

Georgia 2009, Caucasus & Steppe.

Contributed by Jos
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A bloody incursion by Russian troops eight months earlier, current uprisings in Tbilisi, presidential assassination plots, opposition protests and Russians back on the borders of the separatist region of South Ossetia. Yep, Georgia might not seem the obvious locality to partake in a little birding. However, for all the negative news, it remains a remarkable place - stunning sceneries, welcoming people and amazing birding. High in the Caucasus, my main destination was the Kazbegi area. In the shadow of peaks towering to 5033 metres, this rugged outpost of the Western Palearctic harbours such mouth-watering species as Caucasian Snowcock and Caucasian Black Grouse, Guldenstadt's Redstart and Great Rosefinch, plus oodles of added extras, including Green Warblers, Lammergeiers, Wallcreepers, Red-fronted Serins and plenty more. After excellerating days in the mountains, I then enjoyed a couple of days near the Armenian border, rich in raptors, larks, buntings and shrikes. All in all, an excellent trip.

LogisticsAs the only locality in the Western Palearctic for Caucasian Snowcock, Guldenstadt's Redstart and Great Rosefinch, these very much dictated the timing of this trip. Though the Caucasian Snowcocks are reasonably easy to locate throughout the summer, the latter two species become ever harder to find as the summer progresses, breeding on remote scree slopes at altitudes of over 4000 metres. By contrast, in early May, with snow still covering the higher peaks, both species are frequently found at much lower altitudes, even around the village if snowfalls have pushed them into the valley bottom. Visiting earlier in the year is also less appealing- not only would summer visitors such as Green Warbler be missed, but snow can also close the Krestovvy Pass, thereby blocking access to Kazbegi. **Transport, Accommodation and Costs**KazbegiMany persons rent a car to visit Kazbegi or use a tour operator, but in reality it is a simplicity to visit without either. Minibuses run from Tbilisi to Kazbegi several times a day, originating at Didube bus station and costing only about four euros. It is also possible to negotiate a private taxi from the same bus station and, depending on your haggling skills, costs a very reasonable 25-35 euros for the 140 km ride high in the mountains. As my flights arrived in the very early hours (as most flights do), the taxi option allowed me to reach Kazbegi by 7.30 a.m., whereas the minibuses only leave Tbilisi from about 9.00 a.m. and then take about three hours to get there. In Kazbegi, there is one hotel, but also many homestays (private householders renting out rooms), some with meals, some without. I opted for the latter and stayed in a basic, but completely adequate place on the edge of the village at a grand cost of less than seven euros a night. Small shops in the village centre sell all basic provisions. In total, including transport from Tbilisi and back, lodging and food, my four days in Kazbegi cost a total of just under 75 euros. **Davit-Gareji Steppes**Jandari village can be visited by minibus, the lake and fringing steppe then accessible on foot.

