# **FIELD REPORT**

# CENTRAL ASIA: BIRDING THE SILK ROAD UZBEKISTAN, KYRGYZSTAN & KAZAKHSTAN

MAY 2-24, 2022



The smart Caspian Plover posed perfectly for us in Taukum Desert. © M. Valkenburg

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# CENTRAL ASIA: BIRDING THE SILK ROAD May 2–24, 2022 By Machiel Valkenburg

After a slight delay because of the Covid pandemic, we were delighted to hit the road again in Central Asia. We started with an energetic group in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Consequently, we visited the cities of Samarqand and Bukhara for their stunning ancient beauty and attractive birds. During the drive to Samarqand, this venture started with large groups of Rosy Starlings, a single Glossy Ibis, and loads of breeding White Storks. South of Samarqand, the Takhtakaracha Pass is a true pleasure to bird. The warm green valley is dotted with colorful beige-gray boulders and attracts many birds. We were welcomed by an excellent sighting of an Indian Golden Oriole, and not long after, we found the first Greenish Warbler of the trip. We were enchanted by the lovely display flights of the Eastern Orphean Warbler while several Crested Larks and Isabelline Wheatears were in the nearby fields. We witnessed a constant stream of mixed vultures, including Eurasian Griffon and Himalayan Griffon. The pass was full with calling Red-headed Buntings—what a bird! The best bird in this area came just before our departure back to the city. The stunning White-throated Robin appeared perched on top of a bush, giving a show to all present! The morning could not have ended better.



The exquisite Red-headed Bunting proved to be very common in the mountain pass. © M. Valkenburg

We did more birding around Bukhara, where a very early wake-up at 2:30 am was needed to be on time at the best spot in the Kyzyl-Kum Desert to find the famous Turkestan Ground-Jay. Did

we find it? YES, we did; we were only a couple of minutes out before finding a calling male not far away. We positioned ourselves against some larger Saxaul bushes and thoroughly enjoyed all the specifics of this unique family and species. Furthermore, a small family of Streaked Scrub Warblers passed by. We picked them up by their fast-paced metallic calls; just another special bird, like the ground-jay, completely adjusted to life in the desert. A visit to a green oasis in these arid lands was good for the first Blyth's Reed Warblers and Siberian Chiffchaff of the trip. Here, we found some Desert Finches drinking at a leak. In contrast with the beige bodies, the pink wings are especially striking. Before getting the train to Tashkent, we spent a morning south of Bukhara in the national park. We enjoyed several birds seen only on this part of the tour, like White-tailed Lapwing, Rufous-tailed Scrub-Robin, and Menetries's Warbler. We also encountered several species of terns—Little Tern, Gull-billed Tern, and Caspian Tern.



The very brave Yellow-breasted Azure Tit was one of the highlights during our visit to Uzbekistan. © M. Valkenburg

Finally, Kentish Plover and Blue-cheeked Bee-eater showed exceptionally well. After a comfortable train ride on the modern Uzbek high-speed train to Tashkent, we had a final day to explore the Chimgan Hills east of the city. These lush green hills were full of migration. We encountered many European Rollers, Spotted Flycatchers, and Indian Golden Orioles. We had superb views of a Yellow-breasted Tit we picked up in a small village. The town teachers came exploring and were thrilled to learn about our discovery. More White-capped Buntings and Corn Buntings, and Long-tailed Shrikes were added. Finally, a flighty Indian Paradise-Flycatcher crossed the road, but we could not relocate it. We ended our Uzbek part of the trip with a lovely dinner on the rooftop of the Hyatt before flying to Kazakhstan.

In Kazakhstan, we traveled further east to the arid zones of the Sogety Valley and the gorgeous Charyn Canyon. In the lush field of the foothills near the snowcapped peaks of the Tien Shan, we found a White-winged Woodpecker and several White-crowned Penduline-Tits, while Blyth's Reed Warbler proved to be familiar and migrating north en masse. We made a few stops during the drive to buy snacks and fruits. In the Kokpek Pass, we added Rock Bunting to our list. In Sogety, we focused on a good artesian well for birds needing a sip.



