buses for a change of scenery and drove further south, before heading west up into the hills. Beside the road, we found a couple of immature Booted Eagles and an adult Short-toed Snake-eagle. We finally stopped just beyond a fast-flowing river and scoured the scrub-covered hillside for Meadow Bunting. Finally an adult male took flight across the valley and perched up, in full view, atop a thin stem for about 15 minutes. These hills have an excellent reputation for raptors and today was no exception. Highlights included both adult and 3rd-year Eastern Imperial Eagles, two Monk Vultures and a sub-adult Himalayan Griffon-vulture. More raptors were found on the drive back. Perhaps the most enjoyable was an adult Steppe Eagle sat on the ground no more than 30 metres away from us. Slightly further on we came across yet another young Booted Eagle and a couple of Eurasian Hobbies. By the time we reached our chalets, there was just enough time for a casual watch over the marsh and to enjoy yet again 'White-winged Blacks' in all their finery before a shower and dinner.

Day 11: An early start this morning to beat the worst of the heat. We boarded our buses and headed north-west. The road varied from bumpy to down right uncomfortable but continuous sightings of our now regular roadside friends (Hoopoes, European Rollers and European Bee-eaters) made the hour-long journey bearable. In fairness, the heat of the sun had baked the tracks pretty hard, and we were able to drive perhaps 8 km in. We then turned off-road and having parked up, we walked a wide track overlooking grassy fields, stands of reeds and bushes bordering wide ditches. First to show were Richard's Pipit and Oriental Skylark. Black-headed Wagtails flew across our path and we began to hear both Cetti's and Barred Warblers. Both species are notorious skulkers, but eventually individuals of both sat up atop bushes long enough for all to enjoy. Up to eight Montagu's Harriers were circling over the fields. These included at least two pairs and we watched several 'food passes' of what looked like mice. Having heard a number of distant Common Quail calling one was eventually considered near enough to 'explore' in a wet grassy field. Vaughan, Gary and I were the appointed 'flushers' and, after a few false starts, a bird flew up from virtually underneath my boot, flew about 50 metres before landing out of sight, but allowing the remainder of the party on the raised bank to get a good view. But the best was yet to come. A distant Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler was heard (and very briefly seen by Manfred) in a patch of burnt reeds. After a patient 10 minutes or so, another bird appeared, in full view, no more than 50 metres away and remained atop a stem sunning itself for about five minutes. To our amazement yet another was found, similarly confiding on the other side of the track. Views of three different Pallas's Grasshopper Warblers on one day are almost unprecedented here. What a success – all of our target species seen well, and a pleasant walk in warm sunshine. How were we to know that our success would run right through the day? Following a leisurely lunch, we boarded a motor cruiser mid afternoon to spend an hour or so following the shoreline to view the wildfowl and seabird colonies. At first there were few surprises: a summer-plumaged Black-necked Grebe; a party of seven Dalmatian Pelicans, Mute Swan being added to the trip list and huge rafts of Red-crested Pochards taking to the skies. Eventually we reached the gull colony. It is extremely difficult to estimate the number of adult Great Black-headed Gulls – perhaps 200 together with raft after raft of fluffy young in crèches. Certainly one of the highlights of the tour so far. The next 20 minutes became yet another of those magic moments. We had slowly retraced our steps when Vaughan asked that the boat turn around once more so we could look again at the line of Common Black-headed Gulls along the shore. Just as every gull took to the air, the cry went out 'adult Relict Gull!' We all followed the flock in the air, but several of the party never got onto the right bird. All the gulls landed again, not far off but quite spread out, and we slowly motored closer and closer, easily picked out 'our bird' and enabled all aboard to watch this exceptionally rare gull at leisure. The afternoon was ending on a high. Looking up at the hills a rain squall was heading our way. Already the swell on the lake was making a less than smooth passage for the boat as we headed back to our moorings. Once ashore, time for a celebratory ice cream and a wind down before dinner.

Day 12: Today was all about the return drive to Almaty. So it was, just before 7.00am, that we left Lake Alakol. A few of the group had expressed concern, even dismay upon arrival, looking at our rather primitive living conditions. Today, no one wanted to leave! On the stretch before Usharal, we found a total of 17 Black-bellied Sandgrouse and four Demoiselle Cranes sat in roadside fields and the usual small group of Lesser Kestrels were hunting from the utility wires. The first 300km stretch of the A3 was relatively uneventful. There were plenty of European Rollers etc., on the wires and Alexei, the driver of Bus No2, was hard at work trying to find us birds of prey. By the end of the journey, without binoculars, he could identify and pronounce in English both Kestrel and Black Kite. We also found an adult Eastern Imperial Eagle and a male Montagu's Harrier. Lunch was taken beside a lake close to the highway. Here, amongst the Black-necked Grebes and Red-crested Pochards were two new duck species for the tour – Eurasian Wigeon and Common Pochard. In the damp woods on the eastern shore Nigel found a White-crowned Penduline Tit's nest, and we all enjoyed prolonged views of a pair putting the finishing touches to the structure. The excitement of the remainder of the drive had nothing to do with birds. We encountered a torrential rain and sleet storm and one of the windscreen wipers flew off Bus No2. Despite our pleas to await a break in the weather, Alexei insisted on transferring the remaining wiper across to the driver's side, completely ignoring each passing car that literally drenched him with spray. His valiant efforts enabled us to get into Almaty shortly before 7.00pm. Early-evening

Friday traffic has to be seen to be believed. Having arrived safely at our hotel once more, we said goodbye to Alexei and Ruslan and settled down to a beer or two, watching the opening ceremony of the 2006 Football World Cup.