The amazing area around Davit-Gareji monastery can be visited by private taxi from Tbilisi (at a cost of about 45 euros a day), but I decided to rent a car for two days to fully explore the grasslands from dawn till dusk. No accommodation is available, I camped out. With the car costing 95 euros, this segment of the trip cost me 115 euros, the remainder going on petrol and food. Other than these costs, the only additional expense was the airfare, the return Vilnius-Tbilisi ticket setting me back just over 250 euros with Air Baltic. **DAILY LOG - Birds and Birding, spring 2009.** 8 May With Skylarks singing above, I said my farewells to Vilnius at 3.30 p.m. and boarded a plane. Economic collapse in Lithuania has left direct flights few and far between, so an hour later I was in Latvia awaiting my onward flight. Four hour stopover, then in the air again for the three-and-half hour flight to Tbilisi. Touched down at half an hour after midnight, local time. 9 May (Kazbegi, the south-east slopes) Took a kip at the airport, then caught the 4.15 a.m. train to central Tbilisi, a taxi to Didube bus station, then immediately organised a taxi 140 km direct to Kazbegi. Impressive route, up the Georgian Military Highway climbing higher and higher via hairpins and tunnels, eventually over the Krestovvy Pass at 2400 metres. Many birds here - didn't stop, but large numbers of Twite and Water Pipits, two Snow Finch and a Ring Ouzel. At 7.30 a.m., a kilometre short of the village of Kazbegi, a flash of red and white by the roadside, I immediately abandoned my taxi! Now perched atop a bush, a stunning male Guldenstadt's Redstart, what amazing luck! Of all the specialities, this is the one I had expected to struggle with, but here it was, the very first bird I saw, superb. Adjacent, Caucasian Chiffchaffs in abundance, plus two Common Rosefinches - the birding had begun! Getting my bearings, I realised I was just below meadows and scrub south-east of the village, localities mentioned in birding reports, so off I went. Twite everywhere, at least 120, plus Water Pipits common, several Red-backed Shrikes and the first Red-fronted Serins zipping over. A Griffon Vulture appeared above. The day was shaping up to be excellent, both in terms of birds and weather - quite against the forecast, blue skies and sun. From crags above, the wild call of Caucasian Snowcocks echoed down, most evocative - I had intended to dump my bag in my accommodation, but I thought it wise to use the weather and push on, climbing to the higher slopes. Soon I was at the first snow and there I found a whole pack of birds, all feeding at the base of the drift, where the ice turned to shingle - loads of Twite again, but amongst them other birds. A quick scan and I was looking at my first ever Great Rosefinch, a chunky female. Panning right, another and another, then a crimson-red male, dappled in white speckling. What fantastic birds. About fifteen in all, another key species under the belt and it was still not 10.00 a.m.! Upward I climbed, this was a hard slog - the slope had turned to 60 degrees and I was nearing 2500 metres. Fortunately, the amazing scenery gave good reason to pause for numerous breaks. Butterflies and alpine flowers dotted the slopes, quite warm even at this altitude. Still the Caucasian Snowcocks called up ahead. More Red-fronted Serins flitted over, Alpine Choughs wheeled in the sky. Suddenly, from the tip of a ravine, just as I entered the rhododendrium zone, a whirl of wings, a Caucasian Black Grouse flushed - another new species, splendid views as the female flapped and glided right across the deep valley to land on the slope opposite. I was now in Caucasian Snowcock territory, birds were calling on all sides. Choosing a sheltered spot, overlooking crags and meadows, I began a scan. Not seeing any, I climbed a little further, but barely had I clambered a few metres and I bumped right into a pair. Who was the more startled, I am not sure, but the two birds rose from a grassy dip, flying straight over my head,

