

## Winter Photography

A fourteen day photography tour through Georgia and Azerbaijan

3<sup>rd</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> December 2019

## Trip Report



Güldenstädt's Redstart *Phoenicurus erythrogastrus*  
Picture by Alexander Rukhaia

**Tour leaders:** Alexander Rukhaia and Steven An  
**Trip report complete by:** Alexander Rukhaia

## Introduction

This tour was planned in summer 2018, when Chinese bird photographer visited Georgia for a week time, in order to explore opportunities for the future trips. This time we visited Greater Caucasus Mountains of Kazbegi Region and steppe hotspots to the east of Georgia. Despite of reasonably warm temperatures, non-breeding and long ago passed migration, we did manage to see and photograph a very nice set of resident birds, especially in the country's east; Eastern Imperial, Steppe and Lesser Spotted Eagles, Pallid and Montagu's Harriers, Eurasian Griffon, Cinereous and Egyptian Vultures, Chukar Partridge, Isabelline, Black-eared, Pied and Finsch's Wheatears, Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin, Western Rock Nuthatch and many more. Unfortunately, in Kazbegi we were not able to see Gldenstdt's Redstart and Great Rosefinch, because birds were already high up, while we didn't even try to take a hike for them. On the other hand we did photograph a Wallcreeper, Red-fronted Serin, Golden Eagle, Lammergeier and other high altitude wings, and we also saw Caucasian Black Grouses and Caucasian Snowcocks through scope.

By the end of this journey we had a few ideas in mind for the future tour for Chinese photographers, but surprisingly at the end we did point on winter season, with a focus on wintering highlights, but it would be short concentrating in only one country, and then came an idea to extend number of days and therefore expand the diversity, so this is how Azerbaijan got into our loop. It was just an idea, but still long way to go, first with proper planning and then preparations.

Finally it was decided to organize seven days in Georgia and another seven in Azerbaijan. In this way group would arrive to Tbilisi, Georgian capital and depart back from Baku, capital of Azerbaijan. From a logistic point of view it was doable, but we had to find right dates, as in terms of diversity, as well as in terms of weather conditions. After a long emailing we have chosen mid of December as a commencement date. For most of the target species this period would suit very well, as well as looking back to the weather history it would be the best period in December... also it would allow people to arrive back home just before new year. Finally all narratives were ready to be presented and we were also looking forward for first signs, but considering the fact that Georgia and Azerbaijan would not be very well known countries in China, we did not put big hopes for swift attention, but knew in advance that it would take some time for recruitment. It was silent until mid of October, when we received a group of four photographers interested to join, but they asked for date change to the beginning of December. Despite of such a short notice and request for date change, we did agree and started immediate preparation works. Finally everything was set... fingers crossed!

## The tour map



## Summary

**Day 1 | 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2019:** Our group of five photographers arrived a night before the commencement date. The plain from China has landed as planned at 21:35 and meeting in the airport's exit gate, we quickly transferred to our fancy hotel in the center of Tbilisi. This hotel nicely fits into the overall interior of the historical Avlabari district, with big outdoor terraces above the Kura River, providing lovely views over the Old City. Here we had our first Georgian breakfast, enjoying surrounding sceneries and some of the journey's first



Alpine Accentor

birds, including Armenian Gulls, Pigmy Cormorants, a flock of Black-crowned Night Herons roosting in the tree and some other common sights. After breakfast we took off straight to the Greater Caucasus Mountains. Our driver smartly and carefully escaped all traffic jams, when leaving the city and driving thorough the so called former military road, in about two hours' time we have already reached the popular viewpoint, where spotted our first Bearded Vulture and Golden Eagle soaring above the gorge; quite a usual sight for this place. Unfortunately this time not on proper photography distance, but instead we got very well approachable Alpine Accentors. It was nice and sunny day, with very good early afternoon light, so certainly we made quite amount of quality shots.

Driving further, after about wife kilometers, one of our group mates shouted; another Lammergeier. We immediately stopped, got out, but by the time we organized our equipment the bird was already far away. We decided to wait a while and suddenly after maybe ten minutes or so the bird appeared gliding in its manner towards us, and then soaring on a background of the snow covered mountain top... what a dream scene, and it became even more dramatic, when just from nowhere a Golden Eagle joined it. With such



Lammergeier

exciting activities we were almost one hour behind the schedule and late for lunch, but looked like nobody really cared about lunch. Soon both birds disappeared beyond the mountains and we moved on. Reaching our hotel, we first checked in, had a short rest and then enjoyed our delicious lunch in the hotel restaurant. After lunch we went not far, but visited closest patch with sea buckthorn grows, a habitat, where Great Rosefinches and Gldenstdt's Redstarts winter. Undoubtedly we had good views of both species, and in addition a small flock of Horned Larks, Rock Buntings, some thrushes, such as Redwings, Fieldfares, Ring Ouzels and another Lammergeier. We found it interesting also to walk around and explore the valley, where spent the rest of the day until it got dark. Nice dinner was already served for us in hotel.

