

Kazakhstan, Lands of the Pallas's Sandgrouse.

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Last Updated Sunday, 31 August 2014

Explorations into Central Asia, this eleven-day trip to southern Kazakhstan was my first to the region and focussed on the high Tian Shan mountains and the vast expanses of semi-desert that stretch to the north. With species including Pallas's Sandgrouse, Ibisbill, White-tailed Rubythroat and Altai Accentor, this 2014 trip was truly memorable.

Background and Logistics. Few independent birders visit Kazakhstan and fewer still do in mid-summer. Whilst a spring trip would certainly have had cooler weather and would have also coincided with the migration of northbound species, there were also advantages of a mid-summer trip - across the country, the breeding season was at its peak and it was a pleasure indeed to witness countless shrikes, etc, feeding young in the nest or recently fledged. Also, with the country far hotter and drier, I reasoned that certain species in the desert would be easier to find due to their greater dependency on the more limited water resources and to the simple fact that with juveniles also on the wing there would be greater numbers of birds to potentially find. This certainly seemed to be the case with Pallas's Sandgrouse in particular and various larks, buntings and finches in general. Many birders visiting Kazakhstan also incorporate the northern steppes into their itinerary (Sociable Plover, Black Larks, etc), but I purposely decided against this - not only would it have required internal flights of over 1200 km, but moreover it is also relatively easy for me to visit these areas on a long weekend from my base in Eastern Europe (especially as British no longer require a visa for Kazakhstan). With relatively poor infrastructure and a total lack of English in most areas (signage and spoken), Kazakhstan is not the easiest place to visit independently. With public transport to most birding areas non-existent and understanding that hitch-hiking would be difficult, I chose to rent a car. This is not as simple as in many countries - many companies do not respond to e-mails, some (notably Europcar) have an unreliable reputation and do not turn up at the airport, while most of the others (eg. Caspian Car Rent) have restrictions on where the cars can be taken and have a limit of 150 km per day, far too low for a birding trip in such a vast country. After a little research, I found Dixie Travel - not only were they the only company to respond to e-mails quickly, but they also offered a daily allowance of 250 km and a fair price. Once inside the country, it is fair to say most localities are fairly remote! In general, roads ranged from reasonable to poor (mostly asphalt, but deeply furrowed with numerous potholes) and, especially on the route from Almaty to Kokpek, traffic police were numerous. With a fairly simple road network, navigation in most areas was simple, the obvious exception being Almaty city - with few signposts, and even fewer in Western script, getting around in this large city would be a challenge indeed without satellite navigation. Away from the Almaty area, there are no hotels or other forms of accommodation at any of the main birding sites and I camped throughout.

DAY LOG. 4 July. Kiev, Ukraine. Stop-over on route to Kazakhstan, only a couple of hours free, so I nipped out from the airport, incurred the wrath of a couple of local police by wandering around scrubland adjacent to the airport fences, but in the process notched up a few nice morsels to get the trip underway - I was primarily seeking out butterflies, but the typical east European mix of birds also included several Red-backed Shrikes, a Wryneck, one Marsh Harrier quartering adjacent to the runways, plus plentiful Whinchats, a couple of Northern Wheatears and a Black Redstart. Almost back in the airport terminal, a small patch of woodland produced one Syrian Woodpecker, one Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and several Spotted Flycatchers. 5 July. Almaty to Sogety Plains. Touchdown in Almaty 3.30 a.m., let the adventures begin. Remarkably swift passage through immigration and a mere half an hour after landing, I was in my rental car navigating my way out of the city and heading east. With Pallas's Sandgrouse high on my 'most wanted' list, my destination was the Sogety Plains, a vast expanse of semi-desert close to the Chinese border and a key locality for the sandgrouse. As dawn broke, with the snow-capped Tien Shan mountains cutting the skyline to the south, I was motoring through an arid farmscape, wheeling masses of pink and black lifted from fields as flocks of Rosy Starlings took to the skies, while regular blobs on the roadside wires transformed into European Rollers and Lesser Grey Shrikes, both surprisingly numerous. A little bleary-eyed, I pulled into a clump of trees for a break, Indian Golden Orioles yodelled and flew from poplars, a couple of Hoopoes flapped across and, most exquisite, my first Azure Tits of the trip came roving past, two stunning little bundles of sparkling white and blue-greys. A couple of hours into my trip, the farmland came to an end and ahead lay a ridge of moderately low hills, markers of the start of the desert. Passing through Kokpek Pass, steep gullies fracturing off to either side, another short stop quickly revealed yet more good birds - two Golden Eagles drifting down the valley, several Pied Wheatears and Rock Buntings adorning rocks, a family party of Turkestan Shrikes. I however was looking for my first target of the trip and it did not take long ... singing from a rocky crag and requiring quite a bit of scanning before I suddenly noticed it far closer than I was expecting, the bird in question was a White-capped Bunting, a localised species and a very nice bird to start the trip. And then onward, so I entered the lands of the enigmatic Pallas's Sandgrouse ... a stark world of subtle beauty, one of vast, open plains,

