



Mount Belukha, the highest peak in the Altai mountain range seen from high altitudes around Rahmanovsky lake.

Birding trip report by Bassel Abi Jummaa

NUR-SULTAN STEPPES AND NORTHEAST KAZAKHSTAN

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Since I started working in Kazakhstan back in 2018 and I had been always eager to travel around this prime birding destination in pursuit of its special bird species and stunning nature. From the central Asian semi deserts in the south to the northern steppes and the eastern mountain ranges , Kazakhstan offers plenty for birdwatchers and acts as a biodiversity hotspot in the very heart of Eurasia and a breeding stronghold to many Eurasian bird species . In addition it hosts several of the region's sought after and breeding regional specialities notably the endangered sociable lapwing, Saker falcon, Turkestan ground jay and black-headed penduline tit not to mention other avian species of central Asian origins.

Having seen many of these regional specialities in my previous trips to eastern Kazakhstan and many other migrant species in the west, I decided to make a birding trip covering the Steppes around the capital Nur-Sultan and later the extreme northeastern part of Kazakhstan to catch up with some Siberian species that cannot be found elsewhere in the country. This extreme northeast corner is a unique part of Kazakhstan falling within the Siberian taiga biome and considered to be the south western part of Siberia . It also encompasses the Kazakh part of the Altai mountain range shared with Russia , China and Mongolia .



Typical steppe habitat around Korgalzhyn.

Being a remote corner of Kazakhstan, I started arranging for the trip and seeking information on many aspects some time earlier. It was necessary to ensure knowledge on key localities, roads and accesses, fuel station locations and accommodations. The site (caravanistan.com) hosts plenty of valuable information and travel tips on touristic destinations around Kazakhstan .The article “ Ridder and the Kazakh taiga “ on the site is extremely invaluable and a must read for anyone interested in visiting the area .

Having known my friend Samir with whom I had previously done my both trips to Almaty area east of the country, I directly thought of approaching him and through regular conversations we agreed upon my proposed itinerary. Samir is a knowledgeable guide originally from Semipalatinsk city but residing in Almaty and operates tours mainly in that region and surroundings. He fits with all types of itineraries and loves adventures and does take risks although he drives in a very safe manner. On all the trips, he never hesitated to get me into the remote locations and was always positive, negotiable and encouraging to the extent that he drove all the way from Almaty to Semipalatinsk with the 4WD Pajero to start our trip and make it happen. He can be reached on the mobile number (+77051740006) and I do strongly recommend utilizing his services to any tourist visiting Kazakhstan.

The first leg of the trip to the northeast covered Ridder and the surrounding area while the second covered Katon karagay area along the Bukhtarma river valley and further east into lake Rahmanovsky close to the Russian border. The main locations visited around Ridder where the dense taiga forests along the black Ulba river and up to the village of Poperechnoye.

Also, I spared a complete day hiking up to the very scenic and spectacular Radon lake (Podbelkovoye lake in Russian). The second leg covered katon karagay area including Bukhtarma valley and Austrian road up to the high altitude Burkhat pass. Also, I visited the beautiful lake Rahmanovsky and its surrounding taiga forests at the extreme northeastern part of the region. All the checklists for recorded birds were submitted on bird.org.



Taiga forests around and close to Ridder, home to several species fond to this type of habitat and biome.

Accommodation and guiding.

In Korgalzhyn area I stayed in the old Russian style hotel owned by the guide Berlik and his wife . The stay was pleasant and both were welcoming and friendly. The place was clean but basic and a very good option for any birder visiting Korgalzhyn. It is worth to mention that Korgalzhyn area is vast with several internal unpaved roads and an unaware visitor can be easily lost . So a guide who is knowledgeable on the locations and road networks is of high necessity. Berlik can be reached on mobile number : +77053804477

In Ridder , we based ourselves in Altai hotel which is pretty good with very reasonable price and a nice restaurant . The staff at the reception was very friendly and helpful and when asked provided important and precise information on the area overall including information on transportation and the condition of the roads .



The guesthouse where we resided at Katon Karagay. A very lovely place.

At katon karagay town and upon arrival in the late evening, we never had a clue where to stay and base ourselves. However after several calls made by Samir our choice fell on one small Siberian style guesthouse owned by a lady named Zarina. We were both accommodated in one double bedroom and shared the toilet with the other guests . The guesthouse was clean and well maintained . The owner used to send us meals upon request with one of her relatives named Asiya and also gave us permission to fully utilize the kitchen where Samir had prepared dinner on several occasions . We were offered also an array of delicious pure local honey .It was very nice experiencing the rural lifestyle in such remote areas and merging into the daily way of life of the local residents . All in all, the place was pleasant and lovely. Zarina operates touristic tours and is very knowledgeable on the area and it's cultural aspects and can be reached on mobile phone number : +77026067997

Day 1- 29 June 2021 (Nur-Sultan and Korgalzhyn)

I woke up early as usual and soon received the message from Berlik awaiting down at the parking and with no traffic at all we quickly exited Nur-ultan heading south west through the steppes to Korgalzhyn . My plan was to utilize the full morning birding on the way to Korgalzhyn and reaching there by lunchtime . Our first stop was some kilometers from Nur-Sultan when I told Berlik to slow down after noticing a raptor in low flight over the wet fields on the right of the highway. It turned out to be a **short-eared owl** that never gave prolonged views and eventually headed north . I decided to check the spot and found myself amidst lush habitat and surrounded by several singing **common grasshopper warblers** of which I saw three individuals in flight . A **northern Lapwing** passed above as well as a **grey heron** .



One of the several booted warblers encountered in the vast steppes of Nur-Sultan and surroundings.

