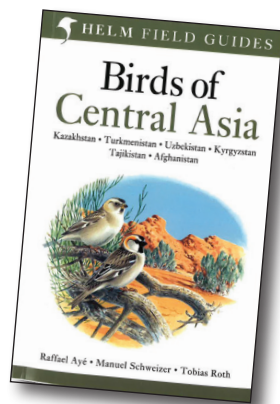


REVIEW

Birds of Central Asia

Raffael Ayé, Manuel Schweizer & Tobias Roth
Christopher Helm, London. 2012.
Softback. 336 pages. 143 colour plates
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I first visited Kazakhstan in 1987 and recall the problems of finding any suitable literature covering the country. European field guides did not include the specialities and I had to fall back on the late Vladimir Flint's *Birds of the USSR*, which did include all the species but otherwise fell short by modern standards. A field guide to the birds of Kazakhstan and surrounding countries has long been overdue and finally we have *Birds of Central Asia* added to the Helm series of guides.

The book includes details of 618 species in its 336 pages, covering the area from Kazakhstan in the north to Afghanistan in the south. It is a relatively slim volume and follows the now established format of previous Helm guides. The first 33 pages comprise the introductory chapters, including the usual glossary of terms, a chapter on taxonomy (of which more later) and 16 half-page habitat photographs, which if nothing else serve to showcase the stunning variety of habitats in the region.

The bulk of the book naturally comprises the list of species, with the text on the left opposite the appropriate plate. Initial impressions of any field guide are often drawn from a quick glance at the illustrations and not many readers will be disappointed here. Thirteen different artists were used and a number of the 143 plates have been previously used in other field guides. The general standard of the artwork varies from good to very good. The whole point of illustrations in a field guide is to complement the text, thus enabling a correct identification to be made, and in nearly all examples this will be the case. The text is neatly laid out with normally 3–5 species per page. Key identification features are emboldened and the text is of a high standard. Distribution maps are included for all but vagrant species and

common non-breeding migrants; although on the small side, they appear to be as accurate as possible within the limits of our current understanding of distribution in the region.

Other than taxonomic splits, only one unfamiliar species is included in the region's avifauna, namely the near-mythical Large-billed Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus orinus*, previously known from only one specimen obtained in northern India in 1867. The species then went unrecorded for more than 100 years until, due to pioneering work by Lars Svensson, Raffael Ayé and others, it was found in various specimen collections and is now known to breed in the region. In brief, visiting birders should carefully check all presumed Blyth's Reed Warblers *A. dumetorum* breeding at high altitude from Afghanistan northwards to southern Kazakhstan.

The dramatic rate of taxonomic changes is making life for those of us who work in the field a nightmare, and authors must also be struggling to keep up with the latest thinking. Many of the generally accepted splits are included such as Booted *Iduna caligata*/Sykes's Warblers *I. rama* and Taiga *Ficedula albicilla*/Red-breasted Flycatchers *F. parva*, but some others might cause consternation. Turkestan *Lanius phoenicuroides* and Daurian Shrikes *L. isabellinus* are split with *arenarius* (the so-called Chinese Shrike) included within the latter, despite its different wintering grounds. Mention is made of hybridisation between Turkestan and Red-backed Shrikes *L. collurio*, which is a real problem where the two come together. I was surprised to see that the grey shrike complex is now split into three species, with a 'new' Asian Grey Shrike, including both *pallidirostris* and *aucheri*, two forms that to my eyes could not be more different within the complexity of this group. We now have two golden orioles with *kundoo*

now a full species, named Indian Golden Oriole *Oriolus kundoo*. Turkestan Tit *Parus bokharensis* appears to be lumped with Great Tit *P. major*, but without great conviction in the text, although hybridisation between the two is widespread. Yellow-breasted Tit *Cyanistes flavipectus* started life as a race of Azure Tit *C. cyanus*, was then afforded specific status but is now relegated to a race of Azure Tit—all very confusing. Perhaps the biggest shock is the treatment of the larks. Anyone who has visited the deserts of Kazakhstan and surrounding areas will have found the *Calandrella* larks a problem. We have been accustomed to the *longipennis* race of Greater Short-toed Lark *C. brachydactyla* sharing habitat with *heinei* Lesser Short-toed Lark *C. rufescens*. Additionally, the search has been on to find the *leucophaea* race of Asian Short-toed Lark *C. cheleensis*. We are now led to believe there are no Lesser Short-toed Larks in the region and that *heinei* is in fact an Asian Short-toed and that *leucophaea* is probably another species. It may well have been best to leave the nomenclature as it was, until the true status of *leucophaea* becomes established. The latest information suggests that the Aral sea might be the place to look rather than lake Balkhash, where many of the older records came from. The Lesser Whitethroats *Sylvia curruca* are dealt with well, nominate in the north with *halimodendri* occupying other areas. True desert birds *S. minula* are probably scarce and not separable from *halimodendri*. It is good to see that the migratory Indian House Sparrow *Passer indicus* has been split, as this taxon breeds alongside the resident House Sparrow *P. domesticus*, and the males at least are diagnosable in the field.

The systematic list is followed by a collection of doubtfully recorded species prior to 1950. Some may regard the authors as

being somewhat harsh. Knowing the wealth of ornithological talent formerly based at Almaty it would be surprising if White-naped *Grus vipio* and Hooded Cranes *G. monacha* would have been misidentified and equally Chestnut-eared Bunting *Emberiza fucata* has been recorded twice from Uzbekistan and yet does not find favour in this book.

To summarise, the *Birds of Central Asia* is an excellent guide and an absolute must for anyone travelling to the region. Excellent concise text, good artwork and a wealth of fine detail. The more you delve into it, the more you realise the commitment the authors have for this region. Finding faults is surprisingly difficult, one could argue with some of the taxonomy but the authors clearly state the authorities they have chosen to follow. Kazakhstan's only endemic bird Panders Ground Jay *Podoces panderi* of the race *ilensis* could have been better covered as we are given no indication of how to separate from the nominate. Common Scoter *Melanitta nigra* is treated as specifically distinct from Black Scoter *M. americana*, yet the Common Scoter on plate 11 is labelled Black Scoter. It would have been good to know in which of the countries the vagrants have occurred. This information must have been available to the authors during their research and it is a pity they have not shared it with us. All this is, however, nit-picking and in no way detracts from the book's usefulness.

As the authors state, there is much to learn about the avifauna of Central Asia and this slim volume will greatly facilitate that process. With the *Collins Bird Guide*, *Birds of the Middle East*, and now *Birds of Central Asia* we have three excellent field guides to cover the OSME region. I cannot recommend the latest addition too highly.

P A Lassey