hyper arid in nature and marked by stunted vegetation and bordered by low hills to north and west. A few kilometres after the village of Kokpek, Rosy Starlings in residence, the road splits and I took a route to north-east. Long-legged Buzzards sat on hummocks, Isabelline Wheatears became the default bird and, rather ominously, the sun was already beating down and the temperatures rising steadily. Short-toed Larks began to flit up from the roadside, a couple of Tawny Pipits too, Black-eared Kites circled overhead, I had arrived at my destination, the horizons shimmered in all directions. Gazing around, I quickly understood that key to finding the sandgrouse in mid-summer, and indeed many other birds, was to locate water. At kilometre post 192, a small track meandered to the left, passing some old tumbled down buildings and leading to low hills beyond. In previous years, in spring at least, birders had identified this as a good site for the sandgrouse, a dripping pipe near the hills offering a rare water source. Along the track I went, Isabelline Wheatears and Horned Larks about the only birds seen. Three kilometres after the buildings, a rough track led to the right and, low and behold, there was the pipe ...dripping precious water and creating a mini oasis measuring a grand two or three metres in total extend. But an oasis it was, flocks of birds were already dropping in to drink and it would be here that I would spend the next few hours - a pleasure indeed, relaxing and watching the comings and goings of many birds. Very common were Grey-headed Buntings and Short-toed Larks, but amongst the other visitors Mongolian Finches and Horned Larks dropped in with regularity, several Crimson-winged Finches visited on a couple of occasions, as did a Red-headed Bunting once and, unexpected bird of the day, a single Oriental Skylark. Rather entertaining, a pair of Turkestan Shrikes were also nesting at the site, the adults often feeding a mere metre or so from my car, then flying up to feed the young in bushes just up the slope. Two Black-bellied Sandgrouse also visited briefly mid-afternoon, as did a Long-legged Buzzard a little later. Towards evening, I made a little trip to the nearby Charyn River, but saw relatively little, so returned to km 192 in the early evening for my first hikes across the desert. No Pallas's Sandgrouse and, in fact, not very much at all ...looping across the open plains, then back via the edge of the low hills, the hike of some kilometres revealed only Desert Wheatears and a Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush as new species.