Walking around I came along a **Siberian stonechat** and later three **rosy starlings** seen in fast flight . A single **barn swallow** circled above and later three **common reed buntings** showed well. Minutes later a dry call within several meters away took my attention and soon a pair of **booted warblers** popped out from the scrub and flew to land meters ahead . Eventually they surrendered giving up great photos and views . Returning to the car I came along two feeding **Sykes' wagtails** . Proceeding towards Korgalzhyn we had another brief roadside stop that produced the first **red-footed falcon** of a female type and a **Eurasian kestrel** . Shortly after, a singing **bluethroat** put on great views as well as a pair of **Siberian stonechats** . **Eurasian skylarks** were on full song and the roadside scrub held a good breeding colony of **Sykes' wagtails** with most individuals noted still in Juvenile plumage . In the following hour or so , I had made a handful of quick birding stops and was very happy to encounter the first **black larks** which later turned out to be an abundant sight in the vast steppes of Korgalzhyn and surroundings . In addition, good numbers of **red-footed falcons** noted mostly perched on roadside trees . **Sykes' wagtails** were numerous and so **white-winged terns** . A single male **pallid harrier** noted and several **Lesser grey shrikes** also . Around mid morning we had almost reached Korgalzhyn but started a loop drive covering the area outside and around Korgalzhyn where I concentrated my birding on two small lakes. **Ruffs** in breeding plumage, **common and spotted redshanks**, **common greenshanks**, **Kentish plovers**, a single **little ringed plover** and a **Eurasian oystercatcher** all recorded . A congregation of gulls on both lakes was dominated by **Pallas's** and **common black-headed gulls** with only eleven **Steppe gulls** noted and a single **common gull** seen later in flight . **Greater flamingos** were numerous at the second lake and Waterfowl species recorded were a group of **common shelducks**, eleven **northern pintails**, a single **Mallard** and a flock of **common pochards**. Later six **tufted ducks** were seen together at the other edge and a single **white-headed duck** recorded nearby several **common goldeneyes** .



Black-winged pratincoles flew so close at one of the lakes near Korgalzhyn.



and so common terns.

Northern lapwings were common nearby the lakes and **black larks** even much commoner. A single **tawny pipit** and another single **lesser short-toed lark** seen at the first lake and later on the second a **long-legged buzzard** appeared in flight. The scrub bordering the water produced five **booted warblers** in total and all around the place were hundreds of **Sykes' wagtails** . Leaving the second lake on which we had spent sometime, I preferred to turn north towards the newly ploughed fields rather than proceeding straight for what it looked an excellent habitat for the sociable lapwings . I actually depended on Berlik to at least show me any spot on which they had been previously recorded, but him not much knowledgeable on that species nor on its habitat, I took the full authority to decide and navigate. Soon within several hundred meters and to my surprise a large flock of **sociable lapwings** was on the fields left of the road and a count ended up with eighty two individuals !!! It was a great privilege to have such an encounter with the critically endangered Sociable Lapwings on their Kazakh breeding grounds however it was equally sad to realize that this flock constitutes a considerable percentage of the global population . Leaving the lapwings behind and completing the loop we reached Korgalzhyn village for a short break and Luggage drop off . Berlik's wife had prepared a traditional food plate which I enjoyed and some locally made sweets. It was also pleasant to know about the efforts Berlik and his wife are making towards conservation and awareness promotion on bird species in Korgalzhyn and surroundings . After a short nap interrupted by a constantly singing **Eurasian golden oriole** we set off towards Sholak lake outside of Korgalzhyn . Once near the lake we made our way through the beautiful steppes on which lark activity was very evident. We encountered many **black larks**, several **Calandra larks**, plenty of **Eurasian skylarks** and only two beautiful **white-winged larks**. Later on our way we recorded three **tawny pipits**, good flock of **Eurasian linnets**, several **northern wheatears** and many **Sykes' wagtails**. Two elegant **demoiselle cranes** stood out in the vast steppes in the time a handful of vocal **European bee-eaters** put a nice flight show. A flock of **northern lapwings** appeared while we approached the lake edge while more and more **black larks** crossed our way. **Greater flamingos** dominated the west side of the lake where I counted nearly 170 individuals of this most northerly population and later small separate flocks of noisy **black-winged pratincoles** kept us entertained. A single **great crested grebe**, a **common shelduck** and nine **red-crested pochards** were the only waterfowl species noted . Far inside the lake was a lonely **mute swan** and further two **great white pelicans**. Another short stop along the reeds produced a **sedge warbler** and later singing **Eurasian reed and great reed warblers** in addition to a handful of **little terns** followed by two **gull-billed terns** overhead. Several **Pallas's and steppe gulls** also recorded and a single far **caspian tern** noted in flight before Berlik decided to get me to the other end of the lake at the river mouth. At this end the place was teaming with gulls and terns that were busy hunting for fish. **Black headed gulls** were dominant joined by **black, white-winged and common terns**. Three **Caspian gulls** picked up resting on boulders and further upstream several wader species seen on the river banks notably **ruffs, marsh sandpipers, common greenshank, wood sandpiper** and a single **black-tailed goodwit**. **Sykes' wagtails** were abundant and while driving slowly flushed a single **common quail** near the river bank. Tired and hungry we decided to call it a day and on our way back we were pleased to encounter several groups of **Saiga antelopes**.

Day 2- 30 June 2021(Korgalzhyn)

Today Berlik's plan was to take me to an accessible vast wetland not far from Korgalzhyn and another nearby lake that can be checked from the road, and after an early breakfast we quickly headed to the wetland where I started birding on foot. The adjacent reeds held singing **great reed, Blyth's reed** and **sedge warblers** in addition to **Cetti's warblers** and a single **Eurasian penduline tit** that called just twice.



