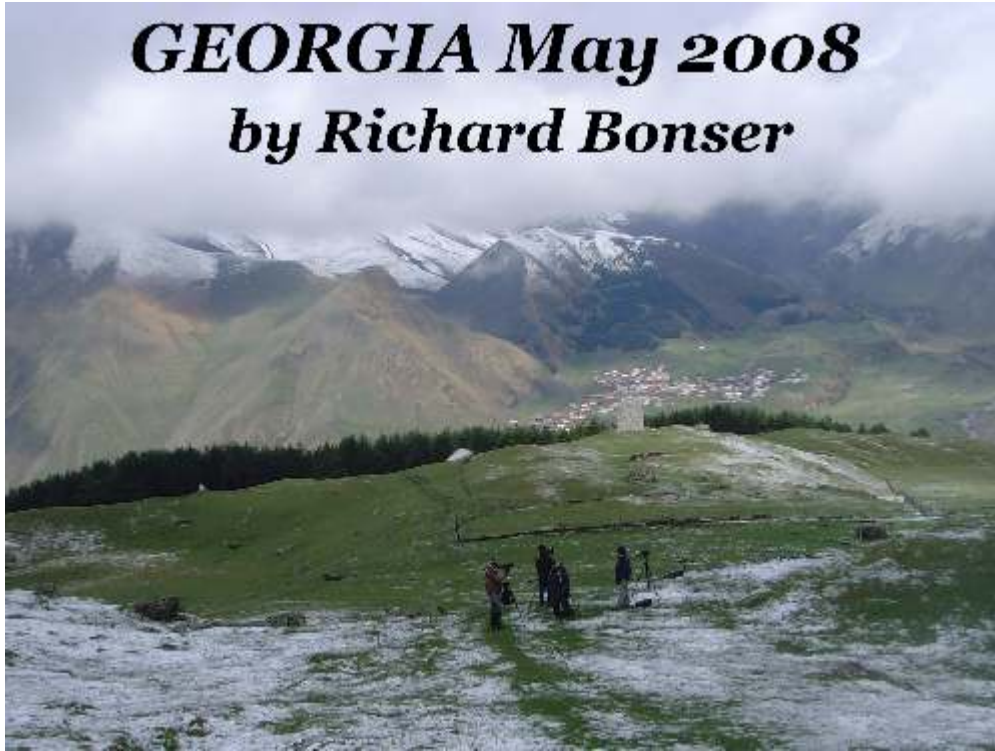


# ***GEORGIA May 2008***

## ***by Richard Bonser***



**Participants:** Chris Bell, Richard Bonser, Colin Dodsworth, Tom Francis, Graeme Joynt, Paul Hinley, Stewart Hinley, James Hunter, Mark Lopez, Stuart Piner and Richard Stephenson

### **Introduction**

Birding the high Caucasus had long been on my ‘future trips’ list and my desire to visit the area was fuelled when I was in Mauritania with Danish birder Christian Leth where he described flocks of Great Rosefinches and Guldenstadt’s Redstarts in the dramatic, snow-covered landscape near the village of Kazbegi. After easily rustling up some interest with a like-minded team, we settled on visiting Georgia in early May 2008.

We were all keen to see three key species – Caucasian Snowcock, Great Rosefinch and Guldenstadt’s Redstart – while those of us who had not visited northern Turkey ranked the likes of Caucasian Black Grouse and Green Warbler high on our agendas. The purpose of this report is to offer some information and tips on how best to see the birds of Kazbegi and to add to what has already been written about the area’s birding potential.

### **Logistics and Useful Information**

We arrived in Georgia from London Heathrow in two groups – though we all arrived in Tbilisi within fifteen minutes of each other, six of us flew with Lufthansa via Munich (£359 return) while the other five flew with Czech Airlines via Prague (£350 return). British Airways do fly direct from London to Tbilisi but at the time of our visit was much more expensive than the Lufthansa/Czech Airlines options used. Note that British citizens no longer require a Visa to visit Georgia – check your local embassy for further details if required. The drive from Tbilisi airport to Kazbegi took 3-4 hours.

The most crucial part of the trip to Georgia is ensuring that you have a decent ground agent. After a fair bit of hunting around, one company stood out both in terms of price and professionalism. Maria at [Explore Georgia](#) was excellent and I couldn't recommend using her highly enough; she speaks fluent English and fully understood the reason for our trip and continually emailed me regarding exactly what we needed in terms of itinerary, transport and accommodation.

We paid £185 each for transport, food and accommodation (all prepaid prior to the trip and we stayed in local people's houses in Kazbegi that had been prearranged for us). The only expenditure over this being rather too many bottles of the local beers Kazbegi and Natakhtari (50p per bottle). Note that we only hired drivers – hiring of local bird guides would have increased the cost of the trip significantly and, being the cocky bastards that we are, knew we wouldn't need them anyway!