**Day 2 | 4<sup>th</sup> December 2019:** Today we faced some weather challenges; it was foggy entire day, with little snowflakes time to time, and the temperature dropped to -12. Despite of such tough conditions, after breakfast we went out anyways and first visited an eastern from the village gorge. It was unusually quiet, unless a few Gldenstdt's Redstarts in passive move, Blackbirds, a flock of Fieldfares and Alpine (Yellow-billed) Choughs flying around.



With such a slow activity we decided to make a coffee break out in the field, while dreaming for weather change. Based at a higher elevation, views around our townlet seemed cleaner and soon we relocated lower down to the river valley. Parking the bus and just before getting out, we spotted a few male Redstarts roosting on the bush tops. It was at least much better light here, quite suitable for photography work, as well as bird activity looked a lot more attractive, with many Redstarts, both males and females approachable on a nice distance and a flock of fourteen Great Rosefinches busy chewing the sea buckthorns seeds. This time we did not stay in one group, but spread to the different sections. Roughly after two hours of a hard work we were frozen enough and ready for going back to hotel, but with very good results. In the hotel's restaurant we were having well needed hot tea, while waiting for our lunch to be served and watching out for any movements, when spotted couple of Griffons, Lammergeier and Golden Eagle circling against the fog.



Güldenstädt's Redstart

After lunch we went southwards and to the gorge, where resident Golden Eagles can be well observed all year round, but arriving to the place it was disappointing to see entire gorge covered in fog. Staying here no long, we relocated towards the Russian border, a place with breathtaking landscape views. It was also foggy here and in addition it started to snow. From bird perspectives, only Long-tailed Tits we could hear... hiding in the pines. So, it was best time for cultural activities and we went in to the recently reconstructed big monastery complex and had a nice meet and chat with a local priest, who has later invited us to the fireplace in the monastery's library, where we met another frozen people sheltering here, a couple from Great Britain. We spoke little bit about everything, including politics and the influence of the Soviet Era on Georgia ☺ probably one of the popular topics to touch while visiting Georgia or any other Post Soviet countries in the Caucasus region, especially being so close to the Russian border. So, that was it and soon we headed back to hotel, where the hotel manager organized for us a special farewell dinner.





**Day 3 | 5<sup>th</sup> December 2019:** Our last morning in Kazbegi; It was snowing last night, but surprisingly clean and sunny in the morning, just a bit chilly as usually this time. Much more white around and we could enjoy incredible views of the Kazbegi Mountain, while having our breakfast. Before checking out from hotel we did visit an eastern gorge again, just in order to see Caucasian Black Grouses and Caucasian Snowcocks before departure. A few Red Foxes were roaming on the snow covered slope, Grouses settled much higher up. We could see them very well, but only through the scope - 13 males hanging together. We couldn't hear any call of Snowcocks and unfortunately the road going up to the better place, where they are usually seen from, was covered in snow, so we didn't want to risk driving uphill and acquire in trouble, before planned long way to the east. Besides Grouses, we also had a few Ring Ouzels, Güldenstädt's Redstarts and Great Rosefinches again, but nobody really cared to make any more pictures that we had them so many last days, but group were rather busy landscapes photography.



Great Rosefinch

Maybe little more than an hour here and we went back to hotel to check out and head off to the eastern Georgia. Before completely leaving Kazbegi region, we still made a few stops along the way, including one for lunch not far from the viewpoint. We did serve our table right in front of the nice looking gorge and enjoyed our leisurely lunch, while waiting for anything flying by to capture, but Alpine Choughs and paragliders were the only and most active targets, unless three Red-fronted Serins, which we saw, but have not been quick enough to nail. Four and a half hours drive, including one well needed stop and we have arrive to our hotel in Signaghi, a small historical town at an elevation of 740 meters, with great views over the Alazani River Valley, just opposite to the Greater Caucasus Mountain ridge. Another very nice and wealthy dinner and then we had a brief group gathering next to the cozy fire place, discussing plans for tomorrow and next three days of our photography workshop in Georgia's savannah.