splendid. Watched them wing across the valley, then enjoyed prolonged views as they landed and ambled up a rocky outcrop, the male calling in constant display. A nearby pair answered the intruder's call, soon I located them too. Now early afternoon and still warm and sunny, the effects of a night of travel, not to mention the hike up a mountain, caught up with me - on a grassy perch, high above a snowfield and scree slope, I snoozed off, forty winks well deserved. Some time later, refreshed, I was subjected to an abrupt awakening - sudden, loud calls of Snowcocks! I opened my eyes just in time to see two cruising back across the valley, passing just tens of metres from me. What a super place this Kazbegi was - I'd come to see the four specialities (Caucasian Snowcock, Caucasian Black Grouse, Guldenstadt's Redstart and Great Rosefinch) and already I had seen them all, even better had savoured them all in weather better than I could have hoped for. I began my descent, seeing yet more Caucasian Snowcocks, and sought out my accommodation in the village. Black Redstarts sang from roof tops, a Red-breasted Flycatcher flitted in a riverside tree. Now 4 p.m., sense would have dictated a break, but I decided for a wander back to the riverside scrub where the Guldenstadt's Redstart had been. No joy in relocating, but nearby Rock Buntings and Red-throated Pipits ended the first eventful day in true style. I slept well. 10 May (Kazbegi & Krestovvy Pass) Another excellent day, albeit somewhat hard on the legs again! Woke to clear skies and immediately headed over to the scrub and meadows south-east of the village. Started the day photographing a rufous-phase Cuckoo, then began birding. The sun was up, but with the extra day of good weather, it seemed some birds had already moved up the slopes - all was rather quieter than the day before, with no Great Rosefinches and smaller numbers of Twite. Regardless, very good birding - two Caucasian Snowcocks trotting across a snowfield, the male displaying, one singing Rock Thrush, one singing Wryneck and two Shore Larks, plus plenty of Water Pipits and Northern Wheatears. Also one semirufus Black Redstart amongst the predominant ochruros. Met some Danish birders, exchanged news, then wandered down to the road, immediately up-popped the Guldenstadt's Redstart of the day before, very pleased to see him again. Also one tephronotus Long-tailed Tit. Strolled along the river, adding Dipper and Common Sandpiper, then hitch-hiked to the Krestovvy Pass, some 20 km back towards Tbilisi. Arrived to a change in the weather - snowing! Jumped out of the car at the very highest point (2400 metres), then slowly walked all the way back to the lower Terek Valley, circumnavigating the long dark tunnels that really would have been spooky to walk through! Superb birding all the way - in alternating snowstorms and sunny patches, Water Pipits and Twite everywhere, Shore Larks reasonably common, at least 12 Snow Finches, plus occasional Red-fronted Serins and Ring Ouzels, two Rock Thrushes and both Red-billed and Alpine Choughs in flocks above. Absolute highlight, however, two pairs of Wallcreepers, the first pair flopping directly overhead as I struggled through snow whilst avoiding a tunnel! Like oversized butterflies, they flapped across an adjacent snowfield and disappeared beyond a ridge, just as two Alpine Accentors appeared on the snow! The second pair, even more showy, flitted up from an old stone bridge, landing on an adjacent bank, then worked the crags before moving up and out of sight. Red-fronted Serins fed adjacent. Also six Great Rosefinches, but rather distant. As I reached the valley bottom of the pass, perhaps 6 km down, a sunny spell resulted in blue skies and, slightly unexpected, a sudden push of migration: first 30 Bee-eaters going north, then a cloud of raptors - at least 30 Steppe Buzzards, two Griffon Vultures, one Sparrowhawk and, almost side by side, an adult Golden Eagle and a first-year Steppe Eagle, very nice spectacle. Walked another 5 km, then hitched back to Kazbegi. Now late afternoon and decidedly cool, I contemplated returning to digs, but instead trudged to the west side of the Terek River. Good move - didn't go far, but found a Green Warbler in riverside pines, then had a Lammergeier cruise over surrounded by Griffon Vultures. Returned to my room quite content, but every bit as exhausted as the day before! 