### **Timing of the Trip**

Timing a trip to the Kazbegi region of Georgia is a careful balancing act between being too late for the last major snowfalls that push both Great Rosefinch and Guldenstadt's Redstart into the valley bottom and being too early for the late arriving Green Warblers. Going any earlier than we did, however, could prove tricky as adverse weather can close the Krestovvy Pass between Gudauri and Kazbegi for days at a time. On the other hand we had heard tales from other birders of gruelling walks in June up to the mountain tops where they had to work hard to see just ones and twos of each target species and often distant and brief views.

Additionally, as the majority of the team had visited Kuwait and Turkey previously, we decided not to visit Armenia for species such as Persian Wheatear and Mongolian Finch and as such did not need to coincide our visit later in the spring for these species. In a nutshell, we wanted some easy birding with a fair chance of observing the target species as close to the village and in as larger numbers as possible.

### **Weather in Kazbegi**

Despite being in a valley, the village of Kazbegi is still at an altitude of 1800m and therefore is covered in heavy snow for a lot of the winter. Early May should be the start of spring and, in fact, the week prior to our visit locals had been experiencing 'shorts and t-shirt weather' with temperatures in the mid to high twenties. The morning we arrived though, there had been heavy snowfall overnight with snow being present in the village itself. There was no snow for the rest of the day and conditions were relatively clear and the snow retracted quickly. The next day snow fell almost continuously until turning to rain late afternoon while on the morning of our third and final day more snow was falling as we left Kazbegi village.

Although snow cover undoubtedly meant that good numbers of Rosefinches and Redstarts were present in the valley bottom, you do need to make the most of clear spells in such conditions so that you can scope up the mountains to look for Caucasian Snowcocks. The harsh weather may also have delayed large numbers of Green Warblers arriving as we only saw one bird during our visit (although we do realise we really were on the cusp of them arriving back).

## **Trip Reports and Reading**

Not too much has been written on Georgia but what there is available is of rather high quality – starting points would be Peter Alfrey and Darryl Spittle's 'Birding the Greater Caucasus, Georgia' in *Birding World* Vol.17 No.6:255-257 and Arnoud van den Berg's 'High Birding at Kazbegi, Georgia' in *Dutch Birding* Vol.27 No.4:241-247. The most useful internet resources are trip reports by [Chris Batty](#) and Janne Aalto's two visits in [July 2006](#) and [May 2007](#). 'A Birdwatching Guide to Georgia' by Lexo Gavashelishvili et al (2005) is an interesting read and perhaps worth having for subsidiary sites around Tbilisi (though doesn't go into too much detail regarding finding specific species around Kazbegi).

## **Acknowledgements**

Particular thanks to Hugues Dufourny, Olof Jonsson, Kari Haataja, Christian Leth, Pablo Fernández García and Dominic Mitchell who provided us with directions, GPS points, maps and annotated photographs that were invaluable during our trip. Chris Batty and Andy Clifton provided us with notes from their visit to the Kazbegi area while Janne Aalto's trip report also contained some useful information. Stuart Piner and Chris Bell helped proof read this report and helped with the species list. And finally, a thank you to the legendary Richard Stephenson who kept us all entertained while in Georgia.

## **TARGET SPECIES**

I'll start with the three main target species that birders look for in the area surrounding Kazbegi village (plus Green Warbler for completeness). The best thing to do is have a look at the annotated photo below that is taken looking east from the track leading down from Sameba church to get some idea of the geography of the Kazbegi area: -



**Point 1 (N42 39 26.3, E44 39 52.6) – Caucasian Snowcock**

**Point 2 (N42 39 19.5, E44 38 58.5) – Great Rosefinch**

**Point 3 (N42 38 52.3, E44 38 58.6) – Great Rosefinch and Guldenstadt's Redstart**

**Point 4 (N42 39 38.1, E44 38 26.6) – Green Warbler**

## Caucasian Snowcock



One of the most enigmatic birds of the Western Palearctic region, this species can only be found in the High Caucasus and Kazbegi is the most easily accessible place to see it. Out of the three speciality species (with the Rosefinch and the Redstart), it is probably the easiest to see throughout the year and despite retreating with the snow line to some extent, it doesn't occur as high up as the other two species in late spring/summer months.

The far-carrying curlew-like call of this species could be heard from Kazbegi village during our visit. Due to adverse weather during our visit, the only prolonged opportunity we had to see the mountains was on our first afternoon. We got dropped off by the small chapel just to the east of Kazbegi village and then walked a few hundred yards uphill. We scanned from N42 39 26.3, E44 39 52.6 looking east-south-east up to the Kuro Mountains and were able to locate two birds. Later on in the spring when the snowline is higher up, you will need to either walk the path that we started walking to an altitude of 3000-4000 metres or follow the steep grassy ridge west (uphill) from Sameba church (N42 39 57.1, E44 36 00.8) for around 4 hours walk to the scree area (see Chris Batty's report [here](#)).