Mta Kazbegi 5033 m



Gergeti Trinity Church 2170 m



Dariali Monastery



Friendship Monument, Gudauri



**Day 4 | 6<sup>th</sup> December 2019:** Today we had slightly earlier breakfast, since we had to make a long drive to the nature reserve along the border with Azerbaijan. A lot promising, nice and sunny day, still a bit chilly in the morning, but much warmer during the day, than in the Greater Caucasus. Some small birds were seen in the backyard of our hotel during breakfast, including Greenfinches, Goldfinches, Hawfinches and one Lesser Spotted Woodpecker pecking on a tree in front of the hotel's restaurant. We set off at yet first morning light to photograph Sighnaghi town on the way. Beautiful scenery indeed, with clean blue sky and clear views of the Greater Caucasus Mountains on a background.



Sighnaghi Town 836 m

Today we wanted to draw the attention on Little Bustards and it took us a while of driving and scanning around, before we finally spotted a large flock of several hundred individuals. Following them for some time, we decided it was write place to settle for long. Suddenly, in a few minutes time after we started organizing our tools, few other flocks did rise as well and started murmuring around. Wherever we would look, Bustards were all over... what a delightful spectacle to watch. It was quite an easy process that we had to settle mainly on same spot or relocate only short distances mainly by walk and sometime by car. We spent here almost entire day as planned and headed back to hotel after sunset. Little Bustards were not the only wings we could photograph here, but also very nice low flying Cinereous Vultures and couple of adult Eastern Imperial Eagles. Before venturing back to hotel



after such a productive day, we tried to experiment and have prepared fresh meet and bones for tomorrow, in order to attract some raptors.



Little Bustards



Little Bustards



**Day 5 | 7<sup>th</sup> December 2019:** Today we returned back to the same place, where we had two adult Imperial Eagles yesterday. Not far from this place two eagle nests are found, which are active almost every spring, since their discovery in 2014. We all agreed to focus particularly on Eastern Imperial Eagle photography today and upon arrival to the spot, first of all we started exploring the area, potentially suitable to hide, with nice background views and proper light hit. When we found such a place, just roughly about sixty meters away we did put up beef meet and mainly bones, which we bought yesterday evening. *Just a reminder, that it was spontaneous experiment, we all wanted to give a try, without big expectations. Normally such method works when putting up meet and bones at least a day or night earlier.*



Spending almost two hours in the hide it didn't really brought any results. We could see two eagles seating on the pylon about five hundred meters away, but they have not taken any broad flight, but rather moved only on short distances from one pylon to another. It was already late lunch o'clock and we all walked to our vehicle to eat. During lunch we discussed about changing photography method and it was decided to try first driving as closer as possible to the bird and shoot from the open windows. We tried it and it worked very well. After an hour try, both birds seemed quite relaxed about us and it was decided to try on walk, so what we actually did; we drove and parked our vehicle about two hundred meters away, got out, prepared and made first shots. Then we moved on fifteen meters closer and did same. Then another fifteen meters and so on, until we reached it on thirty/fifty meters distance. When everyone got enough pictures of seating bird, we stayed quietly and waited until bird would spread the wings to shoot it in flight. That was probably a last and one of the most successful captures of today. We all agreed on completion of the daily task and headed back to hotel for longer rest before dinner. On the way back we could again spot big flock of about one thousand Little Bustards murmuring above the same place we had them yesterday.



Eastern Imperial Eagle





**Day 6 | 8<sup>th</sup> December 2019:** Sadly it was time to leave this extraordinary region and travel back to Tbilisi, capital of Georgia, but before that it was planned to visit famous birding hotspot, the David Gareji Monastery. It took us roughly about three hours' of a normal speed drive from Signaghi town to the monastery, including one short stop on the way, with nicely seen Pheasant *Colchicus group*, a native to Georgia and to the Caucasus. Unfortunately we had no chance to photograph it, since it did not let us get on proper distance, and we also had no time to wait for long. Arriving to the monastery, we started preparing our heavy equipment, while enjoying incredible landscape views around monastery complex. Before starting our workshop, we did also spread some bird feed in different places as an attraction.