11 May (Mount Kazbegi) Assault on Mount Kazbegi. No giddy aspirations to reach the 5033 metre peak, but the snout of the glaciers seemed a reasonable target. The first segment of the climb, to the Sameba church high on a ridge, could have been done by 4WD car - but not much chance of me finding one of those before 7.00 a.m. in this sleepy village, so back to the leg work. Common Rosefinch by the river, Red-fronted Serins and Rock Buntings in Gergeti village, dozens more Red-fronted Serins as I climbed through the pine forests hugging the lower slopes. One singing Crossbill, several Jays and dozens of Caucasian Chiffchaffs, two hours of steady climb were now behind me - I'd reached the Sameba church at an altitude of 2200 metres, above the treeline. From here, a steep ridge rose towards the glaciers and snowfields of Kazbegi to the west. For the next hour, Twite and Water Pipits decorated the route, occasional Ring Ouzels and Northern Wheatears too. On an adjacent slope, however, north-facing and covered in snow, an even more impressive sight - no less than nine Caucasian Black Grouse, all feeding on the small patches of snow-free ground. Five males and four females, a good gathering. As the birds slowly made off, trotting across the snow from patch to patch, I resumed my slog upwards. And a slog it was, each additional metre more and more difficult ...and less and less birdy, just occasional Twite now. Four hours into my climb, the scenery became sublime - ice and snow all around, views to the peak superb and the path now sandwiched between a snowfield to the left and a precipitous drop to the right. Another hour and a half, not much further in distance, but a lot in effort, I reached my final altitude - 3045 metres, further progress now blocked by the vast Gergeti Glacier and deep snow. Heck, no Guldenstadt's Redstarts or Great Rosefinches jumping about on the boulders, the whole point of the climb! I cannot claim to have been disappointed, the scenery really justified the climb. Four Alpine Accentors shuffled from rock to rock, Shore Larks fed nearby, I paused to admire the view - against a backdrop of mighty peaks, an adult Lammergeier. What a fantastic place! The return journey was rather easier, a mere jog in the park compared to the ascent! In just two hours and a half, I was back in Kazbegi village, my legs very much pleading for a cancellation of events for the rest of the day. I compromised with them and took a gentle stroll along the river, returning to the riverside scrub. I glanced skyward, the sun was rapidly being replaced by dark clouds, rain started. Yuk, a fair weather birder am I, but on I went. Snow was falling on the upper slopes, I was happy I had near sprinted down the mountain! At the scrub, plenty of Caucasian Chiffchaffs again, but I wondered about the Guldenstadt's Redstart. I arrived at his bush ...and there he was. But oo err, he had company! Where before there had been one, now there were five superb Guldenstadt's Redstarts atop the bush, three males and two females! A smile lurked somewhere beneath my rain hat. Time to return to digs, evening was drawing in and the weather was looking somewhat disgusting. 12 May

(Kazbegi, the south-east slopes) Last day at Kazbegi, I woke to no view of the mountains - grey sky, low cloud and rain. Gloom, thought I. I almost returned to bed, then kicked myself - bad weather at Kazbegi can mean first-class birding! A quick glance to the slopes and, yep, they were snow-covered ...pushed by the weather, almost certainly birds would be descending from the altitudes, the potential was there for a memorable day. I donned my waterproofs and headed out. Good numbers of Red-fronted Serins and Water Pipits in the village, a good sign. Near constant rain. Hmm, wandered right across the meadows and saw very little - none of the hoped-for Great Rosefinches or indeed especially large numbers of anything. Two samamiscus Common Redstarts, plenty of soggy Ring Ouzels, Water Pipits by the dozen, but it went a whole hour before I finally found a Great Rosefinch, a splendid male feeding quietly beneath a bush. Hardly the expected flock, but I wasn't complaining. Then he flew down the slope, I went to look for him and found three, two males and a female! By 9.00, with the rain turning to snow, I arrived at the riverside scrub. My eyes almost fell out!!! Jeepers, like baubles on a Christmas tree, the bushes were alive with Guldenstadt's Redstarts, dozens of them! All sat atop the bushes, a staggering 16 males and 14 females were right visual treats, really amazing. I spent an hour with these engaging birds, then as the sun began to break through, I thought I'd return to the earlier scrub to try to relocate Great Rosefinches. I certainly did ...first three, then a flock of seven, then another five, birds were pouring in from the mountains above!, gripping stuff. Then a vivid flash of red and white and, low and behold, more Guldenstadt's Redstarts, loads more! Hopping about on the rocks and on bush tops, at least 11 males and three females, bringing the morning total to an incredible 44 birds! This was birding at its best! Then a shadow - a monster of a shadow, I looked up and