

Kazakhstan

28 May–13 June 2007

Participants:

Tony Baker
Myles and Kathy Conway
John Dyer
Peter Hodgson
Kevin White

Leaders:

Vaughan Ashby and Martyn Kenefick



Severtsov's Tit-warbler

Day 1 Cold, wet, grey and downright miserable – but that was London Heathrow. Despite the persistent gloom, our Boeing 737 short hop across the North Sea to Amsterdam arrived on schedule; our transfer was smooth and we were soon all aboard our Airbus for the near 7-hour overnight flight to Almaty.

Day 2 The day dawned around 04.30 clear and bright with the snow-capped peaks of the Tien Shan guiding us into Almaty. Immigration and Baggage reclaim were straightforward, if a little tedious and Customs simply did not exist. Both Sveta and Dina were there to meet us and we were introduced to Alexei who was to become our main driver and firm friend, and we were soon tucking into sausage, fried eggs and coffee at a roadside restaurant, courtesy of Elena, our charming ground agent.

The birding focus for the morning was to be the huge wetlands of Sorbulak. Common Mynas were a plenty from the word go, as were long-tailed *bactriana* Eurasian Magpies, long-billed *orientalis* Carrion Crows and bright-cheeked *bactriana* House Sparrows. However we quickly enjoying an introduction to the “bright and colourful” with European Bee-eater, European Roller, Lesser Grey Shrike, Eurasian Hoopoe and Red-headed Bunting all present at an unscheduled roadside stop just north of the city. Indeed all were to be regularly seen throughout the day. Much scarcer, and much appreciated was a Red-rumped Swallow that flew directly over our heads. As we neared Sorbulak, Yellow Sulks dodged and weaved their way through the roadside scrub; a Horsfield's Tortoise was however much more stately in its demeanour. Calandra Larks appeared on all sides, but as always, never sat still long enough for the cameras; the odd *lineatus* Black-eared Kite drifted over and several Eurasian Hobbies hunted the treetops. We decided to prioritise our time at a host of smaller lakes and freshwater marshy areas in the northeastern quadrant. Over the first, an adult White-tailed Eagle flapped along; on several others, parties of Black Terns were on nest and we enjoyed our first party of Black-bellied Sandgrouse (this species was to be particularly widespread this year). Up to five different Little Bitterns flew across various reed beds whilst full breeding plumaged Black-necked Grebes, Red-crested Pochard, Garganey and Ferruginous Ducks were present in splendid numbers and numerous Great Reed-warblers sang from the reed tops. Perhaps as many as 15 late migrant Terek Sandpipers were feeding the muddy shoreline and Pied Avocets were seriously into harassing Ruddy Shelducks. We learned how to separate Dalmatian from White Pelicans and enjoyed, as always, the spectacle of summer plumaged White-winged Black Terns. Whilst we saw many flocks of Rose-coloured Starlings during the morning, it was disappointing to find that a traditional huge colony at the dam end of the main lake had apparently been abandoned.

Having lunched beside the water, we made the 100km drive north towards Konchegil. En route, a traditional roadside stop produced two Blyth's Reed-warblers, two Greenish Warblers and two Hume's Warblers in one tree, accompanied by two Lesser Grey Shrikes, two Pied Wheatears and a Spanish Sparrow. Perched Long-legged Buzzards also became a regular feature of the drive. At last we reached our tented camp – and it was even more luxurious than last year. Sacha and Elena had purchased a set of individual and very roomy yurts, inside which were carpeted with proper beds, electric lights and even a power socket! The separate shower tent provided beautifully hot water and the catering ladies once more did us proud. Having settled in our yurts, we set off to explore the local area. It is unusual for one of the tour highlights to be found on the first day. Nevertheless, an adult Asian Desert Warbler, perched atop low foliage no more than 30 metres away, on view for at least 15 minutes was amazing. The more so when we were to realise that in and around that small stunted bush there was a second adult and two fully-fledged young. A waterhole, some 10km into the semi desert, attracted a party of Rose-coloured Starlings, several Red-headed Buntings and a scattering of Short-toed Larks but little else of note. There ended the first days proceedings; we had found a satisfying total of 76 species on our first day. Evenings in the desert become quite chilly and the lure of a warm yurt and a comfortable bed beckoned