## Guldenstadt's Redstart



This species is probably the one most likely to be missed by birders, breeding in low density at high altitude in the boulder fields below the glaciers on Mount Kazbeg and the Kuro mountains. However early spring can see good concentrations of this species in the valley near Kazbegi village.

We located at least five birds (at least two males and three females) during our visit in the scrub at N42 38 52.3, E44 38 58.6 immediately to the south-east of Kazbegi village. They seemed faithful to this area being seen on the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> May. Christian Leth had up to 60 birds in the riverside scrub (approximately N42 38 46.9, E44 38 24.8) in early May 2005.

### **Great Rosefinch**



One of the reasons for coming to Kazbegi in early May was the hope that we would see good numbers of this species low down in the valley bottom prior to them dispersing to the higher slopes (3,000-3,500 metres above sea level) for breeding.

On arrival in Kazbegi, with fresh snow having fallen overnight, we found a small flock of half a dozen birds just to the south of our accommodation at N42 39 19.5, E44 38 58.5. Later the same day, we located a pair on the scree to the north-east of the area of scrub at N42 38 52.3, E44 38 58.6 as well as a singing male being present in the scrub itself. On the mornings of 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> May, at least twenty birds were present in this same area of scrub and, on the afternoon of 5<sup>th</sup>, a flock of 150 or so birds were seen on the slopes viewed from this scrub area. In early May 2005 Christian Leth observed at least 250 birds between this scrub area and the riverside scrub (approximately N42 38 46.9, E44 38 24.8) after heavy snowfall.

### **OTHER SPECIES NOTES**

#### **Caucasian Black Grouse**

Seven (five males) were seen on the hillside to the left of the road at N42 30 25.8, E44 27 28.0 (coming from Gudauri) on the Krestovvy Pass early morning on 4<sup>th</sup> May. We did not really look for this species in the Kazbegi area but the best habitat to search is the rhododendron scrub near the small chapel to the east of Kazbegi village at the base of the Kuro Mountains. Early spring is best for this species, and by mid June it can become increasingly difficult to locate.

### **Lammergeier**

One bird was seen over the ridge to the east of Kazbegi village on 4<sup>th</sup> May. Georgia is apparently one of the better countries to see this species; the weather during our visit probably wasn't conducive for this species to fly unless it had to.

### **Shorelark**

Small numbers of the race *penicillata* were noted – a few were seen on our journey into Kazbegi near the tunnels beyond the Krestovvy Pass on 4<sup>th</sup> May and a couple later that day on the scree slopes south-east of Kazbegi village while a couple were located by the roadside about ten kilometres south of Kazbegi on 5<sup>th</sup> May.

### **Paddyfield Warbler**

This species appeared to be relatively common in the reeds at Lake Lisi (N41 44 25.5, E44 44 03.4) with at least two birds seen.

### **Green Warbler**

The main arrival of this species in the Kazbegi/Tbilisi region is mid May. Therefore we were on the early side to see it and we eventually located one bird in the small woodland by the 'horses to rent' sign on the west side of the river bridge (N42 39 38.1, E44 38 26.6) on 5<sup>th</sup> May. It is a common summer visitor and can be found in areas of woodland near Kazbegi village as well as in the foothills between Tbilisi and Gudauri e.g. just beyond the bridge at N42 09 08.1, E44 44 00.2 near Ananuri.

### **Mountain Chiffchaff**

A common species; vocal in scrub and woodland surrounding Kazbegi village.

### **Wallcreeper**

A stunning male was located on the rock face immediately east of the scrub area at N42 38 52.3, E44 38 58.6 early morning on 5<sup>th</sup> May. Another favoured area for this species are the rock faces just to the south of the small petrol station to the south of Kazbegi. Park on the east side of the road in the layby at N42 38 18.3, E44 37 58.4 and walk up the track for a couple of hundred metres to view.

### **Snowfinch**

Small numbers were seen, with a couple seen on the Krestovvy Pass at N42 30 25.8, E44 27 28.0 and one by the roadside about ten kilometres south of Kazbegi village.

### **Red-fronted Serin**

A common species in Kazbegi; seen both in the village as well as in areas of scrub and woodland – a flock of several hundred birds was present in the woodland near Sameba church (N42 39 57.1, E44 36 00.8) on 5<sup>th</sup> May.

### **Twite**

Small numbers of the race *brevirostris* were noted – a flock of ten or so birds near the chapel at the base of the Kuro Mountains on 4<sup>th</sup> May and several birds were mixed in with large numbers of Red-fronted Serins in the woodland below Sameba church on 5<sup>th</sup> May.