With the sun now setting, I returned to the waterhole in hope of sandgrouse coming to drink ...zilch. Having spent the previous night on a plane however, I was ready for sleep now anyhow, so with a European Nightjar hawking around the waterhole, I put up my tent and collapsed into it, day one in the lands of the Pallas's Sandgrouse over. 6 July. Sogety Plains, Kegen Pass & Borogai Lake. 5.00 a.m., light flooding across the plains, I poke my head out of the tent. Very little happening at the waterhole, so I decided to relocate a couple of kilometres to the east and resume the strategy of simply logging up the kilometres and hope that sooner or later I would bump into a Pallas's Sandgrouse. Meandering between flat stony areas and shallow wadis, the land resounded to the sharp yelps of Great Gerbils, burrows of the critters pockmarking almost sandy areas in all directions and beady little eyes watching from near and far. In the cool hours of dawn, a lot of bird activity too - abundant Short-toed Larks and Horned Larks, Isabelline Wheatears on virtually every tussock, a total of four splendid Asian Desert Warblers, little melodies of song rattling out from the vegetated wadi beds. An hour and more, I'd been wandering, the bubbling calls of a couple of Black-bellied Sandgrouse floating across the skies, but not a peep of a Pallas's Sandgrouse. Already the heat was beginning to build ...but then, 6.20 a.m., an hour or so after sunrise, a call overhead, not totally dissimilar to the Great Gerbils. Presuming the gerbils hadn't learnt to fly, I spun round and scanned ...and there, heading directly towards me, one slightly daintier sandgrouse, pale underwings, no darker flight feathers. Wa hoo, incoming Pallas's Sandgrouse! And straight overhead he went, flying fast and direct, veering slightly to the west. Seemed to be heading for the hills, but not towards the drinking pool. A few minutes later, another flew over ...then another, then two more! Over the next 15 minutes, in pairs and threes, eleven more went bombing over, simple calls chirping out, all tracking to the same direction. To say I was happy is an underestimate, this was my main target on this Kazakhstan trip ...but where were they all going? They had to be heading for water, so I returned to my car, I following the same general direction, bumping along rough tracks and over a ridge ...and then I happened upon an abandoned shepherd's corral...and directly above this an absolutely fantastic find - gushing water flooding out onto a little pocket of green grass! Oh wow, this had to be the spot! And indeed it was ...within minutes, I was surrounded by Pallas's Sandgrouse - birds in the air, birds waddling across the grass, birds drinking at the pool! Never in my wildest dreams did I expect to see so many Pallas's Sandgrouse ...at a very conservative estimate I would say that at least 65 birds dropped in to drink by 9.30 am., with a few last birds lingering another half an hour. And with them, a couple of dozen Black-bellied Sandgrouse, one Cuckoo, one Hoopoe and an assortment of small passerines, including a Bimaculated Lark and my only Corn Bunting of the trip. By mid-morning, with action at the waterhole dwindling to almost nothing and temperatures steadily climbing towards 40 C, I decided to depart and head for the relative coolness of the higher altitude Kegen Pass, a fairly remote locality a mere 80 km from the Chinese border and about 40 km from Kyrgyzstan. One Steppe Eagle on route, a few simple villages along the road, some rather puzzled locals wondering what a foreigner was doing trying to buy milk in a store that wouldn't have looked out in place in a century long gone by! Saw my first Oriental Turtle Dove as drove along this road, plus my only Crag Martins, but the best birding was certainly as the altitude began to increase and the road began to zigzag - Pied Wheatears joining the Isabelline Wheatears, Rock Sparrows here and there, Common Rosefinches sitting atop shrubbery, one more White-capped Bunting and, best of all, a superb colony of Lesser Kestrels near the top of the pass. About thirty pairs in all, the birds were breeding in a rocky road cutting, dozens of little chicks clearly visible peering out of little holes and loads of adults wheeling about over the slope, hovering over adjacent meadows and generally giving superb views. A lot of Common Swifts too. From Kegen, I thought about returning to the Pallas's Sandgrouse site, but instead decided to go to Lake Borogai, a high altitude lake just short of Kokpek Pass. Though the birding was not outstanding, the lake merely holding a few Ruddy Shelducks and other common waterbirds, the site did provide my Saker Falcon on the trip. A stunning bird, the Saker came storming in from the adjacent plains and immediately provoked a Ruddy Shelduck to fly up from the lake and start mobbing it. My final sight of the pair were duck and falcon vanishing off over the far side of the lake! On the shores of the lake, I put my tent and waited sundown, two Black-bellied