Day 3 The Taukum Desert is a huge expanse of protected semi-desert reserve bordered to the north by a line of Barkhans, vegetated sand dunes. To truly understand the variation in temperature, you have to experience it. At 15.00 it is stifling hot, by 03.00 absolutely freezing. Nevertheless our beds were equipped with heavy duvets. Shortly after dawn, we walked north to the run of Barkhans on a quest for Macqueen's Bustard, with Short-toed and Calandra Larks singing all around us. Over the course of about an hour we managed to find two acceptable if distant bustards, a male Montagu's Harrier and a female Red-backed Shrike. By the time we returned to camp for breakfast, the sun was up and fleeces were at least unzipped if not discarded altogether. At 07.30, we boarded Yuri's 4-wheel drive bus for an "off road morning" which surpassed all expectations. At the camp waterhole, the Rose-coloured Starlings were back, accompanied by a flighty pair of Desert Finches, several Red-headed Buntings and Eurasian Hoopoes, whilst small parties of Common Swifts glided over including a number of the whiter throated and mottled plumaged race *pekinensis*. Groups of Black-bellied Sandgrouse continually flew over en route to an artisan well further east, but several pairs landed close to us, away from the waters edge, before warily creeping forward. Most of the larks were Short-toed, but we did find one Bimaculated which, sadly, took flight all too quickly. It was time to drive further into the desert. Of the specialities of the area first to show were Greater Sandplovers – indeed we were to find over 50 during the morning, including several pairs with young. Around 10.00, we came across one of the highlights of the Kazakhstan birding year – a sub-adult Pallas Fish-Eagle soaring well to the south. Suddenly it plunged down to the ground and out of sight, about 1km away. Not a problem for Yuri's bus – we relocated the bird and were able to watch it slowly gain height and drift slowly westward towards Balkhash. There have been only three records of this eagle in recent years, and Sveta has seen all of them! This detour also produced a fine male Red-backed Shrike and our first Steppe Grey Shrike – but hardly anyone noticed! A little further on, a party of Greater Sandplovers contained a fine adult male Caspian Plover. Sadly this group was very skittish and the noise of everyone getting off of the bus made them take flight before all of the members of our party had set their telescopes up. They all came back, unfortunately except one! There then followed a frustrating couple of hours driving and continually stopping to scan various suitable areas before, at long last, a pair of Caspian Plovers with two young were found, and watched from a safe distance. The drive also produced several extremely close "fly by's" of Macqueen's Bustard and a Short-toed Eagle.

It's fair to say that the drive back was far quicker than the journey out. We stopped only once, to watch a Persian Gazelle run through the scrub before crossing the bank in front of us. Following a late lunch we set off once more driving south towards Tamgaly. The road was alive with larks; most were Short-toed, Calandra and Crested but we did find a couple of Bimaculated. At least 25 Long-legged Buzzards were either perched on fence posts or sat atop earth mounds and we saw their whole range of plumage variation. Without doubt the highlight of the drive were two White-winged Larks. The first was a male on the way in, hovering over the road and seen perched only briefly. The second was absolutely bizarre. An adult female continually fed on the roadside, passing literally within a foot of our vehicle, and making the photographers amongst us very happy. Other birds of interest seen on the drive were a couple of Short-eared Owls, a sandy coloured pair of *bactriana* Little Owls with their two young and a confiding male Montagu's Harrier. A quick "leg stretch" in a tiny tamarisk grove produced three each of Blyth's Reed-warbler and Hume's Warbler, a Greenish Warbler and a pair of Desert Finches at the nest. Parties of Black-bellied Sandgrouse continued to follow the road on the drive back and we returned for a final dinner at the camp, just before sunset.

Day 4 A dawn breakfast and a farewell to the staff who had treated us so well immediately preceded our departure from Konchegil. Once we reached the main road we stopped to refuel. In some roadside bushes we found a Barred Warbler and a couple of Blyth's Reed-warblers. We then spent an hour or more driving through the Barkhans. In addition to continually flushing Crested, Short-toed, Calandra and Bimaculated Larks from the edge, Vaughan picked out a flushed European Nightjar that subsequently posed well at the base of a sand dune, and a single dark-mantled *karelini* Isabelline Shrike. Further speculative stops produced a *syriacus* Rufous-tailed Scrub-robin and a Tawny Pipit. A hint of green in the vegetation heralded the onset of a series of reed fringed roadside lakes and ponds, all the result of subterranean seepage from Lake Balkhash to the north. Amongst a variety of species found in the area were at least two Little Bitterns, a number of Ferruginous Ducks, a pair of confiding Shikras, a close perched Eurasian Hobby, a couple of rather grey *hafiza* Common Nightingales good numbers of Sykes's and Blyth's Reed-warblers, both Azure and Turkestan Tits and a pair of large-billed and pale *pyrrhuloides* Eurasian Reed Buntings. Close to Topar village a patch of reeds held Common Bittern and a brown-capped *caspia* Eurasian Penduline-tit. Currently this is considered to be a race of Eurasian Penduline Tit although local authorities consider it to be a race of Black-headed Penduline-tit based on nest shape and habitat. Lunch was taken in a grove of Turanga trees to the continual background noise of White-winged Woodpeckers and Turkestan Tits. We found the nest of the former, replete with at least one chick. Two pairs of Eversmann's Doves were flitting from tree to tree. These birds are extremely skittish and, unfortunately not all of the group managed to see them perched. Our final birding stop of the afternoon was at a Moslem cemetery. Here, a small colony of Saxaul Sparrows are the star attraction and they certainly put on a show for the photographers amongst us with at least 10 (and possible double that) birds present. By mid afternoon it was extremely hot and rather humid – a fitting time to return to the comfort of Alexei's bus for the four hour return drive to Almaty. Little was seen en route other than a fine male Montagu's Harrier quartering some fields and a *meena* Oriental Turtle-dove. The observant amongst us passed away the hours counting the European Bee-eaters and European Rollers on the roadside wires – others slept. By 20.00, we were safely delivered to our hotel for the night. During the course of a tour, there is always a quote from one participant that stands out. Tonight it was Cathy's turn. On looking up at the size and relative splendour of our accommodation, she smiled and announced "gee, with a hotel this big, I'm gonna get a proper toilet seat!"