## GPS POINTS

Although all of the GPS points can be found elsewhere in this report, for convenience they are listed together below (degrees minutes seconds): -

**N41 40 15.8, E44 57 51.6** – Tbilisi Airport

**N42 30 25.8, E44 27 28.0** – Caucasian Black Grouse site on the Krestovvy Pass

**N42 39 19.5, E44 38 58.5** – our accommodation at the eastern end of Kazbegi village

**N42 39 26.3, E44 39 52.6** – Caucasian Snowcock site on the Kuro Mountains

**N42 38 52.3, E44 38 58.6** – scrub area south-east of Kazbegi village for Guldenstadt's Redstart and Great Rosefinch

**N42 38 46.9, E44 38 24.8** – riverside scrub south of Kazbegi village

**N42 38 18.3, E44 37 58.4** – Wallcreeper site south of Kazbegi village

**N42 39 57.1, E44 36 00.8** – Sameba church, west of Kazbegi village

**N42 39 38.1, E44 38 26.6** – bridge over the river near the Hotel Stepantsminda, Kazbegi village

**N42 21 02.5, E44 41 21.6** – Pasanauri, roadside stop between Kazbegi and Tbilisi

**N42 17 33.7, E44 41 16.3** – Muguda, roadside stop between Kazbegi and Tbilisi

**N42 09 48.8, E44 42 08.0** – Ananuri lake, between Kazbegi and Tbilisi

**N42 09 08.1, E44 44 00.2** – Green Warbler site near Ananuri, between Kazbegi and Tbilisi

**N41 44 25.5, E44 44 03.4** – Lake Lisi, near Tbilisi

## DAILY DIARY

### **3<sup>rd</sup> May 2008**

It was a rather fraught start to the trip for a couple of us. The previous day Stuart and I had been dipping a Caspian Plover on Fair Isle and, at one point, it seemed like the rest of the people we were with wanted to stay on and search overnight and hence we would have been stranded. Fortunately, as it turned out, we got to Heathrow for the following morning and met up with a few of the others before flying to Munich with Lufthansa. We had a long wait in Munich until our mid evening flight to Tbilisi, though were kept occupied by doing a bit of last minute reading up and whatever choice words Richard Stephenson decided to come out with.

### **4<sup>th</sup> May 2008**

The six of us arrived on time at Tbilisi airport (N41 40 15.8, E44 57 51.6) during the early hours and were met by our two drivers and then, ten minutes or so later, the other five of the group who'd flown in via Prague with Czech Airlines. After packing our stuff into the minibuses, we got on the road at just after 4am and headed in the direction of Kazbegi. We wound our way through Tbilisi and then up the mountain roads.

The scenery was impressive from the outset and after travelling for a couple of hours, we stopped off briefly at Gudauri. While our drivers popped into a nearby house, we noted a few species that were immediately apparent adjacent to the buildings and in the valley below. A couple of **Rock Thrushes** were noted by the roadside and **Black Redstarts** and **Water Pipits** were very much in evidence while a handful of **Red-billed Choughs** cruised overhead.

As we climbed in altitude (to 7,834 feet according to my GPS!) we reached a snow covered area at the top of the Krestovvy pass and stopped by the road at N42 30 25.8, E44 27 28.0. Within a minute of setting up our scopes we scanned to the left of the road (coming from Gudauri) and managed to find our first **Caucasian Black Grouse** of the trip – a cracking displaying male albeit fairly distantly. Careful scanning of the area eventually revealed five males and two females, all rather easy to pick out on the landscape that was lightly snow-covered. **Wheatears** and **Water Pipits** were common roadside birds and a couple of flighty **Snowfinches** were also seen. A sub-adult **Golden Eagle** glided over the mountainside giving us some decent views while a group of a dozen **Swallows** migrating over the snowy landscape seemed a little out-of-place.

Happy with the grouse, we all got back into the buses and headed down into the valley below and towards Kazbegi. The road was pretty poor and wound its way through some pretty impressive tunnels and scenery to the valley floor. The change in habitat to grassy meadows quickly produced some different species – four **Rollers** and a couple of **Red-backed Shrikes** were appreciated as we headed to Kazbegi village.

On arrival at our accommodation (N42 39 19.5, E44 38 58.5) it was apparent that it had snowed overnight and the snowline had encroached on the village itself. Although we were all tired after the journey we were all quietly confident that the ‘Kazbegi specialities’ could be present in good numbers close to the village. And no sooner had we got out of the buses, our first **Great Rosefinches** were on view in the meadow to the south of our accommodation. Half a dozen birds were located, including some stonking males, and after having a quick look (thinking we’d see a lot more) headed into the house where we were staying and dropped our bags off.