there, cruising low overhead, one stunning Lammergeier, banking up against a rockface and returning, effortless, quartering with barely a movement of the wings. A second Lammergeier appeared alongside, masters of the air, two falconesque shapes cutting through the sky, minutes later arching out across the valley, soon to become distant dots over the adjacent mountain range, surrounded by five Griffon Vultures. A Black Kite appeared in the valley, a little midget in comparison! The morning had simply been superb, I glanced at my watch, it was already 1 p.m., I had been totally engrossed. I ambled back across the meadows, then stopped in my tracks ...big red blobs all over the short turf, more Great Rosefinches! Despite the weather now bright sun, the upper slopes were still snow-covered - weather refugees were still arriving. In front of me, about 30 Great Rosefinches, two Shore Larks and dozens of Water Pipits. Up above, Caucasian Snowcocks called, Alpine Swifts dived in the skies. An absolutely brilliant ending to my mountain adventure - 44 Guldenstadt's Redstarts and near-on 50 Great Rosefinches, Kazbegi on its best behaviour! I caught a minibus back to Tbilisi, arriving at 7 p.m. I rented a car and headed south, part two of this Georgian extravaganza was about to begin. 13 May (Lake Jandari & Davit Gareji Steppes) The first of two days birding the steppes on the Armenian border, a total contrast to the Alpine lands of days previous. Failing to find Jandari Lake the evening before, and not wishing to accidentally stray into Armenia, I found a quiet track and slept in the car. Three Scops Owls, numerous Common Nightingales, a musical night. I woke at 5.00 a.m., a slight hint of dawn - looked around, a Golden Jackal came trotting past! Nightingales singing all around, one Quail calling, 16 Glossy Ibis flying from roost. Idyllic start. It turned out I was only a couple of kilometres from the lake, but on the western side - with access and light better on the eastern shore, it took another 20 minutes and one very dodgy track to get around. Not thronging with birds, initial scans revealed just a few Great Crested Grebes, dozens of Whiskered Terns and, one of the key species, several Pygmy Cormorants. A kilometre from the Armenian border, I found a pleasant bay - in a landscape of steppe and tumbled-down houses, reed-fringed with shallow waters. Two Ruddy Shelducks flew past, a Squacco Heron landed amongst Little Egrets. Armenian Gulls lounged offshore, a pod of Pygmy Cormorants fished just beyond. With the rising sun, birds were in song in all directions - Great Reed Warblers in the reeds, Golden Orioles in adjacent poplars and a scratchy wheatear-like song from behind. Hmm, would have to investigate that - took a little wander, Rose-coloured Starlings flew over, a flock of about 40. Got to the nearby farmhouse and there was my songster, a very nice Pied Wheatear singing on the roof! Sparrows bombing about too - House Sparrows, Tree Sparrows, then zipping past, one male Spanish Sparrow to complete the little set. Back to the lake, two Purple Herons rose from the reedbed, Little Grebes popped up nearby. Across the lake, I spotted distant birds, gulls and perhaps waders. A quick relocation and I was over there, Bee-eaters buzzing overhead, a Roller flopping past, more Rose-coloured Starlings in a flock. Studied the small gull flock - amongst a few Armenian and Black-headed Gulls, four Slender-billed Gulls, plus five Gull-billed Terns and both Black and White-winged Black Terns to accompany the rather more numerous Whiskered Terns. Just yonder, a trail through marsh and bushland looked most appealing. Great White Egrets and Grey Herons appeared to be breeding, about 45 Pygmy Cormorants roosted at the water's edge, all very nice. Lesser Grey Shrikes competed with Red-backed Shrikes, waterside vegetation supported Penduline Tit, Marsh Warbler and Grasshopper Warbler, a right medley of birds, Common Nightingales outsung them all. Nice though the lake was, my real reason for being here were the steppes that lay to the immediate east - extensive grasslands rolling all the way to the monastery of Davit-Gareji and beyond. Problem one, find the dirt track that would take me the right way! Whether I was going the right way or not, I was pretty impressed with the landscapes I was travelling through - my first time in true steppe, it really was mesmerizing. In pristine plumage, Black-headed Buntings dotted every other small shrub, Lesser Grey and Red-backed Shrikes were now joined by Woodchat