The only Caspian plover and after some effort in very hot conditions !

Nearby scrub held lots of **Sykes' wagtails**, two **bluethroats**, **reed buntings** and a pair of **Siberian stonechats**. Some **black-headed gulls** and several **steppe gulls** flew past and so three **black terns**. I proceeded further on foot and saw two **booted warblers** along the scrubby area adjacent to the wetland and also heard a **common grasshopper warbler**. A total of four **Eurasian marsh harriers** recorded and one good flock of **Northern lapwings** in addition to another flock of **European starlings**. Moving by car to another nearby location within the wetland complex we were greeted by **black-winged pratincoles** and an array of terns in the form of **Caspian, little, common and black terns** before a single **slender-billed gull** passed overhead. Here several **Black-winged stilts** were amongst other waders and the small lake was full of **greater flamingos** joined by several **common pochards**, **horned and great crested grebe**, **red-crested pochard** and a single **red-necked phalarope**. Berlik decided to operate the drone in order to secure nice footage of the flamingos which he did, but I was against this practice for what is known to disturb and stress bird flocks. **Black-tailed godwits** were numerous and a scan of the area revealed nearly five hundred individuals and some more **Caspian terns**. Gulls were never numerous though with only single sighting of a **Pallas's gull** followed by a **common gull** and some **steppe gulls**. It was around mid morning when we decided to leave to another spot overlooking a saline lake where we had seven white-winged larks on our way. Spending an hour or so produced not so more interesting stuff apart from a very late **Terek sandpiper**, a single **Eurasian oystercatcher** and several **pied avocets**. The dry surroundings seemed a perfect habitat for Caspian plovers and I preferred to spend sometime in search for them but to no avail. It was time to return to the guest house where we had again a good lunch before collecting my bags for the return to Nur-Sultan.

We were joined by Berlik's wife on our way back and before leaving Korgalzhyn I preferred again to give it a try for the plovers but now on the other side leading to the same lake . Again after a good search in dry hot conditions I finally got a single female **caspian plover** that gave very satisfactory views. Happy with the uncommon sighting we left korgalzhyn area and started our way back where we had another short roadside birding stop producing two **demoiselle cranes**, one **pallid harrier**, two **marsh harriers**, two **booted warblers** and several **white-winged terns**. Several kilometers ahead we also encountered more **pallid harriers** hunting over the steppes before reaching Nur-Sultan and marking it a day off. Saying goodbye to Berlik and his wife I left to the hotel to get some hours of sleep before the late night flight to Semipalatinsk which will be the starting point for my extreme northeast Kazakhstan trip leg.



Irtysk river crossing Semipalatinsk

Day 3- 1 July 2021 (Semipalatinsk - Ust kamenogorsk - Ridder)

Reaching Semipalatinsk airport late night, I was greeted by my friend Samir who came several hundred miles away from Almaty to his hometown and after baggage pickup we headed directly to a small motel before starting the long drive to Ridder . Today's plan was a late morning departure hoping to reach Ridder town by the end of the day . An early wakeup saw me several meters away from the motel at the gardens and wooded patches along the Irtysk river where I had an hour or so birding. Those seemed productive with several very tame **fieldfares**, several **great spotted woodpeckers** giving closeup shots and three **lesser spotted woodpeckers**.

Great tits were common around and birch trees held a singing **greenish warbler** and several **common chiffchaffs**. Another **greenish warbler** gave good views and two **Cetti's warblers** delivered their explosive calls from the riverside scrub. Along the river I recorded several **black headed and steppe gulls**, **common terns**, **great cormorants**, a single **Eurasian oystercatcher** and a **common sandpiper**. **White wagtails** were common too as well as **chaffinches** calling mainly from fir trees. Also I had two **European greenfinches** and a pair of **common redstarts**. After a quick breakfast and fuel refill, we commenced our trip for Ridder. On the long way along the beautiful flat landscapes, we came along several **eastern imperial eagles**, plenty of **black kites** and **booted eagle** and a singing **red-headed bunting**. Around midday we had a short stop along a small river crossing bridge. Here a **thrush nightingale** heard singing along the scrub together with a **bluethroat** and **Cetti's warblers**. Overhead a **black kite** circled and later I saw a very nice flock of **rosy starlings** and a single **Siberian stonechat**. Before leaving the place a nice female **red-footed falcon** showed briefly in flight. On our way we had a brief stop at one village where we purchased some delicious strawberries and some nice tasty ice cream. The villagers here depend on farming for food and the nature here has much to produce from pure honey to wild berries and other natural products. As we approached Ridder we could easily notice the surrounding hilly mixed taiga forests and the lush green meadows all around. It was early afternoon when I decided to make several roadside birding stops before reaching Ridder.



Fresh strawberries on our way to Ridder. A tasty thing to have.



At the edge of the taiga forests along the way to Ridder where I had a quick birding stop.



And some little distance into the taiga forests. Here red-flanked bluetails and Siberian rubythroat.

Songs of **common rosefinches**, **Blyth's reed warblers** and **Siberian chiffchaffs** heard everywhere and were by far the commonest sounds noted in forests and forest clearings and to be constantly heard for the several coming days. Several **common grasshopper warblers** consistently sang without even a single being sighted and also **common cuckoos** called frequently. Single **yellowhammers** noted mostly on each stop and were always located first by song and also a pair of **Eurasian golden orioles** seen among the roadside poplars. Several **black kites** seen and at one stop I had a pair of singing **common whitethroats** and **greenish warblers** then a single **chaffinch**. Another short stop near a stream yielded a **common kingfisher** and a **common sandpiper** together with **European greenfinch** and **common rosefinches** being heard only. We stopped on one of the locations where I had a long walk in the lush meadows picking up delicious and tasty wild berries before we continued our journey. Late evening we reached Ridder town and exhausted directly went to Altai hotel for baggage drop off and some refreshing beers and lite dinner. Samir had a small chat with the receptionist who was very cooperative and helpful giving valuable information on the town and locations. Luckily the hotel restaurant wasn't bad and served somehow good dinners otherwise the situation wouldn't have been pleasant as mostly all the restaurants in the town closed early due to the corona epidemic.