The sun was now out so, despite feeling tired, we got our drivers to drop us off by the small chapel at the bottom of The Kuros only a couple of kilometres to the east of our accommodation in Kazbegi village. The snow overnight meant that it was only a couple of hundred yards walk to the snow line, interrupted by good views of ten or so *brevirostris* **Twite**, and with good views of the mountains above us in ok visibility we started to scan from N42 39 26.3, E44 39 52.6. Three **Alpine Accentors** showed in the gorge where we were stood along with **Water Pipits**, **White Wagtails** and a couple of **Black Redstarts**. The far-carrying, curlew-like call of our target species echoed through the dramatic landscape but it took us a good ten minutes or so to work out where they were calling from. But then the shout went up, and looking east-south-east from where we were stood, a pair of **Caucasian Snowcocks** could be found feeding and calling from a rocky precipice. We watched these impressive, somewhat prehistoric looking creatures for a good while as the low cloud rolled in and rolled out impairing our views at times.

Really happy with what we’d seen, and making the decision that it would be best to search the lower altitudes for the Great Rosefinch and Guldenstadt’s Redstart as we’d probably cripple ourselves trying to navigate the mountains in the snow, we walked back past the chapel and south along the slopes. The small woodland near the chapel gave us our first good views of **Mountain Chiffchaff** – a common species in Kazbegi – and other birds seen here included a **Wryneck**, **Spotted Flycatcher**, **Cuckoo**,



*amicorum* **Ring Ousels**, several **Whinchats** and a couple of **Jays**. Colourful **Red-fronted Serins**, a common bird here, were also well appreciated.

The group split up and started to scour the area, and with a little bit of searching we found a further pair of **Great Rosefinches** feeding on a scree slope to the south of the chapel and to the east of Kazbegi village. A couple of **Red-throated Pipits** were seen and heard in amongst the large numbers of **Water Pipits** but we were starting to think where would be best bet to find Guldenstadt's Redstart. Knowing that Christian Leth had observed good numbers of this species in the valley bottom to the south of Kazbegi village in similar conditions at the same time of year, we tiredly ambled in that direction.

We reached an obvious area of thick scrub at N42 38 52.3, E44 38 58.6 and in no time at all, a flash of colour revealed our first **Guldenstadt's Redstart**, a stunning male. Once the troops had been rounded up, we explored the area and got excellent views of at least five (at least two males and three females) of these rather large, robust redstarts. A male **Great Rosefinch** flew in and proceeded to sing, giving us our best views of the day of this species. A **Lammergeier** cruised above us in and out of the gloom while several **Red-billed Choughs** were overhead. Happy with our haul, some of us headed through the damp meadows to the riverside scrub while others headed into the village in a quest to find some refreshment.

Those of us that explored the riverside scrub adjacent to the main road at N42 38 46.9, E44 38 24.8 located a first-summer **Purple Heron** and an extremely elusive singing **Thrush Nightingale**. A brief improvement in the weather late afternoon produced a raptor passage for us all – along with a **Griffon Vulture** and several **Steppe Buzzards**, 17 **Honey Buzzards** and a **Black Kite** passed over the riverside scrub while those in the village had larger numbers of **Honey Buzzards** as well as a couple of **Montagu's Harriers** and **Hobbies**. With the sky looking ominous and the weather closing in, we all headed back to our accommodation for a well-deserved evening of food, drink and rest.

### 5<sup>th</sup> May 2008

We woke up to a winter wonderland scene – the whole area was covered in several inches of snow that had evidently fallen overnight! Visibility was poor and it looked like any hope of revisiting the mountains to see the Snowcocks would be in vain. But fully enthused to have a look for what may have been forced down, we walked to the scrub area at N42 38 52.3, E44 38 58.6 where we found a flock of at least twenty **Great Rosefinches** as well as a couple of pairs of **Guldenstadt's Redstarts** looking pretty smart in the snow encrusted scrub. While watching these birds a scan of the adjacent rock face produced a stunning male **Wallcreeper** in immaculate plumage. The bird fluttered about, often only a few inches from the bottom of the rock face, and kept us all entertained before it flew slightly higher up and was lost to view. We also flushed a **Quail** from this scrub area, a rather bizarre sight in a few inches of snow while a couple of **Rock Thrushes**, a handful of **Whinchats** and a **Red-throated Pipit** were all searching for food in the fairly unseasonable conditions. A quick search around the village prior to breakfast produced an **Ortolan** along with numerous **Red-fronted Serins** while a **Honey Buzzard** that circled overhead probably wished it had kept on going the previous evening. A single **Alpine Chough** called over the village.

After breakfast we headed out in our transport towards the tunnels between Kazbegi and the Krestovvy pass. The snow did not relent and try as we might to bird, we were rather unsuccessful at the higher altitudes just recording a handful of **Ring Ousels** and a couple of **Rock Thrushes**. Realising we were pissing into the wind, we descended to the valley floor where the snow turned to rain and a few more birds were seen. About 10km south of Kazbegi we found at least two *penicillata* **Shore Larks**, a single **Snowfinch** while the odd **Dipper** was seen on the fast flowing bits of the River Terek. A single **Turtle Dove** looked rather bedraggled as it sat out the conditions, a flock of ten or so **Wood Sandpipers** were seen on roadside pools while seven **Rollers** were present in the area where they'd been the day before.