Wallcreeper

We started exploring from the central building of the monastery complex, where one of the first birds we spotted was a Western Rock Nuthatch, one of our primary targets here. It seemed like we would settle in this spot for long. Indeed, a bird gave us very good photography opportunities posing in front of the lenses, like photo model. Sometime later a Wallcreeper flew in to the monastery yard, sticking onto the rocky wall in front, and creeping up and sides in its usual manner. It was totally panicky photography process, jumping from one target to another. Spending about two exciting hours with these two cool birds, we became slightly relaxed, felt even hungry and walked down to our vehicle for picnic lunch and coffee outdoor. Some people decided to take their portion back to the monastery and eat there, in order not to miss any important chance to photograph these birds again.



Our lunch did not last for long, but it was rather quick snacking and the rest of the group has also rushed back to the monastery yard. A few tens or why not hundreds of more shots of Nuthatch and Wallcreeper were made, when group has finally felt satisfied with workshop results and we have relocated lower down to the scrubby patch outside the monastery, where some other nice targets awaited us here; a flock of about fifty Red-fronted Serins, couple of Hawfinches, Rock Bunting, Rock Sparrow and European Robin, that has so much excited the group, because they do not have this common representative of the European fauna back in China and for most of the group mates this bird was a lifer. Over two hours we spent here photographing these different birds and left the monastery only in the late evening. On the way to Tbilisi we did also visit the lake, a big water body between



Western Rock Nuthatch



Georgia and Azerbaijan administrative borders. By the time of our arrival it was already getting dark, so we have not seen much here, unless a few Wrens, White Wagtails, Common Kingfisher, Western Marsh Harriers, some gulls, including one Slender-billed and several Armenians, as well as some other common sights. We summarized this day with big traditional Georgian dinner and wine, and raised a toast for successful Georgian part... tomorrow we will head for a week to Azerbaijan.

Red-fronted Serin



**Day 7 | 9<sup>th</sup> December 2019:** Today we had mainly a travel day to Azerbaijan. In the morning before breakfast the group has settled in the hotel's terrace to photograph flying gulls and other birds, which are wealthy at this part of the Kura River, just a few hundred meters away from popular and touristy old town. After breakfast we loaded our luggage to the vehicle and ventured to the border. About one hour drive and we arrived to the customs, where Layla Muslim met us at the Georgian side of the border. *Leyla is local Azerbaijani birder, engaged in the annual bird counts at the Besh Barmag Migration Bottleneck and representing also the Nature Friends organization. She is one of not many young enthusiasts, nowadays raising in Azerbaijan as a future nature conservation leaders and good birders.*



Old Tbilisi from Hotel Terrace

Passing Georgian customs post it was quick and easy process, but it took us much longer at the Azerbaijani customs post, where we had to declare on paper all our photo equipment. Passing these formal procedures took us over two hours, before finally taking off to Mingachevir city. Due to these circumstances we were way behind the planned time schedule, and we still had to give almost three hours' drive to reach our next destination. Certainly we stopped a few times for quick pictures on the way, including one stop for small purchases in local supermarket and one more stop for lunch. We also made a few short pauses along the drive, trying to photograph Long-legged Buzzards nicely roosting on tree and electric pylon tops.





We arrived to hotel after sunset and it was already dark. We swiftly checked in to our comfortable rooms and then had our first and rich Azerbaijani dinner and wine, some well-deserved compensation after difficult day.

**Day 8 | 10<sup>th</sup> December 2019:** A drive of a bit more than an hour and we have reached an access road to the northern part of the big national park in the central brick of the country. From here it took us another hour until we reached last village at the national park boundaries, where decided to make a stop and explore surroundings. Not much we could see here, unless a few Reed Buntings, big flock of Bramblings and other common passerines. We didn't spend much time here, but relocated further eastwards, where found more-less suitable spot to settle; scanning shrubs over the national park we spotted three Goitered Gazelles a few hundred meters away.

Pygmy Cormorants were quite numerous today, alongside with various duck species, little flocks of Little Bustards and a few Dalmatian Pelicans flying by towards the lake. Little Bustards were also spotted later, feeding on one of not so many green plains, but every time we would try getting closer, birds would relocate elsewhere. Weather today was not good; not cold, but cloudy and dark than any other days before. Bird activity today was fine, even some interesting raptors in addition, but this day would not be bad rather for birdwatching, however not really successful for bird photography, so in the late afternoon we decided to head back and check for entry procedures to the main part on the national park for tomorrow morning. Driving back and passing through some reed grows, we spotted a few Black Francolins walking along the road. We did stop and tried to get closed carefully, but unsuccessfully; birds quickly disappeared in reeds and have not showed up again. Reaching the national park entry gate, we were asked to speak with director at first and Leyla has discussed with him all details on our visit for next morning. Certainly everything was agreed for tomorrow.