Sandgrouse came to drink at dusk. 7 July. Malibay & Lake Sorbulak. Target for this day, White-crowned Penduline Tit. Moderately widespread in the lowlands that edge the Tien Shan mountains, the bird is nevertheless fairly scarce. With the day another beautiful sunny affair, I quickly decamped at Lake Borogai and drove over Kokpek Pass back into the slither of agricultural land that sits between the mountains and desert. Immediately, European Rollers began to dominate the landscape, flocks of European Bee-eaters hawked from roadside wires and Lesser Grey Shrikes appeared with regularity. A dozen or so kilometres beyond Kokpek Pass, I took a left towards the village of Malibay. Black-eared Kite circling, Hoopoes aside the road ...and then a treat indeed. In a series of sand pits next to the road, masses of hirundines buzzing in and out - a hundred burrows and more, the vast majority of birds were Pale Martins, a localised species in Kazakhstan. Spent about half an hour here, picking out a few Sand Martins in their midst, then marvelling as a Hobby came storming through, a mass cloud of martins rising to greet the bird, twittering alarms spiralling high. And then onward, immediately west of the village lies the River Shilik - a gushing river fringed by a thread of relatively lush vegetation, then bordered by traditional plots of farmland and lines of willows. This is the land of the White-capped Penduline Tit. They are not, however, so easy to find - parking a road bridge, I began a wander along the river, slowly checking suitable lines of willows all the way. It was only a couple of hours after dawn, but already stinking hot. On I trudged, an hour and more, Rollers and Hoopoes by the wayside, Cetti's Warblers and Nightingales belting out their melodies from riverine thickets, an Indian Golden Oriole high in a poplar ...but not a sign of anything penduline! But then, almost at the point, I was preparing to return to the car, a distinctive call from a ragged clump of bushes to my left - seee seee ... quiet, high. It had to be them ...and so it was, not just one or two White-capped Penduline Tits, but a whole family of them! Adults and at least eight fledged juveniles, the birds were feeding in the depths of rank vegetation, hidden much of the time but occasionally popping up onto seed heads, then flitting up into willows before flying across to the next bush to drop back into vegetation. Followed them for a half hour or more, the experience all the more pleasurable for the company they chose to keep ...a small flock of Azure Tits, about five in total. Azure Tits and White-capped Penduline Tits, you really can't get much better! And with that, I then returned to the car, pausing as I passed through Malibay village to admire a mass flock of about 350 Rosy Starlings, almost all adults and all seeming very excited about something - and then I spotted why, just to my rear, a female European Sparrowhawk was sitting on the grass with a struggling Rosy Starling in talons!!! I'm not entirely sure who was the more surprised, the hawk or me ...but it was sure the Rosy Starling's lucky day, the Sparrowhawk gave me a long glare, then took to the air releasing its prey, up flew the Rosy Starling back to the flock, one lucky bird! From Malibay, I then made the relatively long journey back to Almaty and up to Lake Sorbulak ...not particularly far in kilometres, but with gangs of traffic police on many junctions and locals obviously well-aware, the average speed was painfully slow! Mid-afternoon, the waters of Sorbulak Lake appeared to the side of the road, a startling dash of shimmering blue set against the drab sands and ashen greens of the surrounding lands. Touching 40 C, my first thoughts were to take a little siesta, but a simple glance at the lake saw those plans vanish - the lake was absolutely teeming with superb birds, ranks and ranks of White Pelicans, rafts of ducks, masses of waders ...ooo, it was looking very good! And truly it was good, within an hour or two, my crude estimations had put the local White Pelican population at about 800, a mass of white bodies and beaks lining the banks along the entire western shoreline. Add to that at least 40 Dalmatian Pelicans, an absolute minimum of 1000 Great Cormorants, a pair of White-tailed Eagles with fledged juvenile and many hundreds of mixed ducks (including perhaps 300 Ruddy Shelducks and several Ferruginous Ducks) and soon the extent of the birding bonanza became apparent. Slowly, I worked the coastline, edging south, scoping all the way ... in addition to the above birds, it was also waders galore - Black-winged Stilts, Lapwings and Common Redshanks dominating, but a total of 15 species in all, including Wood Sandpipers, Avocets, plenty of Ruff in their full summer glory, a couple of Greater Sand Plovers and a Terek Sandpiper ...overall, pretty good for mid-summer (I had not expected any waders!). By evening, I had also added several Black-necked Grebes, an unexpected female Goldeneye and, in surrounding areas, a Shikra, several small flocks of Rosy Starlings and as many as 25 European Rollers. Carefully choosing a remote spot, I pitched camp in a clump of trees near the lake shore ...clearly not remote enough - at about midnight, I woke to a glaringly bright spotlight illuminating my tent, rangers had discovered me! Fortunately, no big deal, once they had established I was a tourist, they bid me goodnight and departed.

8 July. Lake Sorbulak & Kanshengel. Dawn at Sorbulak, a racket of warblers churring and grating in the reeds, Bearded Tits pinging away, a bunch of Magpies scolding a wandering Golden Jackal. Rather than birding the actual lake, I today concentrated my morning efforts on a couple of reedy pools adjacent to the main Almaty-Astana road (km 83 and km 86) ... and most productive they were - a couple of male White-headed Ducks on one pool, a female with three chicks on the other, little flocks of Ferruginous Ducks and Garganeys drifting about, a juvenile White-tailed Eagle sitting on an embankment. In the reeds, as well as a noisy colony of Grey Herons and Great White Egrets, highlights included a Paddyfield Warbler amongst the assorted Acrocephalus warblers and a Greenish Warbler singing in adjacent bushes. Also Black-necked Grebes, a Marsh Harrier and assorted waders. By 9.00 a.m., the heat was already beginning its relentless attack and the reedbeds were falling silent. I decided to continue my journey to the north. Only 110 km distant, Kanshengel was my next destination, a land of semi-desert sitting at the junction of sand dunes stretching to the north-east and flat gravel plains to the west. Only a 110 km perhaps, but with the road an assault course of endless furrows and potholes, the journey was slow, speeds rarely rising above 60 km/hr. Still, some attractions as I progressed north - a Short-toed Eagle sitting in the desert eating a snake, Lesser Grey Shrikes feeding youngsters and, at the 'Wandering Tree' (an isolated clump of trees surrounding a well), birds including European Rollers, European Bee-eaters, a Hoopoe and several Red-headed Buntings, as well as my first Crested Larks of the trip, a dozen or so personata White Wagtails and a selection of waders, including Little Stint and Little Ringed Plovers. Eventually, not far short of midday, the dusty settlement of Kanshengel came into view - a cluster of truckstop tea shacks and small restaurants around a road crossing, one petrol station also present. But boy was it hot, 40 C and still climbing. I collapsed into one of the stalls and ordered a pot of tea, trucks rumbled past, flies buzzed and I plotted my plan of action. Hell, no