Day 5 The critical strategy for this leg of the tour was to take advantage of good weather conditions as we were travelling up into the Tien Shan Mountains. A dawn breakfast preceded meeting up with Yuri once more. It was certainly “tee-shirt weather” as we entered the Ilealatau National Park gates. Our first new bird for the tour was found by Dina – an adult Golden Eagle being mobbed by a Black (-eared) Kite, which in turn was being harassed by a Common Kestrel. On tributaries of a fast flowing stream we quickly added both White-throated and Brown Dippers together with several bright *melanope* Grey Wagtails and a little further on 2 adult Blue Whistling-thrushes perched out in the open. By now we were climbing steeply through dwarf Turkistan Juniper and Tien Shan Spruce forest – the unlikely setting to find two young Kazakh ladies in totally inappropriate skimpy dress and high stiletto heels perched beside their broken down new and shiny Mercedes saloon. How they got the vehicle up that far, and why they were there in the first place remains a mystery. A stop at around 7,500ft added Songar Tit (which to my eyes looks extremely similar to Willow Tit) at the nest together with a much more appealing and very photogenic adult male Blue-capped Redstart, whilst a sub-adult Lammergeier lazily soared over a nearby ridge. We then continued up to park at the northern rim of Great Almaty Lake, some 800ft higher up; and immediately the weather closed in. An important factor in birding the Tien Shan is the speed in which weather changes. Over the course of the next couple of hours, we dodged several short, sharp and exceedingly cold rain showers, but the upside was finding two adult Ibisbills, one sat on the nest. Despite its unique appearance, these birds can be devilishly hard to find, as they often sit or crouch down amongst the river boulders and become nigh on invisible – we were lucky in finding them within 20 minutes. This area of the park always has quality “back up species” and today was no exception. The alternate main attractions were a pair of Eversmann’s Redstarts and a singing Black-throated Accentor; the supporting cast were small parties of Red-fronted Serins and grey-headed *caniceps* European Goldfinch.

By now it was time to check in at the Tien Shan Mountain Observatory, our base for the next two nights, located higher still at 9,000ft. Following an excellent lunch, and in bright sunshine, we boarded Yuri’s bus once more intending to drive to the dilapidated Upper Observatory situated at almost 11,000ft. Well we got almost half way; then Yuri had an argument with his oil pump. The only alternative was for us to put our heads down and trudge up the steep winding slope to the top, fortunately enjoying dry, if both cold and extremely windy weather. Every cloud has a silver lining. If we had driven up, we would undoubtedly have missed the flock of Brandt’s Mountain-finches, which flew right in front of us. This reclusive species is not normally found below 15,000ft so a welcome sight – if only good flight views. Out of breath, but fighting fit, we reached the top and new birds came through thick and fast. Over the course of the next hour or so, we watched at close quarters two pairs of Gildenstädt’s Redstarts, three Brown Accentors, several flocks of, admittedly drab, Hodgson’s Mountain-finches and both Red-billed and Yellow-billed Choughs. And then it started to snow. Fearing a long, cold, wet, walking descent and deteriorating weather, we reluctantly started the steep return journey, only to find Yuri’s bus parked only round the first bend. He was still at work, bashing something mechanical with his hammer and muttering in thankfully indecipherable Russian but we knew that our immediate problem was cured; the bus was facing down hill and even if the worst was to happen, both steering and brakes were working perfectly. We therefore spent the next hour in vain seeking out the only high altitude speciality species we had missed – Altai Accentor. We probably heard it (and may well have fleetingly glimpsed it) but were forced to leave as dusk fell and the temperature plummeted with just that one glaring gap in the day’s proceedings.

Day 6 The day dawned clear and bright, not a cloud in the sky – and absolutely freezing. Pre-breakfast birding was very much a personal thing but most saw most of Himalayan Rubythroat, Black-throated Accentor, White-winged Grosbeak and Red-mantled Rosefinch. Hume’s Warblers appeared to call from every spruce tree but were typically hard to see. Today Yuri could hammer away at his bus to his hearts content, as all birding was to be done on foot. The rest of the morning was spent in the valley beyond the Observatory. A brisk hike to the base of some scree slopes got the blood pumping, whilst several Yellow-billed Choughs soared over and another adult Golden Eagle lazily drifted by, totally oblivious to the attention of an irate Common Kestrel. Once *in situ* (and when everyone had got their breath back) we scoured the rock face for one of our main target birds; Himalayan Snowcock. Full credit to Peter, who’s sharp eyes picked out one feeding in short grass close to the cliff top. It stayed more or less in view for perhaps 20 minutes. Our attention was then drawn away to watch a spectacular display of a pair of Lammergeiers soaring against the hillside; one even perched on rocks briefly, no more than 500ft away. Whilst a snowcock is most certainly not a Lammergeiers prey item, our bird totally vanished, never to re-appear. The far wall of the valley is full of juniper shrubs; the home of our two remaining target birds. The first could not have been more cooperative if it tried. At least four very inquisitive Sulphur-bellied Warblers flew from bush to bush around us, one came no more than 10ft away. The second was another story altogether. Making our way slowly down the valley we all enjoyed repeated showings of both rubythroat and rosefinch. Our quarry, Severtzov’s Tit-warbler, was regularly calling (confusingly like a thinner, slightly less musical accentor) but from deep cover and by lunchtime they had still eluded us. Our final sighting of the morning, whilst sat on a grassy bank in glorious sunshine was one of our Lammergeiers, almost at eye level, chased by a pair of Eurasian Hobbies. For two years running now Birdfinders Kazakhstan has seen a Lammergeier’s beard!