The bird of the trip was the magnificent Turkestan (Pander's) Ground-Jay. © M. Valkenburg

We tried our best for more desert goodies in the plains. The weather conditions were challenging, but we succeeded with most targets. We walked quite a bit through the stony semi-desert before contacting a calling Asian Desert Warbler, which showed marvelously in the end. We found 'albigula' Horned Larks, Greater Short-toed Larks, and more Isabelline Wheatears. From a distance, we scoped a Goitered Gazelle staring at us from half a mile away—a lovely encounter. At some rocky, arid slopes, we had great views of a Gray-necked Bunting.



The skittish, fast-moving Hume's Warbler gave us good views. © M. Valkenburg

We posted at a well, waiting for incoming birds in the afternoons; a wide selection of species passed by like Eurasian Linnet, Mongolian Finch, and a spectacular drinking Pallas's Sandgrouse. We had close views of this mega bird! When it flew off, we noted lots of water splashing as his breast feathers soaked up lots of water to bring back to the nest to keep the eggs cool. One Asian Crimson-winged Finch flew around the well but never touched the ground. We explored the Charyn Canyon and had a lovely walk to admire the view. Here, we had a few birds including more Gray-necked Buntings and a fleeting Rufous-tailed Rock-Thrush. Our basic but cozy lodge provided precious time after birding and was suitable for some owling in the evening. We had close views of Eurasian Scops-Owl and many more Azure Tits during the daytime.



An uncommon sight in Central Asia is the Common Crane. © M. Valkenburg

Our next stop was Karakol in Kyrgzstan. We crossed the border, which went smoothly and quickly. In the mountain pass we found a pair of Common Cranes, not an everyday bird in Kazakhstan. The coming days meant an exploration of the beautiful mountain scenery around the largest city in eastern Kyrgyzstan. We spent two full days in Chon Ashuu and Barskoon Gorge. To be successful in mountain birding, you rely on favorable weather conditions for the most part. We had either a strong wind, fog, or heavy rain on both days. Nonetheless, we picked up lots of good birds. The beautiful green valleys are the home of several unique Asian redstart species, with Blue-capped and Rufous-backed living in the spruce forests. We had walkaway views of both. Hume's Warbler and the secretive Sulphur-bellied Warbler were added to the list. The best birds were no doubt the White-tailed Rubythroat and Ibisbill. We had a lovely time getting to know their rich plumage and behavior. While descending in Barskoon, we were surprised by a large flock of Black-headed Mountain Finches through some heavy fog. Not all of us got onto these high-mountain critters, as it happened so quickly. They come down with heavy snowfall, as they breed above 13,000 feet. We transferred back to Almaty and enjoyed the lavish Mercure for a night before continuing to the desert camp.

Our last region in southern Kazakhstan evolved around several semi-desert systems on the Central Asian migration highway. There are no accommodations here in the desert, so a complete private yurt camp is erected to make our stay as comfortable as possible with

professional chefs and staff! The first bird to track down was the magical Caspian Plover; this spectacular bird breeds in the vast desert, preferring sparse vegetation. As I have these grounds as my local birding patch, we drove straight to a breeding location and, after a little search, found two males and a female. Magnificent! We visited a rare and endangered Central Asian endemic forest where the perfect Saxaul Sparrow and Yellow-eyed Dove were new birds on our list. The sparrow showed especially well and showed all its features—as I have said many times, probably one of the coolest sparrows in the world. We also found Turkestan Tit and White-winged Woodpecker. The Woodie came and gave us great looks when we had lunch. Around the camp, we focused on several drinking holes and the few trees this desert holds. The trees are lovely during migration, as they provide the only places of shelter for migratory passerines.



Great views of the mythical Pallas's Sandgrouse! © M. Valkenburg



The star of the Turanga Forest: White-winged Woodpecker. © M. Valkenburg

We found many Hume's Warblers and Blyth's Reed Warbler, more like thousands than hundreds. We also found Paddyfield Warbler, Thrush Nightingale, Common Rosefinch, and Common Redstart. The watering holes provided excellent photo opportunities for fly-bys of Black-bellied and Pallas's sandgrouse; the latter came by very close! A visit to Sorbulak Lake meant a whole extra selection of good birds. The large water reservoir acts like a magnet to the migrating avifauna. We scoped many White and Dalmatian pelicans, our first Terek Sandpiper, and more Temminck's Stints and Little Stint—all in incredible breeding plumage. One evening walk rendered a lovely Five-toed Jerboa and a Libyan Jird. We had extremely close views of these little desert mammals. It was a great way to end our stay and a fabulous experience in the yurt camp.