way I was going for any long hikes in this heat! I would later camp just north of this point, but in the meantime, I decided the best I could do was take a slow drive along the road to Kopar. Amazing for the total lack of other vehicles, tufts of withered grass were poking up through the cracked asphalt and in the five hours along the road I saw a grand total of one other car! As for birds however, from a point about ten kilometres and onwards, it is truly 'lark alley' ...hundreds upon hundreds of Short-toed Larks flushing up from the roadside almost constantly, Calandra Larks too in fair numbers. In this cocktail, the idea was to find other species lurking, White-winged Lark always possible. Risking a serious dose of frazzling, quite a number of walks were undertaken, great loops across the parched landscape, Isabelline Wheatears and Short-toed Larks everywhere, clunky Calandras by the dozen, but it took a lot of effort to find anything in their midst ...by the afternoon's end, I had managed not a single White-winged Lark, but had notched up a dozen or so Crested Larks, four Bimaculated Larks and four Asian Short-toed Lark, the latter apparently now split from Lesser Short-toed Lark. Also seen, two Steppe Grey Shrikes, a flock of 12 Brown-necked Ravens (lingering around a gully about 8 km from Kanshengel), a small nesting colony of European Bee-eaters (in the same gully), an absolute minimum of 60 Black-bellied Sandgrouse (most sitting on the actual road) and, always an impressive species, a Eurasian Black Vulture, a humongous great bird sitting on a tiny little corpse of a dead hare! Also several Long-legged Buzzards, a couple of Rollers and a few Red-headed Buntings. 43 C the temperature topped and not a scrap of shade anywhere from horizon to horizon! By 5.00 p.m., I was ready for quits, so gradually made my way back to Kanshengel and stopped again at the little restaurant for a while - participated in another pot of tea and had my first little meal of the trip, kebab and rice. Had a lazy half hour or so, then set off to (a) locate a well north of the settlement and (b) find somewhere to camp. I was not initially sure of the location of the well I desired, my directions slightly vague in this respect, but after trying a number of tracks, I found the well exactly 10 km north of Kanshengel - turning to the right, there was a small farmstead with many horses and, a couple of hundred metres from that, a glorious well with water trickling out into a couple of troughs and thereafter spilling out to create a muddy pool. With water a major magnet in such landscape, flocks of birds were massing around the water, the pool and troughs both. Oodles of larks in the main, again Short-toed and Calandra, but also a riot of pink and black as Rosy Starlings dropped out of the sky to drink and bath. As I settled down for what I supposed would be a pleasurable couple of hours, a rolling ball of dusk appeared to my rear, approaching at fair speed. Not a dust storm, but a pick-up from the farmstead ...'darn' I thought, 'am I about to be told to leave?'. Not at all, despite a total lack of common language, it soon became clear that the guy was not only happy to see me, but also wanted to welcome back to the farm. With the cooler evening approaching, I would have preferred to have stayed at the well to be honest, but decided international relations would be better served by acceptance. Pots of tea served by the guy's wife, some weird cakes appearing on the table, the guy then took great pleasure in leafing through my bird book, immediately singling out Macqueen's Bustards and gesturing to where they should be. He also seemed to suggest Demoiselle Crane was in the area and correctly identified both the sandgrouse likely. Declining the offer to stay the night, I eventually dragged myself out of the small house and had another quick look at the waterhole - loads of larks still, plenty of Isabelline Wheatears, but also Black-bellied Sandgrouse present now. And with that, the sun not far off the horizon, I followed a little track to the dunes a couple of kilometres distant, great billowing clouds of dust rising in my wake, my car a shocking new colour when I came to stop! A beautifully peaceful location, I pitched my tent and sat back to admire the day's end, a few camels plodded over to investigate, a full moon was on the rise. As darkness fell, birds still flitting here and there, I boiled up a last coffee of the day, scanning in vain for a Macqueen's Bustard strutting the desert. Time for sleep! As I clambered towards my tent however, an almighty fireball streaked into the skies to the north. 'What on earth is that?!, I thought. Had it been heading down, I would have imagined it was a plane heading into its last moments, but this was rising steadily, cutting across the sky from the west. Truly amazing, I grabbed my binoculars and peered, definitely some kind of projectile, the 'fireball' being spitted out from the rear of something. Seemed pretty close to the images of space shuttles rising high into the sky ...and then it dawned on me - Baikonur, the Russian Cosmodrome, is in Kazakhstan! As it blazed across the sky and eventually vanished off yonder, the remnants of light just sitting there for an eternity after, I checked my maps ...surely not, I was left wondering, Baikonur was almost 1000 km to my west, would I really see a rocket from such distance? But indeed that is what it was, checking later, I discovered a Soyuz-2 was launched at exactly that time, I guess its trajectory taking it straight over me. How cool was that?!