**Day 9 | 11<sup>th</sup> December 2019:** Arriving to the park as planned, we were warmly welcomed by the hospitable national park director and his colleague. We passed necessary registration, paid our entry fees and received some instructions necessary before entering into the area. Worth mentioning that we were first ever official bird photography groups, with a chance to access into this national park... quite a privilege. An impressive place indeed, with many small and big water bodies full of various wintering birds. Well organized



walking trails and viewing towers here allow to embrace a look almost on all primary areas. At one of such lakes we spotted big flock of Marbled Ducks *Population decreasing*; over a hundred individuals, alongside with various other waterfowl fauna, so that was the place, where group decided to explore closer. Very well seen Grey-headed Swampheens were also quite numerous here; eight individuals at this place and twelve more on the other lake later.

In the meantime, when group was busy on their own, we were busy preparing picnic lunch. Apart from nice walking trails and other infrastructure, national park also provides a few nice picnic areas next to the viewing towers. Weather was great today; sunny and warm, just perfect for having outdoor lunch, while keeping eyes on blue sky and surroundings... when a Pallid Harrier just showed off overhead and everyone immediately run to pick up cameras. After lunch we changed location more to the west and came across another shallow lake, with broad mudflats, where seven White-tailed Lapwings *Vanellus leucurus* were feeding. A few Common, Green, Wood and Marsh Sandpipers, were also here, alongside with Common and Spotted Redshanks, a flock of up to forty Black-tailed Godwits, a few Eurasian Curlews, hundreds of Northern Lapwings, Pygmy Cormorants,

various duck species, three Greater Flamingos and four Dalmatian Pelicans flying by, a few small flock of Little Bustards, twelve Grey-headed Swamphens, White-tailed Eagle and many more. Certainly we spent here entire afternoon and left the area only in the evening. Very productive day indeed, something we were all looking for and we would definitely stay longer if not our impending long way to another town and new experiences along the Caspian coast.

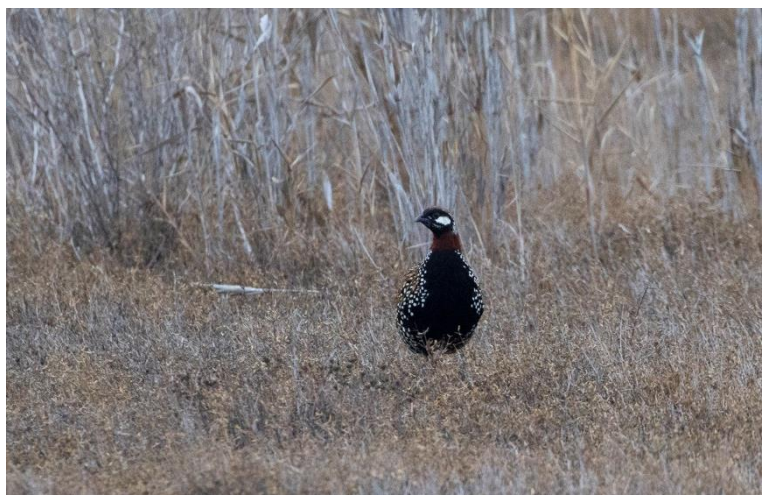
White-tailed Lapwing



Grey-headed Swamphen



**Day 10 | 12<sup>th</sup> December 2019:** Today we took off towards the Caspian Coast and another big national park, which was only recently opened for public access. For long time this place had a status of the state reserve, but this year, the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources of the Republic of Azerbaijan made changes in the current regulations and the area nowadays is officially opened for public, although here again, we were probably the first ever official groups accessing the area. The park itself covers big territory, composing some parts of the Caspian coastline, shallow waters around and huge lake in its central zone, which is also connected to the Caspian Sea. In the morning, just before reaching central gates of the park, we did stop at the boundary lakes next to the road, also part of the national park, with many marshes and wetlands around... it was full of birds this time; various ducks, waders, gulls and terns. It would definitely detain us for a few hours, but soon we were visited by representatives of the state reserve, inviting us to visit the park first and then return back to this place. We did so, but before that we gave



Black Francolin



a short visit to the coastal lagoons on the way to the reserve. Quite numerous waders here as well, Great and Pygmy Cormorants, and couple of Dalmatian Pelicans, but quite distant for photography.