A spectacular surprise on our night walk around the yurt camp, the cute Libyan Jird. © M. Valkenburg

The last part of our trip started with a flight to Nur-Sultan (formerly Astana). In the windy city of Kazakhstan, we admired all the new and extravagant buildings that were shooting up like mushrooms. However, this site is excellent for many range-restricted species, and our goal was to find these gems. Therefore, we visited the Korgalzhyn region. A very early start and a 120-mile drive brought us to the magnificent feather grass steppe of the world's ninth largest country.

One of the very first birds we spotted was the endearing Black Lark—I think the best bird in Central Asia (yes, above the Ground-Jay!); its butterfly-like display flight and the ease with which we see these birds are just a couple of reasons. This site is also known as a significant stopover for shorebirds. Again, the weather was not in our favor, but we came across many Ruffs in full breeding plumage. We noticed many white, black, and rufous colored males. Moreover, we found a single Black-winged Pratincole in a group of Caspian Terns and Pallas's Gulls. The last bird we saw was one of the most desired larks, the White-winged Lark. In addition, we were pleasantly surprised to find 26 Saiga Antelopes in three different encounters. These prehistoric-looking mammals were surely one of the main highlights of the trip. We returned to Nur-Sultan, where we enjoyed a lovely final dinner before heading for the airport and finalizing our wonderful exploration of this magical, extraordinarily safe, and untraveled region of the world.



Our birding habitat in the mountains near Karakol; at this site we experienced close views of the magical White-tailed Rubythroat. © M. Valkenburg

# Checklist

**BIRDS:** This Checklist order, and common and scientific names are those given by James F. Clements in *The Clements Checklist of Birds of the World*, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition, Cornell University Press, with all current updates. Possible or debated species splits and alternative Common and Scientific names (particularly those of the Oriental Bird Club) are given in () or included in heavily bordered boxes. (I) = introduced species. (E) = Endemic.

# **COMMON NAME Ducks, Geese & Waterfowl**

Mute Swan Whooper Swan Ruddy Shelduck Common Shelduck

Garganey Northern Shoveler

Gadwall

Eurasian Wigeon

Mallard

Red-crested Pochard Common Pochard Tufted Duck

Common Goldeneye

# Pheasants, Grouse & Allies

Ring-necked Pheasant Himalayan Snowcock Common Quail

Chukar

#### **Flamingos**

Greater Flamingo

#### Grebes

**Great Crested Grebe** Eared (Black-necked) Grebe

#### **Pigeons & Doves**

Rock Pigeon (I) Yellow-eyed Pigeon Common Wood-Pigeon Oriental Turtle-Dove **Eurasian Collared-Dove** Laughing Dove

## SCIENTIFIC NAME

#### Anatidae

Cygnus olor Cygnus cygnus Tadorna ferruginea Tadorna tadorna Spatula querquedula Spatula clypeata Mareca strepera Mareca penelope Anas platyrhynchos

Netta rufina Aythya ferina Aythya fuligula Bucephala clangula

#### Phasianidae

Phasianus colchicus

Tetraogallus himalayensis

Coturnix coturnix

Alectoris chukar Heard only

Heard only

#### Phoenicopteridae

Phoenicopterus roseus

#### **Podicipedidae**

Podiceps cristatus Podiceps nigricollis

#### Columbidae

Columba livia

Columba eversmanni Columba palumbus Streptopelia orientalis Streptopelia decaocto Streptopelia senegalensis Sandgrouse