Day 4- 2 July 2021 (Black Ulba)

Early we started and the plan for the day was venting deep into the taiga along the black ulba river and birding for some target Siberian species .



A female red-flanked bluetail at one of the stops along the way to Yarmolayevka. The male didn't cooperate for much better photos.

A very short stop just outside Ridder produced good views of a **Blyth's reed warbler** among the willows followed later by singing **song thrushes**, **greenish warblers** and **Siberian chiffchaffs**. Few kilometers further we stopped on a checkpoint at the beginning of the gravel road leading to Yarmolayevka. A quick look around the place produced the first **willow tits** and three **fieldfares** in the dense birches behind the post. A far **common cuckoo** heard calling and nearby **common whitethroats**, **common rosefinches** and **yellowhammers** sang continuously. Several kilometers ahead saw us deep into the Siberian endless mixed taiga forests interspersed with wet forest clearings and vegetated meadows where the habitat looked pristine and the landscape spectacular. Here within some kilometers short birding stops produced the first targets in the form of **red-flanked bluetails** and a skulking **Siberian rubythroat** that was picked up within the dense scrub a distance away but never gave prolonged views. In the same vicinity I had two **lesser whitethroats** and a singing **greater whitethroat** in addition to three **yellowhammers**. Two **common cuckoos** showed briefly and some others heard and a **tree pipit** was noted in the higher pines below the road. **Common quail** calls were heard quite a distance away and so **European greenfinch**. However the dominant songs among the morning chorus were that of **Blyth's reed warblers** and **Siberian chiffchaffs** and heard literally everywhere along the forests. **Blyth's reed warblers** were mostly recorded from forest understory, occasionally within the lower stratum of mixed forest and also in lush vegetation near water and proved fabulous songsters. Moving on to another spot, we had a short stop where I saw two **tree pipits** and a **lesser whitethroat**. A call of a **corncrake** burst out directly from the meadow just near the edge of the road and the bird was less than two meters apart but never offered any views.



After some patience, A Pallas's grasshopper warbler offering good views among the dwarf willows at a forest clearing on the way to Yarmolayevka. They are usually very shy and often heard more than being seen.

Proceeding slowly by car, we continued our way on the gravel road when I heard the call of **Pallas's grasshopper warbler** and instructed Samir to stop immediately. The spot seemed promising with several dwarf willows and tall herbaceous plants. Here a handful of **Pallas's grasshopper warblers** sang continuously but were skulking as usual and finally getting good shots required a long and motionless patient wait. Also a single **common grasshopper warbler** was heard frequently at the same spot. On one occasion it was very interesting to witness the behavior of one of those little Pallas's as it crept like a rat and stood directly at my shoes upon hearing the playback call ! I could see only the tail just at my foot ! However the Pallas's grasshopper warblers never proved more skulking than their relatives in the genus where I had heard only calls and hadn't set my eyes even upon a single common grasshopper warbler throughout the trip. At the same spot I had a pair of **red-backed shrikes**, a **Siberian stonechat**, **spotted flycatcher** and a single singing **Siberian chiffchaff**. A **lesser whitethroat** and a **yellowhammer** were heard just before leaving the place. We proceeded further on our way covering several spots amongst the forest and forest clearings to record additional to the common species , **common cuckoo** , **masked wagtail** , **Eurasian sparrowhawk** , **coal tit** , **Common whitethroat** , **Steppe buzzard** , a noisy **corn crake** and another extremely skulking **Siberian rubythroat**. At this time we had almost reached the river crossing along the black Ulba where we came to a halt . Crossing the river was beyond our 4WD capability and we never opted to take any risk , unlike others who ventured their vehicles into the river where one guy ended up stuck in the middle of the crossing . It was early afternoon when we decided to have some canned food to eat and take a long rest in the shade where we started our return drive to Ridder in the late afternoon. Minimal birding was done on the way back without any significant sightings and ended up on a good beer with dinner at our Hotel .



A Siberian rubythroat in dense undergrowth along the black Ulba. Very skulking and shy and I was lucky to have this one photo.



A bridge crossing along the black Ulba. This is the first and the only one we could cross.

Day 5- 3 July 2021 (Ridder – Poperechnoye)

This day we where planning to reach the rustic and remote village of Poperechnoye lying about 45 km north of Ridder . An early morning start saw me at a small creek outside Ridder where I spent sometime birding and enjoying the beautiful deciduous woodland around and surely the beautiful early chorus of **Blyth's reed warblers** , **Siberian chiffchaffs** , **common rosefinches** , **song thrushes** , **common quails** and **yellowhammer**. Nearly an hour at this location produced brief views of male **Siberian rubythroat** , **common whitethroat** , **song thrush** and **two fieldfares** . Just some kilometers further saw us on an open lush green area around a small lake. **Pallas's grasshopper warblers** calls were evident and the willows around held several individuals. **Yellowhammers** , **Siberian chiffchaffs** , **common rosefinches**, **Blyth's reed warblers** and **common redstart** were singing from the nearby birches and three **Pallas's grasshopper warblers** amused me just few meters away into the lush vegetation. A handful of **eastern goldfinches** were feeding among the grasses and several **Siberian stonechats** advertised themselves nicely on the top of dwarf willows. I had also a pair of tree pipits perching unobtrusively in a roadside tree and heard some **common grasshopper warblers** nearby before leaving the place and proceeding further on the way. Actually the spot seemed good habitat for the critically endangered yellow-breasted bunting but despite some search there was no any signs of this species at the location. The rest of the morning was spent into the taiga and along the way to peperchnoye where I saw several singing **Blyth's reed warblers**, **oriental turtle doves**, handful of calling **goldcrests**, **Siberian chiffchaffs** , **Hume's leaf warblers** , **lesser whitethroats** , **steppe buzzard** , **yellowhammer** and four **long-tailed tits** not to mention other several common species encountered earlier.