Shrikes and, in no time at all, I was logging up the first Calandra Larks and families of Isabelline Wheatears, all to a backdrop of Rollers and Bee-eaters in abundance. Corn Buntings, Tawny Pipits, all fantastic stuff. Some hour into this, though only a few kilometres travelled, I happened upon a gully. A riot of colour and music as umpteen dozen Bee-eaters took to the sky, the sandbanks left and right full of their nesting holes. Two Rollers peered from a small bush, a Little Owl glared from a broken branch on the shingle of the dry river. Here I stopped a while, the Little Owl hopped up and disappeared into a hole, breeding amongst the Bee-eaters. As late morning approached, raptors began to rise - a Short-toed Eagle, then the first of many Montagu's Harriers. Barely a kilometre on, however, my track came to an abrupt end in a farmstead, I had gone the wrong way! Georgians, friendly souls, soon put me right - they jumped in their car and escorted me back about five kilometres, then pointed to a steep winding track. Oo er, I would never have thought of

going up there! It led straight to a military camp! 'Eeks', thought I, 'I suppose I am lost'. Nope, one friendly soldier pointed to an even smaller track and off I went, due east and surely now in the right direction. Some kilometres more, after countless stops for Calandra Larks, one or two Short-toed Larks and a couple more Pied Wheatears, I encountered a shephard and 5000 sheep. 'Davit-Gareji' uttered I, hoping he might confirm I was still heading the right way. A look of confusion, then recognition - he squinted at the horizon and pointed. I squinted too, there in the distance, built into a cliff face, a monastery. I thanked my shephard friend and headed off. Sniff sniff, 'hmm, I smell petrol', thought I. With a glance under the car, I was slightly taken back to see I had sprung a leak - petrol was trickling out of the tank at a rather alarming rate!!! Miles from anywhere, I really didn't fancy wasting the whole day trying to sort it out, so continued on my way, wondering how long three-quarters of a tank of petrol might last! At worst, I thought, at least I'd end up in a very beautiful landscape. Over countless bumps and down a steep windy track and the monastery was before me, one last steep track and I pulled up. I parked the car sideways on a steep bank, hoping it might allay the leak, then headed off on foot. Absolutely superb birding around this first monastery, a Western Rock Nuthatch on the first building, Pied Wheatears on the next. A stone tower was home to a pair of Blue Rock Thrush. Set into a scenic cliff-face, I scrambled up to the ridge and enjoyed the view - Griffon Vultures hung close, a small flock of Honey Buzzards migrated north. On the lea of the ridge, a grassy escarpment added yet more birds - amongst Black-headed Buntings and Lesser Grey Shrikes, one pair of Finsch's Wheatears, a very good bird to find. Also Woodchat Shrikes. Back at the car, I was pleased to find the leak seemed to have mitigated, the trickle had been replaced by a mere damp patch and delightful aroma of fuel. Checked the fuel guage, not dropped much, maybe all would be okay. Looking around, I had already realised this was not Davit-Gareji monastery - I'd seen pictures of that and this certainly was not it. With renewed faith in the car, I gambled I could explore further. An afternoon of excellent birding followed - Long-legged Buzzards here and there, Montagu's Harriers also, one Booted Eagle overhead. Late afternoon, I arrived at the real Davit-Gareji monastery, quite a fantastic place - birding, culture and landscapes all collide, simply majestic. In the heat of the afternoon, the birding was not going to be at its best, but with Rock Sparrows on the roof, a Pale Rock Sparrow in steppe nearby, plus a Menetries's Warbler in scrub and two Honey Buzzards strolling across the meadow opposite, I was suitably impressed - I decided there and then that I would spend the night nearby, hoping the petrol didn't all drain away during the night. With a few hours still to kill, I took a long journey around the neighbouring steppe, then returned to sleep just beyond the monastery compound. Bee-eaters roosted nearby, a European Nightjar appeared in the approaching dusk. Monks spotted my car and came to talk. I guessed I was going to be asked to leave, nope, quite the opposite, take the car closer to the monastery, they said, have a good night. Or at least, given my total lack of Georgian and Russian, that is what I supposed they said. 14 May (Davit