Pallas's Sandgrouse Black-bellied Sandgrouse

**Cuckoos** 

Common (Eurasian) Cuckoo

Nightjars & Allies

Eurasian Nightjar

**Swifts** 

Alpine Swift Common Swift

Rails, Gallinules & Coots

Corn Crake Eurasian Coot

**Cranes** 

Demoiselle Crane Common Crane

Stilts & Avocets

Black-winged Stilt Pied Avocet

lbisbill

Ibisbill

**Oystercatchers** 

Eurasian Oystercatcher

**Plovers & Lapwings** 

Black-bellied (Gray) Plover Northern Lapwing White-tailed Lapwing Greater Sand-Plover Caspian Plover Kentish Plover

Sandpipers & Allies

Black-tailed Godwit Ruff Temminck's Stint

Little Ringed Plover

Dunlin

**Pteroclidae** 

Syrrhaptes paradoxus Pterocles orientalis

Cuculidae

Cuculus canorus

Caprimulgidae

Caprimulgus europaeus

**Apodidae** 

Apus melba Apus apus

Rallidae

Heard only

Crex crex Fulica atra

Gruidae

Anthropoides virgo Grus grus

Recurvirostridae

Himantopus himantopus Recurvirostra avosetta

Ibidorhynchidae

Ibidorhyncha struthersii

Haematopodidae

Haematopus ostralegus

Charadriidae

Pluvialis squatarola Vanellus vanellus Vanellus leucurus Charadrius leschenaultii Charadrius asiaticus Charadrius alexandrinus

Charadrius dubius

Scolopacidae

Limosa limosa Calidris pugnax Calidris temminckii Calidris alpina Little Stint

Terek Sandpiper

Red-necked Phalarope

Common Sandpiper

Wood Sandpiper

Common Redshank

Calidris minuta

Xenus cinereus

Phalaropus lobatus

Actitis hypoleucos

Tringa glareola

Tringa totanus

#### **Pratincoles & Coursers**

Black-winged Pratincole

#### Glareolidae

Glareola nordmanni

# **Gulls, Terns & Skimmers**

Slender-billed Gull Black-headed Gull

Pallas's (Great Black-headed) Gull

Common Gull

#### Laridae

Chroicocephalus genei Chroicocephalus ridibundus Ichthyaetus ichthyaetus

Larus canus

Lesser Black-backed Gull

(Steppe Gull)

Little Tern
Gull-billed Tern
Caspian Tern
White-winged Tern
Common Tern

Larus fuscus

L. fuscus barabensis

Sternula albifrons Gelochelidon nilotica Hydroprogne caspia Chlidonias leucopterus

Sterna hirundo

#### **Storks**

Black Stork White Stork

#### Ciconiidae

Ciconia nigra Ciconia ciconia

### **Cormorants & Shags**

**Great Cormorant** 

#### **Phalacrocoracidae**

Phalacrocorax carbo

#### **Pelicans**

Great White Pelican Dalmatian Pelican

#### Pelecanidae

Pelecanus onocrotalus Pelecanus crispus

#### **Herons, Egrets & Bitterns**

Gray Heron Great Egret

#### Ardeidae

Ardea cinerea Ardea alba

#### **Ibises & Spoonbills**

Glossy Ibis

#### **Threskiornithidae**

Plegadis falcinellus

## Hawks, Eagles & Kites

Egyptian Vulture Cinereous (Black) Vulture Himalayan Griffon Eurasian Griffon

#### **Accipitridae**

Neophron percnopterus Aegypius monachus Gyps himalayensis Gyps fulvus Booted Eagle Golden Eagle