Just to the south of the small petrol station to the south of Kazbegi and on the east side of the road, we parked in the layby at N42 38 18.3, E44 37 58.4. This is a site for breeding Wallcreeper and Green Warbler, though all we could find were a couple of **Red-breasted Flycatchers**, an **Ortolan** and a large flock of **Red-fronted Serins**. A **Griffon Vulture** and a single **Honey Buzzard** were seen overhead.

On a continued quest for Green Warbler, some of us headed over the river bridge in Kazbegi in the vehicles, then through Gergeti and up the rather precarious muddy track to Sameba church (N42 39 57.1, E44 36 00.8). Despite walking all the way down through the woodland, we could not detect any Green Warblers (that are actually pretty common here a couple of weeks later on) with the only *phyllosc* activity being from **Willow Warblers** and **Mountain Chiffchaffs**. A flock of several hundred **Red-fronted Serins** with a few *brevirostris* **Twite** mixed in was an impressive sight while lower down a couple of **Cuckoos** and a male **Golden Oriole** were located.

Although the weather had been far from ideal, up til now we'd done quite well at avoiding the worst of the rain. However, as we headed down through the village of Gergeti and to the river bridge (N42 39 38.1, E44 38 26.6) by the Hotel Stepantsminda, the heavens opened. A couple of **Great Reed Warblers** were seen in the riverside vegetation and a couple of **Grey Wagtails** and a **Dipper** were seen on the nearby rocks. Despite the conditions we had a look in the small wooded area on the west side of the bridge by the 'horses to rent' sign – a male **Red-backed Shrike** and a few **Mountain Chiffchaffs** were present, along with at least one **Willow Warbler**. After some initial half views, one **Green Warbler** was found here and eventually revealed itself on the edge of the woodland and showed for a period. By this time some of the group had headed off to the riverside scrub (N42 38 46.9, E44 38 24.8) where they located a **White-throated Robin**, **Wryneck** and **Great Reed Warbler**. A check of the mountainside from the scrub at N42 38 52.3, E44 38 58.6 produced a huge flock of **Great Rosefinches** comprising some 150 or so birds. After drying ourselves out, we had a hearty evening meal of pike (that of interest tastes like mud) and rather larger amounts of alcohol than intended were consumed by some of the group.

## 6<sup>th</sup> May 2008

A couple of the group got up at first light while the rest of the team had more of a lie in and slept off the beers and vodka drunk the night before. Although it appeared clear

and bright first thing, the weather returned to the norm of limited visibility and snow flurries pretty quickly. The idea of looking for Snowcocks was thwarted and more views of **Great Rosefinch** and **Guldenstadt's Redstarts** were had in the scrub at N42 38 52.3, E44 38 58.6 before breakfast.

With bad weather encroaching, we had been advised by Maria at Explore Georgia to set off as soon after breakfast as possible. So, after sampling the usual fare of bread and local cheese, we packed our stuff into the vans and headed off towards Tbilisi. A group of 4 **Whiskered Terns** to the south of Kazbegi village were a bit of a bizarre sight in the blizzard conditions. As we climbed over the Krestovvy pass the snow became deeper and the road became less visible. We'd been assured that our drivers were the best in the business and, in fairness, they were – a lorry that had become stuck in the snow halted our progress for a while but this interlude allowed us to have a snowball fight. Slightly further on, one of our vehicles pulled off the road and into a snow covered ditch to allow a car coming the other way to pass – with a little bit of shovelling we were back on the road though. The poor visibility did not do us any favours in having another look for Caucasian Black Grouse, and it was with some relief that we managed to get over the pass and arrive in Gudauri.

The snow quickly thinned and we wound our way down to the valley floor stopping initially in the village of Pasaunauri (N42 21 02.5, E44 41 21.6). While our drivers purchased some of the local vodka, we had our eyes on the skies noting a **Lesser Spotted Eagle** and half a dozen **Honey Buzzards** cruising over the ridge. Several **Bullfinches** were vocal in the nearby trees along with a **Redstart** and **Nuthatch**. We continued along the valley, stopping by the side of the road (N42 17 33.7, E44 41 16.3) near Muguda where **Honey Buzzards** were again seen migrating over the ridge and a couple of **Red-backed Shrikes**, three **Crag Martins** and a **Grey Wagtail** were also seen. We were then forced to an impromptu stop by a massive group of sheep spread across the road – having done the touristy thing and taken photos of the scene, the river that we'd been following opened out into a large lake near Ananuri.