Near midday we started closing in for Poperechnoye and made a stop to check what the forest will offer . Venturing a bit of distance into the conifers I came along a small party of **willow tits** and a single **Hume's leaf warbler**. More **Hume's leaf warblers** called in the same spot and later two **Eurasian nuthatches** showed very well above. The habitat seemed perfect for the uncommon Siberian tit and me standing patiently trying to locate any bird even on call didn't pay off . Simply the birds were not there. However a nice bonus was a pair of the similarly uncommon **Eurasian jays** that were seen at close range but stayed unobtrusive. A nearby **corncrake** called briefly before we decided to leave and cover the few kilometers left for Poperechnoye. We reached the village nearly by midday and were really amazed by the beauty of the surroundings , tranquillity of the place and the rustic life style the village offered . Taken by the serenity of the place , we had a brief nap in our Pajero in the shade and later had tasty sandwiches for lunch that were prepared by Samir . We spent a bit of time at this spot before roaming around the village then into a nearby birch forest that didn't offer anything more than the previously recorded. From the village itself, I could well locate the mountain on the east side which we need to hike to reach the scenic Radon lake that I already planned for the next day. Thinking of the risks of crossing the foothills alone up to the lake , I had the idea of arranging in advance an escort from the Village itself if possible . Sharing my idea with Samir , we started searching in the village for a ranger and to our luck the first man Samir set eyes upon turned out to be a ranger and owned a Lada Niva also ! It wouldn't get better than that in a village nearly void of people. We agreed with Sasha on an early start for the following day and then made our way back to Ridder . We made a brief roadside birding stop not far from the village where I heard several common species, however a clear call of an **oriental cuckoo** bounced itself out and I tried seeing the bird but without success. At another roadside spot, also I heard another **oriental cuckoo** call among the songs of **Hume's leaf warblers** and **Siberian chiffchaffs** and again failed to locate the bird. Instead a **black-throated thrush** showed briefly and also a **grey wagtail**.



Taiga coniferous forest and lush meadows on the way to Poperechnoye.



Poperechnoye, a rustic village and simple lifestyle. Radon lake somewhere atop the facing mountains. A pretty long hike to reach up there.



Samir preparing sandwiches for lunch on our short break here in Poperechnoye

Day 6- 4 July 2021 (Radon lake)

We woke very early and directly made a start towards peperchnoye where we reached just after dawn to see Sacha and his friend ready with their Lada Niva and importantly the cans of beer. We squeezed ourselves inn and set to the starting point of my hike. I made it clear to Sasha and Samir to stay ahead of me and make frequent stops for me to catch up with them, however I missed a junction and headed in a wrong direction for sometime before returning back to see them waiting. During the first hour or so I came along many **willow tits** and vocal **song thrushes**, **mistle thrushes**, **Blyth's reed warblers**, **Siberian chiffchaffs**, **Hume's warblers**, **common rosefinches**, **European greenfinches** and **tree pipits**. I also had two **black-throated accentors**, **spotted flycatcher** and four **gray wagtails**. Further up and into a forest clearing along the way I had more and more **song thrushes**, **mistle thrushes** and **tree pipits**. Also, a single **black-throated thrush** put itself into view. The track was at sometimes very difficult and slippery, and it is worth to note the effort spent by Sasha and Samir to keep the vehicle going where they pushed it up to its limits and literally it was traveling in places that would be difficult to cross on foot. I was in disbelief seeing the Lada crossing up through a wide stream of mud and large stones. Higher up on the track I got brief biews of a stunning male **red-flanked bluetail** in additon to several **Eurasian nuthatches**, a single **coal tit**, **greenish warbler** and **common chaffinches**. Higher up the vegetation started to change and we were at the subalpine region with some scattered trees mainly Pines and larches where several **water pipits** noted just near the track edge.



During the hike up to Radon lake crossing mixed taiga forest.

A short walk here also produced a female **Siberian rubythroat** that showed well. We reached the lake nearly by midday, but exhausted I had a nap in the Lada before I started exploring the area. I was politely invited to join a barbecue lunch held by a gathering of Russian families but could not because I had to hike the lake surroundings.



Spectacular scenery of hilly taiga forests from a point along the way up to Radon lake.

However Sasha and his friend joined and after finishing their supply of beer made sure also that not any single can of beer is left for the gathering families. Later on that day and before we left I came to know that they both had consumed around 40 cans!! I made my way up the gentle slopes on the north side of the lake and had several **plain mountain finches** feeding. Later a call from the bushes caught my attention and soon a **dusky warbler** showed itself and kept me entertained a little while. **Tree pipits** were common but there were not any signs of my target bird which was the Asian rosy finch. The habitat seemed perfect but unfortunately no any birds. It was early afternoon when I decided to hike south of the lake to what is called the “Saddle” where I was rewarded with great and amazing scenery. The hike was a bit tough and later I got slightly dizzy of altitude sickness and made a difficult descent in discomfort to the lake surroundings. While having a lengthy rest among the Siberian pines at the lake edge, a stunning male **pine grosbeak** popped out of from dwarf junipers and showed for some seconds before vanishing again into the surrounding Siberian pines. What a stunning bird!!! While still in discomfort of altitude sickness, we packed ourselves in the Lada and started descending the mountain on the risky and challenging road and losing a single leaf from the rear left side leaf spring assembly before reaching safely back in poperechnoye. Late afternoon and after having a good rest at the village, It was time to return back to Ridder and have enough rest for the next days long journey to Katon Karagay.