Eurasian Marsh-Harrier

Pallid Harrier Shikra

Eurasian Sparrowhawk

Black Kite

Common Buzzard Long-legged Buzzard

**Owls** 

Eurasian Scops-Owl

Little Owl

**Hoopoes** 

**Eurasian Hoopoe** 

Kingfishers

Common Kingfisher

**Bee-eaters** 

Blue-cheeked Bee-eater European Bee-eater

Rollers

European Roller

Woodpeckers

White-winged Woodpecker

**Falcons & Caracaras** 

Lesser Kestrel Eurasian Kestrel Red-footed Falcon Eurasian Hobby

**Old World Orioles** 

Indian Golden Oriole

**Monarch Flycatchers** 

Indian Paradise-Flycatcher

**Shrikes** 

Red-tailed Shrike Long-tailed Shrike Great Gray Shrike Hieraaetus pennatus

Aquila chrysaetos

Circus aeruginosus

Circus macrourus

Accipiter badius

Accipiter nisus

Milvus migrans

Buteo buteo

Buteo rufinus

Strigidae

Otus scops Athene noctua

Upupidae

Upupa epops

**Alcedinidae** 

Alcedo atthis

Meropidae

Merops persicus Merops apiaster

Coraciidae

Coracias garrulus

**Picidae** 

Dendrocopos leucopterus

Falconidae

Falco naumanni

Falco tinnunculus

Falco vespertinus

Falco subbuteo

Oriolidae

Oriolus kundoo

Monarchidae

Terpsiphone paradisi

Laniidae

Lanius phoenicuroides

Lanius schach Lanius excubitor Lesser Gray Shrike

Lanius minor

Red-tailed Shrike X Red-backed Shrike

# **Crows, Jays & Magpies**

# Corvidae

Eurasian Magpie	Pica pica
Turkestan Ground-Jay	Podoces panderi
(Pander's Ground-Jay)	
Red-billed Chough	Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax
Eurasian Jackdaw	Corvus monedula
Rook	Corvus frugilegus
Carrion Crow	Corvus corone
Hooded Crow	Corvus cornix
Brown-necked Raven	Corvus ruficollis
Common Raven	Corvus corax

## Tits, Chickadees & Titmice

#### **Paridae**

Coal Tit	Periparus ater
Azure Tit	Cyanistes cyanus
(Yellow-breasted Tit)	C.cyanus flavipectus
Great Tit	Parus major
(Turkestan Tit)	P. major bokharensis

#### **Penduline-Tits**

#### Remizidae

White-crowned Penduline-Tit Remiz coronatus

Larks

#### Alaudidae

Horned (Shore) Lark	Eremophila alpestris
Greater Short-toed Lark	Calandrella brachydactyla
Bimaculated Lark	Melanocorypha bimaculata
Calandra Lark	Melanocorypha calandra
Black Lark	Melanocorypha yeltoniensis
White-winged Lark	Alauda leucoptera
Eurasian Skylark	Alauda arvensis
Crested Lark	Galerida cristata

# **Reed Warblers & Allies**

# Acrocephalidae

Heard only

Booted Warbler	Iduna caligata
Sykes's Warbler	Iduna rama
Eastern Olivaceous Warbler	Iduna pallida
Codgo Warblar	Aaraaanhalisa

Sedge Warbler Acrocephalus schoenobaenus

Paddyfield Warbler

Blyth's Reed Warbler

Eurasian Reed Warbler

Acrocephalus agricola

Acrocephalus dumetorum

Acrocephalus scirpaceus

#### **Grassbirds & Allies**

#### Locustellidae

www.ventbird.com 13 Central Asia, 2022

Common Grasshopper Warbler

Locustella naevia

Heard only

**Martins & Swallows** 

Bank Swallow (Sand Martin)
Pale Sand Martin

Barn Swallow Red-rumped Swallow Common House-Martin Hirundinidae

Riparia riparia Riparia diluta Hirundo rustica Cecropis daurica

Delichon urbicum

**Leaf Warblers** 

Hume's Warbler Sulphur-bellied Warbler Common Chiffchaff Greenish Warbler **Phylloscopidae** 

Phylloscopus humei
Phylloscopus griseolus
Phylloscopus collybita
Phylloscopus trochiloides

**Bush Warblers & Allies** 

(Streaked) Scrub Warbler Cetti's Warbler

**Scotocercidae** 

Scotocerca inquieta Cettia cetti

Sylviid Warblers, Parrotbills & Allies

Lesser Whitethroat
Eastern Orphean Warbler
Asian Desert Warbler
Menetries's Warbler
Greater Whitethroat

**Sylviidae** 

Carruca curruca
Carruca crassirostris
Carruca nana
Carruca mystacea
Carruca communis