After lunch, by 14.30, we were walking down through the spruce slopes once more. Today was definitely Peter’s day; hot on the heels of finding the snowcock, he stumbled upon a superb Long-eared Owl that flew into a conifer, perched maybe three feet inside, confident in it’s own mind that we could not see it. In fact everyone had excellent views. This is the first record that we know of for this site, and is at a considerably higher altitude than the assumed range. The next two hours were taken up with a frustrating scouring of just about every patch of juniper in the valley. There were plenty of Hume’s Warblers on view together with a couple of rubythroats and a Black-throated Accentor. Just as we feared the worst, Vaughan saw a male Severtzov’s fly into an isolated bush. We crept up the scree slope and suddenly it hopped up onto a bare rock, a mere 15ft

away from us. Whilst it probably stayed on view for less than 10 seconds, this is the first time on a Birdfinders tour that all participants have seen this prize skulker at the first attempt. Thereafter we had a number of fleeting glimpses of both male and the slightly duller female flitting between areas of scrub, at one point crawling along the ground like a mouse. A fitting end to a day characterised by superb views of all the targets we sought. The weather had been absolutely beautiful all day. All that was left was a final dinner and repacking of bags before tomorrow's journey back down to the lowlands.

Day 7 On Saturday night we genuinely thought we had "cleaned up" on speciality species in the park; little did we know the surprises in store for the drive down. Once again, a bright dry, early morning greeted us as we set off, with parties of Red-fronted Serins and a couple of grey-headed Eurasian Goldfinches beside the road. We made a speculative stop, hoping to entice a Spotted Nutcracker in – but to no avail. This species is an avid wanderer and has not been found in the valley this season by anyone. However, in its place we found a superb Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker that flitted between two telegraph poles, drumming away like mad. A second speculative stop for Spotted Nutcracker had the same negative result. However in weedy fields beside the road, we heard at least two Corn Crakes and several Western Grasshopper Warblers calling. Patience prevailed and we had an amazing close encounter with one Corn Crake and a little more distant view of a reeling warbler. Whilst over the last two and a half days we had only found 54 species at Ilealatau, the majority were high altitude specialities and our stay was an overwhelming success.

Outside the gates of the park, we bade farewell to Yuri and rejoined Alexei for a journey east of Almaty along one of the original Silk Roads. A brief stop to wander through some roadside Willow trees produced at least six White-crowned Penduline-tits. We took our lunch beside a gorge in the Kokpek pass. Even though it was midday and extremely hot, an adult Golden Eagle flew in to check us out (we were later to find its nest with two downy young) and, eventually a male Rock Bunting perched up in the open.

The Surgaty plateau is a vast flat bleak looking upland plain of scattered sage and tamarisk. Here we encountered large flocks of Rose-coloured Starlings – we were to find at least 5,000 birds during the afternoon, and at a lookout point close to Charyn Gorge at least five Grey-necked Buntings were calling and a Rock Sparrow fed rather unglamorously in the car park. Sometimes third hand local knowledge is a risky thing to act upon. We had received word of a Himalayan Griffon-vulture roost in some canyons off road to the south. In fact we had to drive almost 50km along rough tracks to find suitable habitat, which eventually produced two vultures and a soaring Black Stork.

The weather appeared to be worsening to the west, and it was with some relief that we re-found a tarmac surface before the rain fell. As the clouds rolled in we retraced our steps back to Kokpek. Despite poor late afternoon light we found at least five White-capped Buntings, two male Blue Rock-thrushes chasing each other around the canyon and a pair of Hume's Whitethroats (which basically look like a Whitethroat-sized Lesser Whitethroat), whilst both adult Golden Eagles were continually giving us "the eye". Effectively that brought proceedings to a close. We retreated back across the plains and checked into our hotel before venturing into a town park and getting "up close and personal" with a European Scops-owl

Day 8 For the first time on the tour, dawn was a grey and overcast affair. We were to spend the morning back in Surgaty, this time in a lowland plain dotted with sage and occasional fresh water puddles. Our target bird was Pallas' Sandgrouse. We eventually found a total of 10 birds but only due to persistence and patience. Historically Black-bellied Sandgrouse have been scarcer in this area than Pallas', but not so this year. All in all we probably found at least 50 "Black bellieds" flying around the plains in small groups. Other unexpected finds included a minimum of 37 Greater Sandplovers, three Demoiselle Cranes and two, possibly three, Macqueen's Bustards. Uncommon in Kazakhstan, and decidedly rare away from this area is Desert Wheatear. We found at least two adults amongst the many hundreds of Isabelline Wheatears that are so characteristic of this habitat. One permanent waterhole had a continual throughput of Desert Finches; our first Western Marsh-harriers quartered the vast plains; an adult Egyptian Vulture soared overhead and we found at least two adult male Montagu's Harriers.