And another spectacular scene for Radon lake as viewed from the “Saddle”



The scenic Radon lake.



Me and Sasha shortly after reaching back from Radon lake.

Day 7- 5 July 2021 (Ridder – Katon Karagay)

This day was dedicated to travel from Ridder to Katon karagay which will mark the second leg of the trip and so actually not much birding was done except for a handful of short stops on the way. The journey was quite lengthy but we were treated with nice views of open grasslands and amazing greenery. The sunflower plantations specifically were amazing. The habitat along the way was almost open habitat with undulating grassy hills and some rocky hills. Stopping briefly along the bridge overseeing a damp grassland, I saw a very nice **long-tailed rosefinch** and heard a **yellowhammer** and some **common rosefinches**. We continued our journey to Katon karagay reaching the village early evening and after some searches and calls done by Samir, we opted to reside at the guesthouse owned and operated by a lady named Zarina who herself offers guiding services mainly touristic and cultural. We enjoyed some evening beer cans while seeking information from Zarina about the area and surroundings and discussing the plan for the next few coming days. We had also a nice dinner comprised of traditional Kazakh food.



Along the way from Ridder to Katon Karagay.

Day 8- 6 July 2021 (Katon Karagay)

My plan for the day was birding along the Bukhtarma river valley and mainly concentrated on the damp areas adjacent to the river mostly occupied by willows and long grass and herbaceous plants. This area looked a perfect habitat for the critically endangered yellow-breasted bunting and I have spent considerable amount of time searching for this species but also I wasn't so

optimistic. This species is a rare breeder in northeast Kazakhstan and in addition to that it faced and still facing severe population decline. I started birding in a birch forest not far from Katon Karagay and had **yellowhammers**, **common chaffinches**, **common rosefinches**, **common redstarts**, active and singing **willow tits**, vocal **Siberian chiffchaffs**, a single **mistle thrush** and a **common sandpiper** on the shaded stream. Not far outside the forest, several **Siberian stonechats** and **northern wheatears** mainly recorded on the area dominated by grass and small rocks. Here also **common house martins** were active overhead also a single **ortolan bunting** noted from far. While on the way back I came across a confiding and stunning male **pine bunting** that offered exceptional views.



Samir preparing for a breakfast in the shade of birch trees during a birding stop near Katon Karagay.

Leaving the area, we proceeded along the Bukhtarma valley to locate a good habitat spot to search for the yellow-breasted bunting. We stopped at a promising spot of long grasses and dwarf herbs but eventually didn't produce the target bird, however was productive for other nice array of species. Here I recorded several noisy and flighty **Richard's pipits** where their powerful vertical takeoff flight pattern was very evident. I saw a far **black stork** in flight, an **eastern imperial eagle** and two **black kites**. A **Eurasian hoopoe** seen near the road and also **Eurasian skylarks**, **Siberian stonechats** and two **Isabelline wheatears**. The bushes surrounding the grassland were specifically productive with a single **grey-headed woodpecker**, **red-backed shrike**, **long-tailed rosefinch**, **tree pipit**, **Eurasian tree sparrow**, **common chaffinch**, singing **greater whitethroats** and a **great tit**. I also heard several **common quails**, a single **corncrake**, **Siberian chiffchaff**, several **Pallas's grasshopper warblers**, a **yellowhammer**, **common rosefinch** and a **common grasshopper warbler**.



A male pine bunting that didn't disappoint and offered great views.



Hilly taiga forests along the Bukhtarma valley with the Altai mountains in the background.

Later on I walked nearby a small damp area with small stream crossing and had a **green sandpiper**, **little ringed plover** and heard a singing **sedge warbler**, and before leaving the area a nice **Eurasian hobby** perched on a wooden fence pole gave nice views. Still along the Bukhtarma road and in the early afternoon I again decided to stop at another very good and promising location. However again and after nearly an hour of searching and full concentration on sounds and calls, I hadn't seen and neither heard any yellow-breasted bunting. It could have been also that the birds, if any were present, were also silent and not vocal and already mated. Again, no significant species added other than a flock of **ruddy shelducks**, a **mallard**, six **fieldfares**, three **masked wagtails** and single **northern lapwing**. A single **Eurasian linnet** was heard also in flight. Several kilometers along the way saw us at a coniferous forest patch left side of the road. We stopped here and I made a gentle climb to check the mainly the fir and spruce trees. Here again nothing out of the ordinary except for three **pacific swifts** that showed nicely but briefly in a quick overhead flight. The white rump was evident and diagnostic. A **coal tit** was recorded in the firs in addition to a **lesser whitethroat** and also four **mistle thrushes** were active. I saw also a far **eastern imperial eagle** and a **Eurasian sparrowhawk**. Other species seen or noted were the common species usually encountered. We decided to return to the guesthouse in Katon karagay after this long day and we were treated again to several cans of beer and a nice evening in the beautiful garden.



Riparian area visited several times and that comprises the perfect habitat for the critically endangered yellow-breasted bunting. I searched the area well and on several occasions, but unfortunately up to no avail.



However, I had many Richard's pipits.



And nearby a nice Eurasian hobby.

Day 9- 7 July 2021 (Austrian road – Burkhat pass)

We started early today and the plan was to have a full day birding along the Austrian road up to the Burkhat pass and back. This famous Austrian road is the road eventually leading to lake Markakol, but unfortunately I didn't plan to visit the lake due to lack of time and the probably poor condition of the road. I had read and also seen photos of the road conditions and so simply didn't want to put to risk our vehicle .