The sand and stony islands on this lake provided some good birding. We viewed the area from the layby adjacent to a small castle at N42 09 48.8, E44 42 08.0. Hundreds of **White-winged Black Terns** provided an immediate impact along with smaller numbers of **Whiskered Terns** (c.40) and **Gull-billed Terns** (15+). Four large white-headed gulls gave those who were interested the usual headache, with the consensus being an adult and three first-summer **Heuglin's Gulls**. A couple of **Ospreys** were perched on the bank of the lake before they flew off while waders included a couple of **Ruff** and **Common Sandpipers**. A single **Teal** and a couple of **Mallard** were the only ducks present. Turning our backs to the lake, a **Common Rosefinch** was singing and good numbers of raptors were migrating over the nearby forest – at least 40 **Honey Buzzards**, a pale morph **Booted Eagle** and a couple of **Montagu's Harriers** in the half an hour or so we were present. We left this site happy with our haul, some of us taking up the offer from the local drivers and sampling the local vodka.

Just a couple of kilometres further along the road, I'd been given a site by Hugues Dufourny for Green Warbler just beyond the bridge at N42 09 08.1, E44 44 00.2. Despite searching, we were evidently a little early and the bird we'd seen at Kazbegi yesterday was to be our only sighting of the species during this trip. Nevertheless we

did find **Red-breasted Flycatcher**, **Syrian Woodpecker**, **Common Rosefinch** here as well as another handful of **Honey Buzzards** migrating over.

In murky conditions, we continued towards Tbilisi and arrived at the Explore Georgia offices during a downpour. Having met up with Maria and the team, we dropped off our stuff and headed out again in our transport to Lake Lisi. This reed fringed lake is only fifteen minutes or so away from the city centre so is well worth a visit as a first or a last stop on a trip. Unfortunately our visit coincided with some torrential rain but we still were impressed with what we saw. The scrub on the opposite side of the road to the lake where we parked (N41 44 25.5, E44 44 03.4) held a **Lesser Grey Shrike**, three **Red-backed Shrikes**, a couple of **Wrynecks**, a **Golden Oriole** and a reeling **Grasshopper Warbler**. Looking down into the reedbed below, at least two **Paddyfield Warblers** eventually showed themselves along with several **Sedge Warblers** and good numbers of **Great Reed Warblers**. A **Bittern** could be heard booming from the far side of the lake while a **Purple Heron**, a couple of **Squaccos** and many **Grey Herons** were present in the marshy fields at the back of the lake. The squally conditions dropped in a flock of twenty or so **White-winged Black Terns** and a **Montagu's Harrier** flew over. The conditions eventually got to us and all drenched, we headed back to Tbilisi to change and sort ourselves out for our flight in the early hours.

With time to kill during the evening before our flight, Maria booked us in at a restaurant in Tbilisi. The evening was highly amusing largely due to Richard Stephenson, and a fitting end to an enjoyable trip.

### 7<sup>th</sup> May 2008

Everything went very smoothly with our early hours return flights to Munich and Prague respectively. By the afternoon, all eleven of us had arrived back in London where for once the sun was shining.

#### SPECIES LIST

**Mallard** *Anas platyrhynchos*  
**Garganey** *Anas querquedula*  
**Teal** *Anas crecca*  
**Caucasian Black Grouse** *Tetrao mlokosiewiczi*  
**Caucasian Snowcock** *Tetraogallus caucasicus*  
**Common Quail** *Coturnix coturnix coturnix*  
**Little Grebe** *Tachybaptus ruficollis capensis*  
**Great Crested Grebe** *Podiceps cristatus cristatus*  
**Bittern** *Botaurus stellaris stellaris*  
**Squacco Heron** *Ardeola ralloides*  
**Grey Heron** *Ardea cinerea cinerea*  
**Purple Heron** *Ardea purpurea purpurea*  
**Honey Buzzard** *Pernis apivorus*  
**Black Kite** *Milvus migrans migrans*  
**Lammergeier** *Gypaetus barbatus aureus*  
**Griffon Vulture** *Gyps fulvus fulvus*  
**Marsh Harrier** *Circus aeruginosus aeruginosus*