From the plains we made a return visit for lunch at Kokpek, finding our first Lesser Kestrels and a Little Ringed Plover en route. We took lunch with our Golden Eagles and then moved onto a waterhole on the Surgaty plateau. During the course of no more than 30 minutes, at least 75 Mongolian Finches came in to drink and bathe, together with several Grey-necked Buntings. Far rarer, and most welcome, were three *sanguinea* Crimson-winged Finches. This race is much darker and richer plumaged than birds of North Africa and will become a species in their own right in the near future. Whilst heading back to the tarmac road a further 100 Mongolian Finches were flicking off of the track in front of us; a *bactriana* Little Owl stood on sentry duty on the wall of an abandoned building and at least three pallid looking *brandti* Shore Larks fed in the fields.

The return journey to Almaty was broken close to Kokpek where, thanks to some more specific local knowledge, both Saker and Egyptian Vulture were breeding. We quickly found a female Saker soaring over the gorge, but sadly not close. By contrast three adult Egyptian Vultures flew right over our heads. The final birding memory of the day was a family party of seven bright, almost orange, but strangely nominate Eurasian Hoopoes flitting along the track. The rest of the journey will be remembered for a sharp rainstorm, Alexei's excellent fast but very safe driving and horrendous traffic chaos in the city centre brought about, undoubtedly, by the lack of police on point duty.

Day 9 Today was all about the 625km transfer drive from Almaty to Alakol – a journey of over 12 hours – and we had an extra passenger on board; Vica, Alexei's niece. If you have to have a bad weather day on a tour, then this is the one to have it on. Basically it was cold, wet and windy for the first 300km passing a featureless landscape of rolling grassy hills with the snow-capped Zhongar Alatau mountain range occasionally seen through the gloom. We made one planned birding stop at a gorge known for its breeding Eastern Rock Nuthatches and easily found three birds sitting out on exposed rocky outcrops singing loudly. The main supporting cast was made up of Pied Wheatears. There were at least six birds present together with two more that were the extremely attractive white-throated race *vittata*. Also found were a pair of Chukar and a Red-rumped Swallow flew past. The next 300km passed with regular flocks of Rose-coloured Starlings weighing down roadside bushes – a suggested journey total of 10,000 is probably a gross underestimate. It was difficult to find somewhere sheltered to stop for lunch. We eventually opted for a truckers lay-by, and parked next to a dead sheep in the drizzle, another first for Birdfinders! “Perching birds” were easier to find once the rain had stopped. Cumulatively we saw over 300 European Rollers, 50 European Bee-eaters, 25 Lesser Grey Shrikes, 20 Eurasian Hoopoes and 20 Red-headed Buntings. Eurasian Hobbies were frequently found gliding past, as were Black (-eared) Kites; a Black Stork soared over and Vaughan heard a Pallas' Sandgrouse when we stopped to refuel outside of Usharal. The final stretch of road, running along the base of the Kungai range produced several Lesser Kestrels and a Black-bellied Sandgrouse. Finally we reached a settlement on the shores of the lake, our base for the next three nights. The skies had just about cleared, *hafiza* Common Nightingales were singing and after dinner a European Nightjar flew over.

Day 10 Yesterdays storms had all blown away eastwards, leaving a cool, breezy but bright dawn. Pre-breakfast birding was an individual thing, however a male Eurasian Golden Oriole singing from the treetops near our dining hall, and a pair of Pale Martins perched on wires in the car park were both favourite attractions. It was also time to add common European birds to our trip checklist – European Greenfinch, Common Chaffinch and Sand Martin were all new for the tour together with hundreds of rather oily, shiny looking *poltaratskyi* Common Starlings. However the two European Siskins found by Kevin were a rare find this late into the spring. Of more interest however were the adult Great Black-headed Gulls that regularly glided past. After breakfast we set off southwestward to explore the fields and reed-fringed marshes along the lake shore. We had to walk through almost a haze of flying insects; they looked like mosquitos, but were green and didn't bite – they were however apt to fly either into your mouth or up your nostrils! In weedy scrub, adult male *maura* Siberian Stonechats, *pallidogularis* red spotted Bluethroats, *melanogrisea* Black-headed Wagtails and a couple of Paddyfield Warblers all sang from exposed perches. The lagoons were full of Red-crested Pochards; singles of both Common and Little Bitterns flapped over the reeds and amongst a few Common Redshanks, a single Marsh Sandpiper and a black-ruffed Ruff fed along the muddy margins. Along the shingle at least four pairs of Collared Pratincoles had set up territory and we found our first Little Terns, whilst on the shoreline, 13 White Pelicans roosted alongside hundreds of Great Cormorants but sadly no sign of Relict Gull alongside their Black-headed and Caspian cousins.