Soon we arrived to the reserve gates. It took us some time to pass some necessary entry procedures; mainly filling up our personal details into the visitor's journal and paying entry fees. Very hospitable people here as well. The head of the local science department even let us settle in his laboratory to photograph Black Francolins from laboratory windows. He said his laboratory windows offer good and close views for best captures. We spent here about half an hour, before spotted Francolins on the other side. It was better



to come out and settle outside next to the visitor center, where we would get Francolins right on opposite direction. Here we spent entire afternoon photographing this beautiful bird... probably one of the most remarkable birding sights of Azerbaijan, that even local Ornithological Society, which is partner of the BirdLife International in Azerbaijan, uses this bird for a logotype of the organization. Surely, we did also go deeper into the reserve, again, with few more Francolins along the way, Northern Goshawk, Hen and Pallid Harriers and even one Golden Jackal very well seen, but since we were more into photography, rather than watching, we decided to return back to the visitor center to spend more time getting better Francolin images. This is how we spent entire day today.

**Day 11 | 13<sup>th</sup> December 2019:** The day of visiting Azerbaijan's one of the most popular national park, so everyone were very excited in the morning. On the way to the park we passed by a big lake, also known for its big concentration of wintering Greater Flamingos; we did roughly counted over 300 individuals, alongside with hundreds, hundreds and hundreds of diverse *Anatidae*. Very nice birding place indeed, but was difficult to get Flamingos on proper photography distance, unless we could stay longer to photograph them in flight or get little closer using fishing shallop, but then we would be very late for national park, which was today's target area. Well organized park by the way; nice personnel, also quick in operations.



Greater Flamingo

Very comfortable birdwatching hides and nicely arranged signs, as well as some of the quality bio life. Once we entered national park, we spotted several Goitered Gazelles, then many little packs repeatedly. Gazelles are well approachable on photography distance and super common sight here, with significant population of a few thousand individuals, just in this place. Little Bustards were also quite numerous today, Hen Harrier, White-tailed Eagle, various Swans and other waterfowl in the lake, along with several Dalmatian Pelicans, but everything else was forgotten in a second, when Black Francolins started showing up and nicely posing, maybe about ten meters away, but often even closer. We stayed in the bus, opened windows and kept photographing from inside. Beyond belief, but despite of nonstop loud shutter sounds, panicky shouts and all crazy movements in the bus, birds seemed still very relaxed. I, as a tour leader had not very good opportunities for photography this time, as most of the other times, since I had to give way to others from my group, but I did manage to

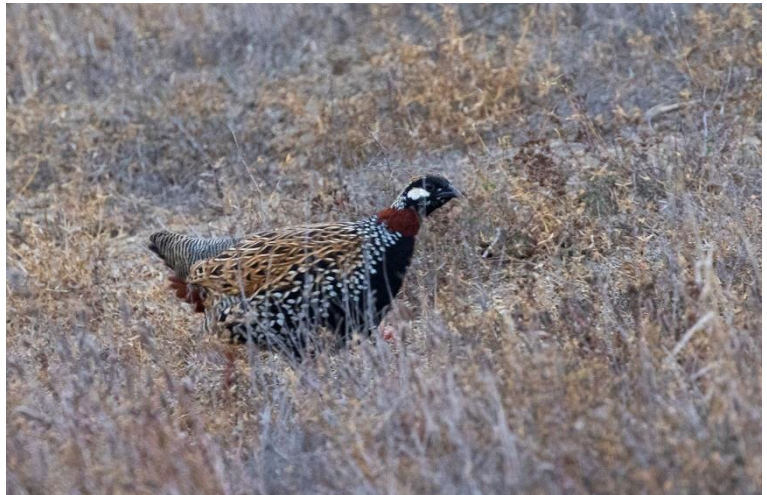


make a few more or less fine captures. Soon it got dark and we started way back to hotel. Group was very excited from this memorable day and during dinner I was asked to arrange somehow return back to the same park again tomorrow. Certainly it was easy task, because we would pass this place anyway tomorrow on the way to Baku, a capital of Azerbaijan, so it was just a matter of slight changes in tomorrow's itinerary.