Day 13: Today was our major transit day, transferring to Astana the capital of Kazakhstan, some 1200 km to the north. Our lunchtime flight meant a lie in for the first time on the tour. Check-in procedures at the airport were perfectly straightforward. However the security scanners were particularly sensitive (Manfred even had to remove his braces). Having said our goodbyes to Dina, we boarded our Air Astana airbus and two hours later were met by Sveta for the four-hour drive to Korgalgin Nature Reserve on the shores of Lake Tengiz, our base for the next three nights. Having by-passed the city of Astana, we entered the steppe proper. Within minutes our first male Pallid Harrier glided past (we were to see at least 10 during the drive). After crossing featureless steppe for about an hour, thanks to Sveta's local knowledge, we pulled off of the road and almost immediately found Sociable Lapwings on breeding territory. After another few kilometres the first of perhaps 10 Red-footed Falcons appeared hunting from roadside wires. The further west we drove, the more common Black Larks became. Most were feeding beside the roadside, others display flying. Perched atop pylons were Steppe Gulls with more rounded crowns and darker mantles than their Caspian cousins further south. As we entered our village, a Short-eared Owl flew across our path and Bearded Tits were ping-pong from the reedbeds. Coffee was taken 'al fresco' watching the sun setting across the lake.

Day 14: Dawn broke around 5.00am on what was to become the hottest day of the tour so far with Vaughan's thermometer registering 37°C. Dawn itself was best described as comfortably warm. From the boardwalk in the reeds, parties of predominantly juvenile and extremely-pallid-looking Bearded Tits flicked across the path, some of them even resting on the handrail. Bluethroats sang atop bushes, a party of Garganey flew over, Sykes's Wagtails were everywhere and the occasional Caspian Tern drifted past. Following an early breakfast, we set off across the steppe. Right beside the road an adult Short-eared Owl sat staring at us with piercing lemon-yellow eyes. Across the road, its fluffy toddler sat motionless waiting for mum to return. Turning off road, we came to a series of reed-fringed lagoons, alive with wildfowl. Most were Garganey, Common Pochard and Mallard but with good numbers of Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveler, Red-crested Pochard, Red-necked and Great Crested Grebes alongside. Much scarcer were three adult male White-headed Ducks and two Slavonian Grebes. Slightly further on, three Common Cranes lazily flapped along the water's edge, a male Pallid Harrier gave serious chase to a female Western Marsh Harrier and a few adult Slender-billed Gulls waded gracefully in the shallows. Both Mute and Whooper Swans looked slightly out of place in the heat shimmer, but four Ferruginous Ducks, a small flock of Marsh Sandpipers, 16 Pied Avocets and a party of Gull-billed Terns maintained the southern flavour. The extensive reedbeds provided a tantalising brief view of a Common Bittern, a couple of Paddyfield Warblers and a Great Reed Warbler but the reeling Savi's Warbler failed to come into view. Our final scheduled stop was to visit a Black-winged Pratincole colony. Parking several hundred metres away from the nesting grounds, inquisitive adults continually hawked over the buses, some landing no more than 30 metres away. Often there were as many as 15 in the air over us at any one time. The return drive came to a sudden stop well short of the road, where a party of 41 male Sociable Lapwings fed beside a shallow pool. It is a sobering thought that this party could well represent 4% of the entire world population. Just before reaching the main road a White-winged Lark appeared no more than 10 metres from the vehicles. We had already seen a number flying off into the heat haze, but were glad to spend at least five minutes in close proximity to this, in my opinion, the most beautiful of all the larks. By now the sun was really baking hot and the next and most important items on the agenda were lunch and siesta! By 4.00pm, it was still incredibly hot, made worse by a complete drop in wind. There were fewer takers for a late-afternoon excursion but nevertheless we set off towards some salt ponds, hoping to find some lingering waders. En route, we encountered more Short-eared Owls, Pallid and Western Marsh Harriers, Black and White-winged Larks and finally had rather distant views of *kirghizorum* (Steppe) Twite. On reaching the lakes, three adult Greater Flamingos were present together with a group of Slender-billed Gulls, but not a wader to be seen anywhere. A further drive to another salt lake (where there had been both Terek Sandpiper and Red-necked Phalarope earlier in the week) drew a similar blank. However all was not lost. In amongst the flowering shrubs on the banks, two pairs of Booted Warblers were aggressively defending their territory from a marauding female Red-backed Shrike. It is strange to think that in Kazakhstan in June, Red-backed is the rarest of the shrikes. Whilst we were away, Diana and Sylvia had performed sterling duties facilitating the preparation of an al fresco dinner, which we finished before the night-time onset of mosquitoes and horse-flies.