After lunch we drove south into the Kungai hills for an afternoon full of raptors. This leg of the tour appeared to be led by Alexei; his incredibly sharp eyesight seemed to find every bird of prey that was in the sky (and he was still keeping half an eye on the road ahead.). First to show, an adult light phase Booted Eagle which soared right over the road, then the tattiest Eurasian Black Vulture I have ever seen with at least 50% of the flight feathers on one wing missing and a great chunk of inner primaries out of the other. Third to show was a much neater adult Steppe Eagle. Having parked up, we strolled up the grassy hillsides, winding our way through low scrub to locate the star passerine of the area. Over the course of about an hour, three different Siberian Meadow Buntings put in an appearance, one at incredibly close range. The return drive was interrupted firstly by at least six Himalayan Griffon-vultures drifting over, before what was for many the bird of the tour so far – an adult Eastern Imperial Eagle sat on top of a pylon about 300ft from the road glaring at us, even defying us to creep closer. So far, our luck had been good; we had seen almost everything we had targeted for and the weather had been kind. As we were walking to the dining hall later that evening the wind picked up dramatically, causing slight concern for our fortunes tomorrow.

Day 11 Our fears of deteriorating weather the previous night were completely unfounded. The wind was tearing though the trees at midnight, by dawn it was calm, dry, clear and already pretty warm. One of the beauties of “birding Alakol” is the diversity of habitat. This morning we were to explore the scrubland, reed beds and wet grassy fields beyond the village of Akdubek. En route there were two Demoiselle Cranes feeding in roadside fields and an extremely photogenic adult male Lesser Kestrel. Access deep into the marsh requires 4-wheel drive transport (luckily we had one along for the morning). Once in suitable habitat we quickly heard our principal target bird – Pallas' Grasshopper Warbler. For the second year running, this renowned skulker perched out in the open no more than 100ft away for over 20 minutes. At one point, it seemed that every patch of reeds or rank vegetation held a singing Cetti's Warbler, although seeing them was another matter. We saw a couple, but heard over 30. A pair of adult Barred Warblers flitted from hedgerow to hedgerow, one with rather plain under-parts, the other much more striking. All the way along the track there were ever present *maura* Siberian Stonechats and *melanogrisea* Black-headed Wagtails.

A little further on, in more open grassy areas, a number of Richard's Pipits were display flying, almost as if they were on a fairground big dipper, before landing and calling from prominent perches. Several Common Kingfishers buzzed up and down the side ditches and whilst most of the raptors seen quartering the reed beds were Montagu's Harriers, we did find at least two

splendid Pallid Harriers, one of which gave chase to a Common Snipe (the only one we saw on the entire tour!). We had found just about all of the speciality birds the area had to offer and enjoyed a peaceful, warm but not too hot walk – just one target bird to go: Oriental Skylark. We scrutinised all of the “skylarks” calling and hovering over the fields. They clearly all had white outer tail feathers and proportionately long tails and so were Common Sky Larks. However at a roadside stop east of the village, we had several distant views of a lark without white in the tail; undoubtedly Oriental but the views were certainly less than satisfactory. We returned to our settlement for lunch. Golden Orioles and Hoopoes calling from the trees had been joined by several Common Rosefinches, obvious recent arrivals.

Sadly the afternoon did not go to plan. We had chartered a boat to coast the shoreline seeking out roosting small gulls in the hope of finding, as last year, the near mythical Relict Gull. Once a localised and fairly common breeding species to the area, in recent years their numbers have nose-dived. They are at best rare, and in some years none are seen. We set off on a “millpond” lake in bright sunshine. Within 30 minutes, the sky to the west was black and rain squalls were moving in. In these circumstances, we are totally in the hands of the boat crew; they know what is safe and what is not. The skipper had no hesitation in insisting that we about turn and head back to base. Indeed by the time we docked the wind had already strengthened sharply and there were white tips to the waves. Little new had been seen although close fly by’s of adult summer plumaged Great Black headed Gulls entertained us and a party of 15 Demoiselle Cranes were feeding just beyond the reed bed. The last four hours of daylight were therefore optional. Just about the only word of Russian that Vaughan and I can speak with any authority is their word for ice cream – the village shop did a roaring trade !

Day 12 The squalls petered out during the night leaving a dry, bright dawn, our last at Alakol. A European Turtle-dove, a new arrival, sat calling from the treetops surrounding the dining hall; at least four *hafiza* Common Nightingales foraged around the lower vegetation, a European Goldfinch replete with red face put in a brief appearance and our regular male Eurasian Golden Oriole remained remarkably conspicuous and extremely vocal, alternating between his fluty bubbly song and harsh cat like braying calls. After breakfast it was time to depart for the long haul back to Almaty, and the weather turned on us once again. Indeed the first half of the journey was in driving rain; little could be seen out of the windows and it was time to catch up on lost sleep. Lunch was taken just as the rain fizzled out, beside a large lake close to the highway. Sat on the water were seven Black-necked Grebes and a pair of Ruddy Shelducks nursing eight fluffy young. The lakeside trees held another Eurasian Golden Oriole and a Eurasian Hobby soared over. By mid afternoon the sun had re-appeared and the wind had died down a fraction. European Rollers, European Bee-eaters, Lesser Grey Shrikes and Red-headed Buntings began to sit up but only in “one’s and two’s” as we sped south. The night was spent once more at our Almaty hotel where we bade farewell not only to Vica but also to Peter and Tony whose work schedules prevented them from flying north with us. They had planned a final days birding back at Ilealatau and were determined to try and see us off with at least a Spotted Nutcracker, if not a White’s Thrush, before returning to the UK.