Spectacular views of the Bukhtarma river valley on the way up to Burkhat pass near the watchpoint.

The ascend from the Bukhtarma valley up to the Burkhat pass produced amazing and scenic views of the valley and also offered different types of habitats and vegetation. Starting at the bottom along the dry stony and sparsely vegetated hills and before reaching the post where we had to submit our identification cards, we had **Isabelline wheatears**, **Eurasian magpies** and a single **tawny pipit** which are fond to this type of habitat. Leaving the post, we started ascending through the birch forest and along a deteriorated road and saw a **red-backed shrike** before making two short stops where I had a family of active **willow tits** and singing **greenish warblers** and **Siberian chiffchaffs**. Exiting the birch forest we entered the mixed forest of birches, Siberian larches and conifers and here I was greeted by a pair of **Eurasian nuthatches** and an **oriental turtle dove**. **Common rosefinch** songs filled the air and so **Siberian chiffchaffs** and **greenish warblers**. Here also a very showy **Blyth's reed warbler** delivered its song from a roadside scrub followed by another two that gave brief views and not less than three **red-flanked bluetails** heard continuously singing.



View over the Burkhat pass. The terrain is flat but not the easiest place to walk at.

Also, I saw several **greater whitethroats** and two **spotted flycatchers** before moving further to meet with a **Siberian rubythroat** that was picked up just standing still on the right side of the road before vanishing into nearby cover. Here **Hume's leaf warblers** were vocal and **black kites** frequently seen in flight. Birding along the conifers I saw five **mistle thrushes**, a single **black-throated thrush** and heard only a single **song thrush**. One more **Eurasian nuthatch** was recorded and a pine bunting and more **Siberian chiffchaffs**. Just before the small viewpoint at the beginning of the Burkhat pass I heard twice the drumming of an unidentified woodpecker which eventually didn't give any views. Here also I had a short walk among the dominant Siberian pines and had a pair of **red crossbills** and a **mistle thrush** and proceeded a little further to a nearby lake to see several **ruddy shelducks** within and three **black storks** on the adjacent meadows and several **tree pipits**. We then proceeded slightly ahead to reach the high-altitude area of the Burkhat pass and were greeted by a flock of Eurasian **linnets**. At this stage we were at the alpine region and at highest point on the road where we parked the car as I started birding and hiking to the high rocky outcrops. My target species here was also the Asian rosy finch which I eventually dipped after several hours of birding. The sea of dwarf shrubs here made it difficult to walk but I did all my way up to the higher locations. At the beginning of the hike and not far from the vehicle, I had my first **bluethroats** that will later turn up to be abundant among the shrubs. The first **Siberian stonechat** also put itself into view, but instantly another good bird showed up in the form of a stunning male **Pallas's bunting**! A very nice bird and an uncommon species here in the northeast with preference to this type of habitat only. Later I saw more individuals including females and counted nine birds in total. Proceeding upwards I had a distant male **Hen harrier** flying low and also had the first **water pipits** that later also proved abundant.

A **Hume's leaf warbler** was active in a lone Siberian larch tree and a little later the first **dusky warbler** showed but briefly before giving itself up for good photos.



The uncommon Pallas's reed bunting among the alpine dwarf shrubs around Burkhat pass.



One of the eight dusky warblers encountered amid the shrubs on Burkhat pass.

Later eight more individuals of this species were seen among the dominant shrubs. **Siberian chiffchaffs** were heard from far and also a **common whitethroat** showed well. I did hear also the calls of three **common quails**. Scanning the skies, I set my eyes upon a distant **steppe eagle** and two closer **northern ravens**. Higher up and after considerable effort I reached an area of large rocky outcrops. Walking among and on the shrubs was time consuming and exhausting. Here I searched a while for the Asian rosy finches but up to no avail. At the snow edge I saw Four **plain mountain finches** feeding and again searching the skies had a very distant **cinereous vulture**. Again, searched some more time for the target birds and again it was a dip. I started my long way back to the car and came across many **bluethroats** and **water pipits** and some **dark and Hume's leaf warblers**. On the way back and above the small lake, two **Eurasian hobbies** spotted in fast flight before they came off site. We then decided it was time to leave and made our way to Katon karagay for another night to be ready for the long drive to Rakhmanovsky lake the next day.



A patch of coniferous forest dominated mainly by Siberian larches just below the Burkhat pass.

Day 10- 8 July 2021 (Katon Karagay – Rahmanovsky lake)

We preplanned the visit to the very scenic Rahmanovsky for this day and so left early for the long drive awaiting us. As we came to know from Zarina that at a point beyond a village called Berrel and upon starting the ascend to the higher altitudes the road will start to deteriorate and would take some time to reach the lake.



On the way up to lake Rahmanovsky, a perfect habitat to look for the solitary snipe. Unfortunately, a quick stop and a brief search yielded nothing.