**Montagu's Harrier** *Circus pygargus*  
**Sparrowhawk** *Accipiter nisus nisus*  
**Buzzard** *Buteo buteo menetriesi*  
**Long-legged Buzzard** *Buteo rufinus rufinus*  
**Lesser Spotted Eagle** *Aquila pomarina*  
**Golden Eagle** *Aquila chrysaetos homeyeri*  
**Booted Eagle** *Hieraaetus pennatus*  
**Common Kestrel** *Falco tinnunculus tinnunculus*  
**Hobby** *Falco subbuteo subbuteo*  
**Common Moorhen** *Gallinula chloropus chloropus*  
**Eurasian Coot** *Fulica atra atra*  
**Ruff** *Philomachus pugnax*  
**Wood Sandpiper** *Tringa glareola*  
**Common Sandpiper** *Actitis hypoleucos*  
**Black-headed Gull** *Larus ridibundus*  
**Heuglin's Gull** *Larus heuglini*  
**Gull-billed Tern** *Gelochelidon nilotica nilotica*  
**Common Tern** *Sterna hirundo hirundo*  
**Whiskered Tern** *Chlidonias hybrida hybrida*  
**White-winged Black Tern** *Chlidonias leucopterus*  
**Rock Dove** *Columba livia gaddi*  
**Wood Pigeon** *Columba palumbus palumbus*  
**Collared Dove** *Streptopelia decaocto decaocto*  
**Turtle Dove** *Streptopelia turtur turtur*  
**Laughing Dove** *Streptopelia senegalensis*  
**Common Cuckoo** *Cuculus canorus canorus*  
**Common Swift** *Apus apus apus*  
**European Roller** *Coracias garrulus garrulus*  
**Wryneck** *Jynx torquilla torquilla*  
**Syrian Woodpecker** *Dendrocopos syriacus*  
**Crested Lark** *Galerida cristata*  
**Shore Lark** *Eremophila alpestris penicillata*  
**Sand Martin** *Riparia riparia riparia*  
**Eurasian Crag Martin** *Ptyonoprogne rupestris*  
**Barn Swallow** *Hirundo rustica rustica*  
**House Martin** *Delichon urbicum urbicum*  
**Red-throated Pipit** *Anthus cervinus*  
**Meadow Pipit** *Anthus pratensis pratensis*  
**Water Pipit** *Anthus spinoletta coutellii*  
**Grey Wagtail** *Motacilla cinerea*  
**White Wagtail** *Motacilla alba dukhenensis*  
**Dipper** *Cinclus cinclus caucasicus*  
**Wren** *Troglodytes troglodytes hyrcanus*  
**Dunnock** *Prunella modularis obscura*  
**Alpine Accentor** *Prunella collaris montana*  
**European Robin** *Erithacus rubecula caucasicus*  
**White-throated Robin** *Irania gutturalis*  
**Black Redstart** *Phoenicurus ochruros ochruros*  
**Common Redstart** *Phoenicurus phoenicurus samamisticus*  
**Guldenstadt's Redstart** *Phoenicurus erythrogaster erythrogaster*

**Whinchat** *Saxicola rubetra*  
**Stonechat** *Saxicola rubicola rubicola*  
**Northern Wheatear** *Oenanthe oenanthe lianotica*  
**Rock Thrush** *Monticola saxatilis*  
**Ring Ouzel** *Turdus torquatus amicornum*  
**Blackbird** *Turdus merula aterrimus*  
**Mistle Thrush** *Turdus viscivorus viscivorus*  
**Cetti's Warbler** *Cettia cetti orientalis*  
**Grasshopper Warbler** *Locustella naevia obscurior*  
**Sedge Warbler** *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*  
**Paddyfield Warbler** *Acrocephalus agricola*  
**Great Reed Warbler** *Acrocephalus arundinaceus arundinaceus*  
**Whitethroat** *Sylvia communis icterops*  
**Blackcap** *Sylvia atricapilla dammholzi*  
**Green Warbler** *Phylloscopus nitidus*  
**Willow Warbler** *Phylloscopus trochilus*  
**Mountain Chiffchaff** *Phylloscopus lorenzii*  
**Spotted Flycatcher** *Muscicapa striata striata*  
**Coal Tit** *Parus ater michalowskii*  
**Blue Tit** *Parus caeruleus satunini*  
**Great Tit** *Parus major major*  
**Wallcreeper** *Tichodroma muraria muraria*  
**Nuthatch** *Sitta europaea caucasica*  
**Golden Oriole** *Oriolus oriolus oriolus*  
**Red-backed Shrike** *Lanius collurio kobylini*  
**Lesser Grey Shrike** *Lanius minor*  
**Eurasian Jay** *Garrulus glandarius krynicki*  
**Magpie** *Pica pica pica*  
**Alpine Chough** *Pyrrhocorax graculus*  
**Red-billed Chough** *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*  
**Western Jackdaw** *Corvus monedula*  
**Hooded Crow** *Corvus cornix sharpii*  
**Raven** *Corvus corax corax*  
**Common Starling** *Sturnus vulgaris purpurascens*  
**House Sparrow** *Passer domesticus*  
**Snow Finch** *Montifringilla nivalis alpicola*  
**Chaffinch** *Fringilla coelebs caucasica*  
**Red-fronted Serin** *Serinus pusillus*  
**European Greenfinch** *Chloris chloris turkestanica*  
**European Goldfinch** *Carduelis carduelis brevirostris*  
**Twite** *Carduelis flavirostris brevirostris*  
**Common Rosefinch** *Carpodacus erythrinus kubanesis*  
**Great Rosefinch** *Carpodacus rubicilla rubicilla*  
**Bullfinch** *Pyrrhula pyrrhula rossikowi*  
**Ortolan Bunting** *Emberiza hortulana*