Day 13 Transfer day. We left Almaty in warm, not hot, sunshine and took a 90-minute flight to cover the 900km journey to the new capital of Kazakhstan, Astana. There is an often-held myth denigrating internal flights inside the former Soviet Union. Our plane was a new Boeing 767; the flight was punctual, with very friendly cabin staff who all spoke English; we were served a pleasant hot meal, complimentary bar and even had stainless steel cutlery – unheard of in the present day west! British Airways take note, they offer a significantly better service. Upon arrival at Astana we teamed up with Vassily and drove steadily south west. The journey crossed flat grassy steppe interspersed with rain puddle ditches and small lagoons. Within 20km of the city, we came across a flooded field with a feeding flock of 76 White-winged Black Terns (we were to find over 200 during the drive), two Black-winged Praticoles and an adjacent male Montagu’s Harrier. From about 50km out, Black Larks became a prominent feature beside the road, the males engaging in a parachute like display flight. How many we saw is difficult to say – definitely over 500.

A series of unscheduled stops produced a plethora of brilliant birds. Perhaps the most striking were five male and two female Pallid Harriers, more delicate and lighter of flight even than Monty’s; around 20 Red-footed Falcons hunting from the utility wires, five Western Marsh-harriers appearing broad winged and bulky; at least 15 Steppe Buzzards and a quick fly past the left hand side of the bus by a very pale male *pallidus* “Steppe” Merlin. On various patches of open water there totalled at least 80 Garganeys, whilst several Marsh Sandpipers, a summer plumaged Little Stint and a female Red-necked Phalarope kept to the muddy edges. After driving about 100km, the weather started to change and the sky ahead was full of rain squalls. We were conscious that the final 50km of our journey was off road and so birding stops became the exception rather than the rule; we just glanced at the numbers of Northern Wheatears flicking off of the track in front of us, and the occasional Long-legged Buzzard perched on roadside bushes. By the time we reached Korgalzhyn Nature Reserve, our base for the next three nights, the wind had reached almost gale force. But, as everywhere else in the huge country, the weather changes quickly and we were optimistic for the morning.

Day 14 As sure as night follows day, the weather had changed. Sunrise was soon after 04.00 – it was fairly still, calm and only slightly chilly. The reed beds beside our camp were full of *beema* Syke’s Yellow Wagtails and extremely pallid grey and buff *russicus* Bearded Tits. A pair of *werae* Citrine Wagtails was obviously feeding young nearby and several *pallidogularis* Bluethroats sang from bush tops. Out on the lake, the sight of flying Common Goldeneye was rather strange, but Slender-billed Gulls and Gull-billed Terns seemed much more natural. As breakfast approached a rain squall powered in, but within an

hour the sun had re-appeared, the wind dropped and we were set for possibly the best days birding of the whole tour. We were introduced to Alexei, the senior ranger for the park. We were to learn during the course of the next couple of days just how sharp his eyesight was (and just how bizarre but effective his bird stalking actions could be). Our itinerary for the morning was to explore a number of reed-fringed fresh water lakes dotted over a wide area of steppe. First to show were both Red-necked and Slavonian Grebes in full summer plumage. Thereafter a huge variety of ducks was found. Garganey accounted for the majority with at least 500 birds seen, but the supporting cast included 50 each of Northern Shoveler and Red-crested Pochard and smaller numbers of Common Shelduck, Mallard, Common Teal, Eurasian Wigeon, Gadwall, Northern Pintail and Tufted Duck. The wildfowl prize however naturally goes to the 20 or so White-headed Ducks, many adult males. The muddy fringes held at least 250 Little Stints and several parties of Red-necked Phalaropes whilst about 100 exquisite White-winged Black Terns sallied to and fro. Walking through the grass a typically elusive Western Grasshopper Warbler looked particularly streaky in flight and got the blood pressure racing. At a final extensive area of reedbeds, our patience was rewarded with perched views of both rather grey looking *sarmatica* Savi's Warblers and *mimicus* Moustached Warblers that were duller than typical Mediterranean birds. A leisurely lunch was taken back at the village.

The sun was bright and we needed late afternoon light for our main quarry – Sociable Lapwing. This spring had been a bad one for this precarious wader in Kazakhstan as many nests had fallen to predatory foxes. Those that had bred now had walking young and were ranging considerable distances away from the nesting sites. Thanks to Alexei's local knowledge coupled with Kevin's sharp eyesight we were to find at least five birds, one a male with much more sharply defined facial markings feeding like tip up trucks in short grass. By its aggressive flying actions we surmised that one of the females still had very young chicks nearby. En route to this site we had excellent views of three male White-winged Larks and several Red-footed Falcons. If we had stopped birding then the afternoon would have been a great success. However, we journeyed further on to a final watch point over a long lake, initially to observe a large Black-winged Pratincole colony. We probably saw over 250 birds, many at extremely close range. However, some of us were drawn to the amazing sight of at least 5,000 Red-necked Phalaropes spinning in the water, mere feet from the edge. Considering the date and state of plumages involved we believe the flock was made up from adult females on the way back south having laid their eggs and young non-breeding males. If you add into the menu on offer the 650 White-winged Black Terns feeding low over the water, possibly as many as 200 Dalmatian Pelicans, together with 40 Black-winged Stilts and 10 Kentish Plovers feeding along the shore line, then the lake could be described as "busy"! In the fields surrounding us, Black Larks were ever present and overhead there was always a raptor to see. Most were Western Marsh-harriers but there were a few Pallid Harriers and a sub-adult Steppe Eagle thrown in for good measure – all in all a pretty good day's birding