On the way we had a first quick stop again at the location where I believed it would be suitable habitat for the yellow-breasted bunting but had same species as before except for a **Eurasian wryneck** and a pair of **ortolan buntings**. We crossed Uril village and then berrel to start ascending up to Rahmanovsky crossing through a mixed forest on a very bad bumpy road full of potholes. Before starting the ascent, I saw a **demoiselle crane** at the Bukhtarma river followed by a **great cormorant** and while on the way up heard and saw **red-flanked bluetails**, **Hume's leaf warblers**, **greenish warbler**, **common rosefinch**, **Siberian chiffchaff**, **black kite** and **common chaffinch**. It took a while to reach the upper limits of the forest to the subalpine zone where the lake is situated and here unfortunately large portions of the forest on the way were completely burnt!!! On the way before several kilometers before reaching the lake I made two stops at what it looked like a perfect habitat for solitary snipe and searched but without luck. We reached the lake in the late afternoon and discovered that the recreational facility not operational and the place is void of people except for the guards. At last, and after some discussions between Samir and the guards we were offered to sleep in one of the barracks near the entrance and on military style beds. With the little time left before sunset, I walked along the conifers surrounding the lake and had singing **red-flanked bluetail**, several **Eurasian nuthatches**, **Eurasian nutcracker** and **black-throated accentors**. On the way back to the gate I had **gray and white wagtails**, **eastern goldfinches** and a **tree pipit**. I reached the barrack and awaiting me were some homemade sandwiches prepared by Samir and we had a nice dinner resting outside after this long day and several meters from our door a **Pallas's grasshopper warbler** started singing from dusk and stayed vocal during the night up to dawn next day advertising the typical behavior of its genus.

Day 11- 9 July 2021 (Rahmanovsky lake)

An early morning saw me near the river not far from the entrance and surrounded by conifers mainly pines and firs. Here thrush activity was evident, and I saw several **black-throated thrushes**, **mistle thrushes** and **song thrushes**. Three **Eurasian nutcrackers** seen in addition to a **Pallas's grasshopper warbler** and nearby **Siberian stonechats**. Also had brief views of a **dusky warbler** singing in a nearby shrub, **Blyth's reed warblers**, **common whitethroat**, **willow tits** and a pair of **Eurasian nuthatches** in the surrounding firs. These also held **Hume's' leaf warblers** and **Siberian chiffchaffs**. **Common rosefinches** were constantly heard and at the entrance area saw the same species as the day before. Nearby the river a single **green sandpiper** flew and also several **carriion crows** were present as well as few **Common ravens**. A woodpecker drumming sound was heard but the bird could not be located. Proceeding towards the lake and past the entrance where species of the previous afternoon were recorded, I made my way towards the edge of the forested lake to check for Stejneger's scoter if any present, but unfortunately none were at the lake. They could have been at the lake edges however.



Lake Rahmanovsky surrounded by coniferous forests mainly dominated by Siberian pine trees. Siberian tit found somewhere among the pines on the left side, however no Stejneger's scoters.

I opted to climb the small mountain past the forest and above but first made a quick check on the forest edge. Here I got a pair of very nice but shy **pine grosbeaks** that eventually gave some acceptable photos but kept well hidden in the Siberian pine tree. Ascending the mountain and along the meadows, I had three **black- throated accentors** of which one was a juvenile bird, two

bluethroats and a lot of **Siberian stonechats**. Also above had brief views of a **steppe eagle**, a **steppe buzzard** and much better and closer views of a **golden eagle**. After a steep ascent, I found myself starting to close on the top and started searching for Asian-rosy finches along the rocky terrain and in suitable habitat. No birds located except several **plain mountain finches** and a single **Altai Accentor** that offered nice shots. The scene was great here with clear views of Mount Belukha some distance away. A **water pipit** showed here and during the descend had similar birds seen before. I reached the lake exhausted and decided to try again for some birding along the forest for a possible black woodpecker or white-backed woodpecker. I had the expected species here but a while later and after some patience I was rewarded by the uncommon **Siberian tit** where I had great views. A not easy to see bird in this part of Kazakhstan in its southernmost breeding range. Happy by the noncommittal sighting and realizing that we have a long way back, I decided to call it a day for birding and consequently we made our way back for Katon karagay while we still had one more last day in the area.



Our very basic accommodation at Rahmanovsky lake. Inside uncomfortable military beds and around this cottage a Pallas's grasshopper warbler stayed vocal until early dawn.

Day 12- 10 July 2021 (Katon Karagay)

We woke up on cloudy skies and it was clear that rain was on the way and indeed soon it started raining and the weather was a bit depressing. Exhausted also from the previous days I preferred to take a break this morning and we stayed at the guesthouse and had traditional lunch in the only public mess available in the village. Soon after lunch the rain stopped but the weather was not promising.



Dinner inside the cottage.



A pine grosbeak among the Siberian pines surrounding the lake.



A masked wagtail on the wooden trail at the lake edge.

However, we decided to go for a ride and search again for a possible habitat for the yellow-breasted bunting. I opted to search on the other side of the river and therefore we crossed a bridge at a village called Zhanaulga. Here the habitat seemed also very good and again despite long searches I failed to locate any bird. I had mostly the same species found of this habitat and that were recorded before, however to my surprise when we just left the place and drove back, I did notice from the car an odd brown shrike in the bush just near the road where my instinct instantly told me it is a brown shrike. We stopped and reversed back a bit, but the bird flew to another close by bush. I pursued the bird and after several minutes it then gave up and I had pretty good photos of this nice bird and surely it was indeed a **brown shrike**. Another uncommon bird in this part of Kazakhstan. Soon after we left again it started to rain and we decided to head back for the house to spend the rest of the afternoon there. We had a good and delicious dinner in the evening and we went to bed for our final night at this lovely and warm place.

The next day we left the place early for our long drive to Semipalatinsk. All in all the trip was successful despite some important dips notably the Asian rosy finch, black woodpecker and the Stejneger's scoter. However, the area was very scenic and a perfect place to escape to Nature. I do recommend for all nature lovers visiting this remote and spectacular corner of Kazakhstan where they will surely feel the serenity the place offers in addition to explore the amazing and unique flora and fauna.

For any questions or information that might help, my email address: ***BASSEL_2002TH@HOTMAIL.COM***



Lake Rahmanovsky from the surrounding high altitudes.



The very wet brown shrike not far from the road at the Bukhtarma valley.