Gareji) Dawn at Davit-Gareji, bells toll at the monastery, calls of Bee-eaters and Nightingales fill the air. On the rocky slopes, bushes are full of warblers - Barred Warblers, Garden Warblers, Blackcaps, Lesser Whitethroat, Common Whitethroat, Menetries's Warbler, Olivaceous Warblers, Willow Warblers, a positive soup of action. The sun creeps up, another splendid day ahead. In the monastery garden, the first monk wanders through, two Red-breasted Flycatchers flit, Chukar Partridges scurry across boulders onto the monastery roof. The sun climbs, I begin across the grasslands - Calandra Larks in display, all the shrikes and buntings in full song. With the petrol still at good levels, having hardly dropped during the night, I drove the ten kilometres back to the first monastery, goal to get more looks at the Rock Nuthatches. Initially no sign, but again the shrubbery was buzzing with birds - Nightingales two-a-penny, warblers by the dozen. A slow walk down a deep valley added plenty of birds, the highlights three Green Warblers, presumably migrants. Climbing onto the open hillside, Barred Warblers appeared in the dotted bushes, the males real stunners. Then a male Orphean Warbler, another blinder of a bird. Relocated the Finsch's Wheatears of the day before and, on the stone tower set on a precipice, the pair of Blue Rock Thrushes. An ideal place to stop and ponder, soon raptors would appear. Right on cue, one Short-toed Eagle overhead, then three distant Griffon Vultures and, tiny on comparison, one Lesser Spotted Eagle. Could have stayed up here much longer, but below I spotted a movement on the rocks near one of the monastery buildings - the Rock Nuthatch was back, almost in the same place as the day before. I clambered down and sat upon a nearby rock, a fledgling appeared on an adjacent rock, sunbathing and ultimatey falling asleep! I got a few photographs. Then the adults arrived and up perked the youngster and off they all went. Tantalisingly brief views of a Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin, then a flock of about 90 Rose-coloured Starlings flew over, seems they'd been to Jandari Lake, some kilometres to the west. I drove to the valley bottom for a breakfast of sorts - my last yoghurt and my last peanuts. Two Rock Sparrows and a Little Owl were on show, two Black Kites circled over a nearby sheep settlement. Deciding it was time to leave, I drove back down over the escarpment, had a look at the Bee-eater colony, then wound back through the low steppe. Two Pied Wheatears, several Isabelline Wheatears, Crested Larks in force. Three Egyptian Vultures sat on the deck, I departed and headed back to Jandari Lake. Now in the heat of midday, I did little here - watched the cows coming to drink, took a quick walk in a stand of poplars - six Golden Orioles, one Red-breasted Flycatcher too. Otherwise, a quick scan revealed much as the day before, Whiskered Terns and Pygmy Cormorants on the lake, Little Egrets around. Nearing the end of my mini-break, I opted for an early return to Tbilisi, giving myself a couple of hours to nip into Lake Lisi on the western fringes of the city. A bit of trial and error in finding the place, winding through residential blocks, then up a bumpy road before suddenly the lake appeared. Small and surrounded by open country, some interesting species to round the trip off. A Crane with two well-grown youngsters wandered the meadow, three Purple Herons flew around, a Bittern boomed, but my attention was for the reedbeds - after a dozen or so Great Reed Warblers and a few Sedge Warblers, finally the target bird appeared, Paddyfield Warbler. Hit the horrendous evening rush-hour in Tbilisi, clearly a city where drivers know no logic. All too soon, the streets were grid lock, oh yawn - Swifts tumbled through the skies above, House Sparrows bounced about. I crept through the queues at less than snail's pace - rather late, I returned the car. Headed for the airport, farewell Tbilisi, farewell Georgia. 15 May Grabbed a newspaper in the airport, talks with the political opposition had failed, more clashes on the streets expected. Russians still on the border, tensions high. My voyage into this Caucasian tinderbox had exceeded all my expectations, an amazing week of birding in an

amazing country, a pity indeed that politics might persuade many a sane birder to think twice. A couple of hours snoozing on airport benches, then 03.30 a.m., the flight departed for Riga. Quick transit and onward to Vilnius. 08.00 a.m., home and straight to work. Trip over.