Goitered Gazelles

**Day 12 | 14<sup>th</sup> December 2019:** In the morning we firstly visited river delta at the Caspian coast, a drive of about an hour from our hotel. Nice birdwatching opportunities here, but photography activities would require much more effort. It was a bit windy, cold, no sunlight and birds were also unreachable for lenses, so it was good excuse to escape swiftly and drive directly to the national park, as agreed yesterday. It was early lunch time, when we arrived to the park, but before entering into the area, we decided to eat first. Nice restaurant



Black Francolin

was just two minutes away, so we went there. As usually, Leyla made an order for us and we started traditionally with cup of local tasty tea. At backyard garden of the restaurant little flock of Little Bustards were feeding in a small green field, about fifteen meters away. We could watch it right from restaurant's widows. We tried to go out and photograph them, but soon birds were forced away by local dogs. Few little flocks were yet flying overhead... in general, quite good number of Little Bustards today, a lot more than we saw yesterday, also inside the park. Probably because of weather.

It was much warmer and sunny here today. A lot of Goitered Gazelles in the park as usually, a flock of about fifteen Dalmatian Pelicans soaring above so called Flamingo Lake, two White-tailed Eagles and many other birds. Hikmet, well-known local guide joined us today and he proposed to take a chance on resident Barn Owls after sunset, but before that, having much better sunlight than yesterday, group wanted to spend some time for Black Francolins again. We let group alone with birds and stayed ourselves at rangers' hat, where group





had to come later for Barn Owl photography. Approximately two hours later group returned back with incredible close up pictures of Black Francolins. As explained, they had several individuals on very close range. Cool pictures in very deed. Waiting a Barn Owl took us about an hour. It was already dark when we first heard them puffing from a hole in the roof, where they live. Soon three Barn Owls popped up one by one and started flying around for a few minutes, before finally landed in a tree in front of the building. Since the targets were in dark, I was asked to use a torchlight, but in respect of conservation concept and considering we were in the national park, I had to refuse. Surprisingly, this decision disappointed some of the group mates, so the only chance they had is to play with settings and use some of the night photography tricks. Of course, the photographs made in such challenging conditions would not be perfect, but conceptually absolutely fine. On the drive back to the entry gate, we saw some nice rodent - Small Five-toed Jerboa *Allactaga elater*, an interesting observation for everyone.

Flamingo Lake Viewpoint



**Day 13 | 15<sup>th</sup> December 2019:** Our last day was short. Initially we did visit some of the small coastal lakes not far from Baku City, as well as Caspian shore itself. Pretty same observations; Northern Shovelers, Mallards, Gadwalls, Pintails, Eurasian Teals, Common Shelducks, Great Scaups and other common sights, but what was new is a Pallas's Gull, two individuals. Today we returned back to hotel much earlier than usually, took a few hours rest and in the evening went out to photograph famous Flame Towers and other shining architectural structures of this glamorous city.

**Day 14 | 16<sup>th</sup> December 2019:** We still had quite a lot of hours, before group would take off back to China. In the morning we gave group some free time to go shopping, while I and Leyla had a very nice and useful meeting with Ms. Vusala Sarkhanova, the Thematic Product Specialist at the Tourism Board of Azerbaijan. We had a long meeting, discussing basically on different positive topics; Ms. Vusala highlighted series of important events planned for upcoming future for the development of birding and generally nature tourism in the country, including planned construction of the brand new observatory at the Besh Barmag Sanctuary. She has even showed us new location on a map, draft sketch and told us what kind of additional infrastructure is planned to be organized around bird sanctuary. Super impressive indeed! I was so much happy to hear about such a big and important effort taken by the government of Azerbaijan. *If you do not know this story yet; last year the government of Azerbaijan started construction of a new highway, connecting country to the Russian federation. The highway would lay across the former bird sanctuary at the Besh Barmag, but with an effort of many good people inside and outside the country, including the Tourism Board of Azerbaijan, the highway project was slightly corrected at the section of the Besh Barmag Bird Sanctuary, and moreover, it was alternative location found and appointed, where all above mentioned development is planned.* Very much looking forward to be there in 2020.

Leaving the meeting, with full of positive emotions, we went back to hotel meeting our group. We checked out, placed our luggage to the bus and went for walk around Old City of Baku. Such a great place to spend a few hours or certainly much more if time allows. Funny, but for lunch we had noodles and some other Chinese dishes in on of Asian restaurants in the center, because group wished

so for variety, after two weeks of having Caucasian food. ☺ After lunch we ventured straight to the airport and saw off a group back home.