**Nuthatches** 

Eastern Rock Nuthatch

Sittidae

**Troglodytidae** 

Sitta tephronota

Wrens

Troglodytes troglodytes

Heard only

**Starlings** 

European Starling Rosy Starling Common Myna

Eurasian Wren

Sturnidae

Sturnus vulgaris
Pastor roseus
Acridotheres tristis

**Thrushes & Allies** 

Mistle Thrush Eurasian Blackbird Fieldfare **Turdidae** 

Turdus viscivorus Turdus merula Turdus pilaris

**Old World Flycatchers** 

Spotted Flycatcher Rufous-tailed Scrub-Robin White-throated Robin Muscicapidae

Muscicapa striata Cercotrichas galactotes Irania gutturalis Thrush Nightingale Luscinia luscinia

Common Nightingale Luscinia megarhynchos

Blue Whistling-Thrush

Luscinia svecica

Myophonus caeruleus

Himalayan Rubythroat Calliope pectoralis

Rufous-backed Redstart Phoenicurus erythronotus

(Eversmann's Redstart)

Blue-capped Redstart

Phoenicurus coeruleocephala

Common Redstart Phoenicurus phoenicurus
Black Redstart Phoenicurus ochruros
Rufous-tailed Rock-Thrush Monticola saxatilis

Blue Rock-Thrush
Siberian Stonechat
Northern Wheatear
Saxicola maura
Oenanthe oenanthe
Isabelline Wheatear
Pied Wheatear
Oenanthe pleschanka
Finsch's Wheatear
Oenanthe finschii

Accentors Prunellidae

Altai Accentor Prunella himalayana Heard only

Brown Accentor Prunella fulvescens
Black-throated Accentor Prunella atrogularis

Old World Sparrows Passeridae

Saxaul Sparrow
Passer ammodendri
House Sparrow
Passer domesticus
Spanish Sparrow
Passer hispaniolensis
Eurasian Tree Sparrow
Passer montanus
Petronia petronia

Wagtails & Pipits Motacillidae

Gray Wagtail

Western Yellow Wagtail

Citrine Wagtail

White Wagtail

Tawny Pipit

Water Pipit

Motacilla cinerea

Motacilla flava

Motacilla citreola

Motacilla alba

Anthus campestris

Anthus spinoletta

Finches, Euphonias & Allies Fringillidae

White-winged Grosbeak

Common Rosefinch

Red-mantled Rosefinch

Cimson-winged Finch

Mycerobas carnipes

Carpodacus erythrinus

Carpodacus rhodochlamys

Rhodopechys sanguineus

Mongolian Finch

Plain Mountain Finch

Bucanetes mongolicus

Leucosticte nemoricola

Leucosticte brandti

www.ventbird.com 15 Central Asia, 2022

Leader only

Heard only

Leader only

Desert Finch

European Greenfinch **Eurasian Linnet** European Goldfinch

Fire-fronted Serin

Rhodospiza obsoleta

Chloris chloris Linaria cannabina

Carduelis carduelis

Serinus pusillus

**Old World Buntings** 

Red-headed Bunting

Corn Bunting **Rock Bunting** 

White-capped Bunting

Pine Bunting

Gray-necked Bunting

Ortolan Bunting

**Emberizidae** 

Heard only

Emberiza bruniceps Emberiza calandra

Emberiza cia

Emberiza stewarti

Emberiza leucocephalos

Emberiza buchanani

Emberiza hortulana

**MAMMALS** 

**Dogs** 

Canidae

Vulpes vulpes

Red Fox

Libyan Jird

**Great Gerbil** 

Steppe Agama

**Squirrels** Sciuridae

**Gray Marmot** Marmota baibacina **Bobak Marmot** Marmota bobak

Gerbils

Gerbillidae

Meriones libycus Rhombomys opimus

Jerboas

Allactaga elater

Small Five-toed Jerboa

Dipodidae

Leporidae

Rabbits & Hares

Tolai Hare Lepus tolai

European Hare Lepus europeus

Other Wildlife

**Agamas** 

**Agamidae** Agama sanguinolenta

Sunwatcher Toad-headed Agama

Phrynocephalus helioscopus

**Monitor Lizards** 

Varanidae

**Desert Monitor Lizard** Varanus griseus

Captive/Re-introduced

Goitred Gazelle Gazella subgutturosa Przewalski's Horse Equus caballus

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