SYSTEMATIC SPECIES LIST

Great Crested Grebe Little Grebe Pygmy Cormorant Bittern Squacco Heron Little Egret Great White Egret Grey Heron Purple Heron Glossy Ibis Ruddy Shelduck Mallard Lammergeier Griffon Vulture Black Vulture Egyptian Vulture Golden Eagle Lesser Spotted Eagle Steppe Eagle Short-toed Eagle Booted Eagle Black Kite Marsh Harrier Montagu's Harrier Long-legged Buzzard Common Buzzard

- Buteo buteo menetriesi
- Buteo buteo vulpinus Honey Buzzard Eurasian Sparrowhawk Common Kestrel Caucasian Black Grouse Caucasian Snowcock Chukar Partridge Quail Moorhen Coot Common Crane Wood Sandpiper Common Sandpiper Black-headed Gull Slender-billed Gull Armenian Gull Gull-billed Tern Black Tern White-winged Black Tern Whiskered Tern Rock Dove Wood Pigeon Common Cuckoo Little Owl Scop's Owl European Nightjar Common Swift Alpine Swift Hoopoe Common Kingfisher European Bee-eater European Roller Green Woodpecker Wryneck Common Skylark Crested Lark Short-toed Lark Calandra Lark Shore Lark (*Eremophila alpestris penicillata*) Sand Martin House Martin Barn Swallow Tawny Pipit Water Pipit Meadow Pipit Tree Pipit Red-throated Pipit White Wagtail Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava feldegg* *Motacilla flava dombrowski* Grey Wagtail Dipper Dunnock Alpine Accentor Common Nighthawk Thrush Nighthawk Rufous Bush Robin Common Redstart (*Phoenicurus phoenicurus samamisticus*) Black Redstart (*Phoenicurus ochruros*) Guldenstadt's Redstart Northern Wheatear Isabelline Wheatear Pied Wheatear Finsch's Wheatear Whinchat Blue Rock Thrush Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush Song Thrush Mistle Thrush Blackbird Ring Ouzel Barred Warbler Garden Warbler Blackcap Orphean Warbler Lesser Whitethroat Common Whitethroat Menetries's Warbler Sedge Warbler Grasshopper Warbler Marsh Warbler Paddyfield Warbler Great Reed Warbler Olivaceous Warbler Willow Warbler Caucasian Chiffchaff Green Warbler Spotted Flycatcher Red-breasted Flycatcher Great Tit Coal Tit Blue Tit Long-tailed Tit Penduline Tit Western Rock Nuthatch Wallcreeper Red-backed Shrike Woodchat Shrike Lesser Grey Shrike Magpie Jay Jackdaw Red-billed Chough Alpine Chough Rook Hooded Crow Common Raven Common Starling Rose-coloured Starling Golden Oriole House Sparrow Spanish Sparrow Tree Sparrow Rock Sparrow Pale Rock Sparrow Snowfinch Chaffinch Linnet Twite (*Carduelis flavirostris brevirostris*) Goldfinch Greenfinch Red-fronted Serin Bullfinch Common Crossbill Common Rosefinch Great Rosefinch Black-headed Bunting Corn Bunting Rock Bunting (153 species) Also Golden Jackal, Red Fox, Brown Hare, Mediterranean Tortoise, various lizards and one unidentified snake.