Day 15: The weather was to turn through 180 degrees today. Dawn broke clear and a little chilly. The reedbed was full of Bearded Tits and Paddyfield Warblers, a Caspian Tern and three Great Black-headed Gulls flew past, and Bert found the bird of the morning – two Desert Finches, only the second record at this site for many years. After breakfast, and a futile effort to see a couple of reeling Savi's Warblers, we drove off in a big loop round the reserve, looking at a series of freshwater and salt lakes, trying yet again to find over-summering waders. Before seeing any birds however, we had to negotiate our vehicles around a marmot who had decided to excavate its nesting burrow right in the middle of the track. It must have been pretty disconcerting to our driver, all of a sudden, to have an animal's head peer right out in front of you. Slightly further along the track we found five 'Steppe' Foxes, so much redder than the grey individual seen a few days earlier, and two pairs of 'Steppe' Twite showed far better feeding amongst the weeds in the track. This race is considered by some to be a potential species in its own right, but they do sound just like European Twite. The first two salt lakes were rather disappointing. On the first we found a couple of Greater Flamingos and a party of Slender-billed Gulls, on the second, a Little Ringed Plover. After a further 30-minute drive, we came to a series of freshwater lakes with stands of reeds in the middle. A pair of Whooper Swans looked totally out of place surrounded by 24 White-headed Ducks. Also present were two Black-necked Grebes, three pairs of Demoiselle Cranes, three Sociable Lapwings, four magnificent breeding-plumaged male Ruffs (three red heads and a brunette), three adult female Red-necked Phalaropes, 25 Marsh Sandpipers and 20 Black-winged Pratincoles. In the reeds, a pair of Citrine Wagtails were chasing each other around: the yellow on the forehead was a little washed out, the extent of

black in the collar combined with a grey mantle suggested *citreola* rather than the *werae* birds seen close to the village. In the light scrub on the opposite side of the track, two Booted Warblers showed well. The plan was for lunch followed by a siesta as the temperature was close to yesterdays (and birds were getting increasingly hard to find in the heat). However, by 5.00pm the cloud had turned dark, the wind gusted to almost gale strength and it proverbially pee'd down. By 6.30pm, the heavens had calmed down, so we walked south along the shore to look at a pair of *pallidus* 'Steppe' Merlins. The male has almost a white face and under-parts, the female being pale tawny on the mantle – a putative separate species, but again they call just like Merlins should! A little further on we came to a large lake with a number of reedy islands. Here we found eight full summer-plumaged Black-throated Divers together with both Slavonian and Red-necked Grebes. On the way back, some of the group diverted to the lakeshore and their efforts were rewarded with brief but welcomed perched views of a Savi's Warbler reeling away. Sveta heard what was undoubtedly a Moustached Warbler singing – a target for one last look in the morning.

Day 16: Our last morning at Korgalgin. Despite being bright and still, few warblers were calling from the reeds, and even fewer seen. One however was an identification nightmare, being partially leucistic with a completely white head. By a process of elimination (it was *acrocephalus* on shape, the right size and had a reasonable primary projection) it would appear to be a 'Caspian' Reed Warbler. At 9.00am, we departed for Astana, with dark clouds looming behind us. From the dirt road, we saw five Long-legged Buzzards, a Steppe Eagle and a rufous-phase female Common Cuckoo. A greater variety of birds was seen from the tarmac stretch. At least eight Red-footed Falcons hunted from roadside bushes including two full-adult males. Our first and only Ortolan Bunting sat in a dry twiggy bush; a 'red' Common Rosefinch sat singing atop a pylon and some of us saw a heavily-barred Barred Warbler. Having lunched in a town park restaurant, (the luxury of seated toilets at last!) we spent the afternoon south east of the city. Our target was Pine Bunting, here at the south-western edge of its breeding range. The first male was a surprise; it had virtually no chestnut on the throat or ear coverts; the other three birds were superb standard adult specimens. Not content with just one new bird for the tour, a *tristis* Common Chiffchaff perched out in the open bringing to a close an excellent birding tour. The first leg of our return journey to the UK went like clockwork. Our internal flight was as smooth and straightforward as before and our friend Yuri was there to meet us and return us for a final 'night' (well four hours actually) at hotel.

Day 17: A flight departure at 7.30am by necessity means an early arrival at the airport where we bade our final farewells to Yelena and Sacha. Our misfortune was to be clearing customs/immigration at the same time as two other international flights. The queue appeared to take forever – in fact the problem was nothing more than the security computer system being slow (a feature of technology we all live with, almost daily). Nevertheless, our flight left on time; the journey was smooth; our transfer in Amsterdam was straightforward and we arrived back at a cold, grey Heathrow mid-morning UK time. A huge amount of logistical administration goes behind making a tour like this run smoothly. For this, we sincerely thank Yelena and Sacha, our ground agents; our various drivers, some of whom became honorary birders for a while, the ladies at our various camps and villages who produced the best possible meals from the resources available – and always with a smile, and finally Dina our delightful interpreter who became so much more to us. And a final thought - 'Manfred stops - 'oh dear!'

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