Day 15 A decidedly chilly, windy but bright start to the day. Again, everyone did their own thing before breakfast so the tour log included the usual Slender-billed and Great Black-headed Gulls, Citrine Wagtails and Bluethroats. By 7.30am we were driving off road north west of our camp to view a different series of steppe lakes; some fresh water and others more saline. From the track, we had our first views of kirghizorumi (Steppe) Twite which looked surprisingly like female Eurasian Linnets with just a little more white in the wing. Admittedly the males did have pinkish rumps but this was only really evident when preening. Close by a very concerned looking adult Short-eared Owl was eyeing up a Red Fox scampering over the grass with something large, white and fluffy hanging from its mouth. It turned out to be a Greylag Goose chick that, I suppose, is good news for the owl. A little further on a Burbak Marmot, large enough to feed a family of four, sat atop its earthy mound, totally bewildered but not in the least concerned by Alexei's frantic white hat waving antics. Eventually we reached our first lake. A party of 45 Greater Flamingos graced the left hand shore and at least 500 Red-necked Phalaropes hugged the near shoreline while up to 40 Pied Avocets fed in the shallows. A further short drive took us to a second area of wetlands with a bank of wild rose bushes forming the near shoreline. This is a traditional breeding site for Booted Warbler. We quickly found two pairs that obligingly posed for the photographers over an extended period of time, and more Twite flew in.

Our last scheduled stop, a very shallow lake with extensive mudflats, had many hundreds of shorebirds feeding. Unfortunately the light could not have been more unkind, and most birds could only be seen in silhouette. Most were Curlew Sandpipers and Red-necked Phalaropes; a few were Dunlin. The remainder were stints but conditions left a lot to be desired. The lengthy and bumpy return drive was punctuated with roadside photographic stops for extremely confiding Pallid Harriers and Black Larks together with a mad cross country dash to watch three Common Quail disappear into the vegetation. By 15.30 it was time for a relaxing walk along the south eastern shore of the lake. A pair of *pallidus* "Steppe" Merlins has a regular nest site in the area and the male was hard pressed to thwart the attentions of a pair of Hooded Crows. A little further on, we came to a large reed fringed lake with numerous small islands. To a western birder, the sight of breeding Black-throated Divers in Central Asia, some 2000km from their normal range is unusual, however a small isolated population exists in northern Kazakhstan. Also showing were several Slavonian and Red-necked Grebes, at least four White-headed Ducks and a feeding party of about 75 White-winged Black Terns. By far the most unusual sighting for us here was a Steppe Grey Shrike, likely to be the first record for Korgalzhyn; the nearby *karelini* Isabelline Shrike being much more expected. We had now seen every viable species that this area of the Steppe has to offer in June – more than that, we had seen them all extremely well.

Day 16 Today was the start of the journey home. Before departing Korgalzhyn, there was still time to watch Slender-billed and Great Black-headed Gulls drifting over and the local Savi's Warbler seemed to have been reeling away all night long. The 160km drive back to Astana was broken with a couple of stops for photogenic Red-footed Falcons but we also saw 10 Pallid

Harriers, 5 Demoiselle Cranes, 3 Black-winged Pratincoles, at least 140 White-winged Black Terns, numerous Black Larks, a scattering of White-winged Larks and another “Steppe” Merlin. Our final birding of the tour was in some light woodland. This is a Birdfinders site for Pine Bunting and we found at least four birds, remarkably including a leucistic individual lacking any chestnut in the face whatsoever that we had found in the same area in 2006. An added bonus was finding at least four Fieldfares which have recently extended their breeding range south to Astana. Our Air Astana airbus back to Almaty was as punctual and comfortable as the outward flight; we said our goodbyes to Dina and settled into our Almaty hotel for a final night.

Day 17 One of the unfortunate by-products of Kazakhstan’s phenomenal growth and modernisation is that its new air terminal in Almaty simply cannot smoothly and swiftly administer the volume of passengers passing through. We arrived at the airport around 05.00 but it was close to 07.00 before our bags were checked in and the length of the queue for immigration and passport control defied belief. Once at the relevant desks, the officials were in the main courteous and efficient; it’s just that the whole system is bursting at the seams. Nevertheless our KLM Airbus departed only 15 minutes late; our flights and transfer in Amsterdam were smooth and comfortable and by midday (thanks to a five-hour time differential) we were saying our goodbyes at London Heathrow. The success of this tour was due, in no small part, to the efficiency and support of many local people. However special mention must be made of three. Alexei, our main driver, as much for his birdfinding skills and warm friendship, as for his driving; Elena, our ground agent for whom nothing was too much trouble; and of course Dina our interpreter and catalyst who did so much to “pull all the strings together” and always with that lovely smile.

Martyn Kenefick
Birdfinders