Here we would like to thank few people, our friends for their kind support during planning, as well as implementation processes of this tour: Michael Heiss from Germany, Kai Gauger from Germany and Leyla Muslim from Azerbaijan. These are people who run monitoring and count of migratory birds at the Besh Barmag Bottleneck. The project is yet very young, but undoubtedly invaluable for bird science and bird protection in the Caucasus and the Western Palearctic migration corridors. The results they put on a table are simply incredible! In addition these people have managed to do a lot for birding tourism development in Azerbaijan, that now even government looks at it very seriously.

### Some of the primary target birds photographed on this tour:

1. Marbled Duck	<i>Marmaronetta angustirostris</i>
2. Dalmatian Pelican	<i>Pelecanus crispus</i>
3. Pygmy Cormorant	<i>Microcarbo pygmaeus</i>
4. Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>
5. Grey-headed Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio poliocephalus</i>
6. White-tailed Lapwing	<i>Vanellus leucurus</i>
7. Pallas's Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus ichthyaeus</i>
8. Black Francolin	<i>Francolinus francolinus</i>
9. Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>
10. Pine Bunting	<i>Emberiza leucocephalos</i>
11. Horned Lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>
12. Güldenstädt's Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus erythrogastrus</i>
13. Western Rock Nuthatch	<i>Sitta neumayer</i>
14. Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>
15. Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>
16. Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>
17. Red-fronted Serin	<i>Serinus pusillus</i>
18. Great Rosefinch	<i>Carpodacus rubicilla</i>
19. Bearded Vulture	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>
20. Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>
21. Black Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>
22. White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>
23. Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>
24. Eastern Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila heliaca</i>



## Overall Conclusions

- ✓ **Bird checklist:** In this trip report we will not be able to provide annotated bird checklist, but only some of the key targets, which were nicely photographed. None of our group members had a binocular, but only photo equipment, so the only interest was in birds, which could be photographed; short distance, good light and so on. To run checklist, at least we had to watch around, spot, identify and write down, like on any other birdwatching trip, but on this trip we had different agenda. In this way we did miss seeing and registering large amount of species, so providing incomplete list would not make a point.
- ✓ **Weather:** within these fourteen day we certainly had many nice and sunny days, also cloudy grey days and even foggy days, but luckily no single rainy day. Up in the Greater Caucasus Mountains it was cold, with maximum -5. Every other places later were a lot warmer, even at the Caspian coastline. Still, such a long trip in winter contains a risk of having rainy days, which should be considered whenever planning.
- ✓ **Process:** Certainly we had numerous good days, with lots of very good birds, but we did also have some days, with less bird activities. This is another predictable disadvantage of such a long bird photography tour. Also, in winter days are shorter, so focus on several targets a day is not an effective method, but better to pay one full day for only one particular target photography, in order to achieve satisfying results.
- ✓ **Difficulties:** One of our difficulties was that we had no hides. We did buy them in China in advance, but a bag, where they were placed did not make it between short connections from one plane to another in Beijing airport, so we had to improvise without them. Another difficulty we had at customs point of Azerbaijan, while crossing the border from Georgia to Azerbaijan, where group had to stay quite long to pass necessary declaration process for carrying expensive photo and optic equipment. It took us more than two hours and as a result we were late for photography spot on that day. Another small, but still a reasonable difficulty was a language barrier. None of group members spoke any English nor Russian, but only Chinese group leader did speak English. Such a language barrier kept us with no chance to communicate without translation and resulted into a lot of small, but time consuming challenges. It should be also noted that language barrier was another reason for staying longer at the customs point using three/four layers translation; between border police and me with Leyla, then between me and Leyla with Chinese group leader and then between Chinese group leader and group members... then all the way round.
- ✓ **Accommodation:** We stayed in very good and comfortable places, most of them were European ranking four and even one five star hotel. Only two nights we used relatively lower level accommodation and this only due to absence of any better options in the area or nearby, even within radius of forty minutes' drive away.
- ✓ **Meals:** In both countries we had very good food every day. Breakfast as breakfast, but still nice variety. Lunch we had mostly out in the field, also quite nice variety with both local white and dark bread, different sausages, cheese, olives, pate, pickles, vegetables, dry and fresh fruits, cookies and coffee/tea. Whenever we were close to the civilization, we used local restaurants for lunch. In the evening we always ate in hotel. Our dinners were wealthy, full of various traditional in both countries dishes on a table.
- ✓ **Transport:** We used unusual Mercedes Benz Sprinter 4x4 van. New vehicle, with new and clean interior and cool looking exterior. Probably too big for our group, but we all had comfortable seats, more than enough space for ourselves, plus equipment. Very organized transport, with large luggage space, all safety belts on board, properly working heating system and very nice driver.



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