9 July. Kanshengel & Lake Alakol. A Goitered Gazelle trotting off across the dunes, a scrawny Red Fox sauntering past, t'was 5.00 a.m. and I was up and scanning, the plan was a Macqueen's Bustard or two before the sun rose too high. Bah, some hope, had a few Black-bellied Sandgrouse shuffling along, found two Eurasian Black Vultures and a Eurasian Griffon Vulture roosting on the lip of a dune, but not a hint of a bustard! Giving it up very early, I then decided on spec to travel further north, thinking Lake Alakol had to worth a gamble - I'd found relatively little information on this site, but in spring at least it seemed quite reasonable, possibilities of pratincoles and perhaps Great Black-headed Gull. Again, an awful road to get there, potholes in the furrows, violent bumps just when you weren't expecting them! Kazakh road-builders have a great future! A couple of jarring hours later, the waters of Alakol opened to the right and off the road I turned, a dusty little track winding down to a rocky coast and small pebble beach. One Gull-billed Tern overhead, several Little Terns too, but first impressions overall were far from overwhelming - as well as the terns, a few Caspian Gulls lounged offshore and a Common Redshank eyed me from the beach, but otherwise it was a shoreline that appeared rather barren and uninviting. Not even 10.00 a.m., it was absolutely sweltering, over 40 C with the landscape once more promising zero shade. Following the lake southward, I soon discovered however that this was no barren landscape - just a couple of kilometres along, the rocky shore gave way to a low expanse of land arching out into the lake, a rich mix of habitats from shallows dotted with reedbeds to stark pans of salt, saline pools separating them. And there were birds, oodles of them ...fearing to either get my car stuck in soft sand or, worse still, sink through one of the salt crusts, I

donned my hat and stepped out into the heat to explore. Serious doolally temperature now, even worse for the white of the salt, I managed an hour or so before being forced back to the car ...but what a good hour it was, the very first pool I encountered supporting not only a flock of 18 Pygmy Cormorants (a little out of range), but also Greater Sand Plovers, a dozen or so White Pelicans and a multitude of common herons and waders. Strolling further, flocks of Red-crested Pochard began to rise from the reed, plentiful Black-headed Wagtails flitted across the mudflats and a whole bevy of warblers grated away in the reedbeds - Moustached Warblers seemed common, as did Eurasian Reed Warbler, but also present both Great Reed Warbler and Clamorous Reed Warbler. The best birds here however were the birds I'd been hoping for - pratincoles. Always great birds to see, I was pretty impressed to not only find three Collared Pratincoles, but also two Black-winged Pratincoles, this latter a more typical breeder of more northerly areas in Kazakhstan. Were it not for the heat, I could have walked all day - I had barely scratched the surface of the habitat available (it seemed to continue endlessly to the south), but I was in need of refreshment. A coffee back at the car didn't cut it, so checking my map, I saw there was a small town about 30 km further north. A pilgrimage in search of milk, I was happy indeed to find a little shop in that town, it seemed to have precious little else! Downing two litres of deliciously cold milk, I was truly revived ...I could face another bash at the shores of Alakol! So back to Lake Alakol I went, this time trying an area a little further north. After checking a few bays, all reasonable enough in themselves, I then hit the jackpot ...one of the absolute highlights of my whole trip to Kazakhstan, a bay that just had me gasping in awe time after time! A small inlet fringed by reeds, sporting a few sand banks and backed by a rocky ridge, it was just packed out with birds - hundreds of waders in the shallows at one end and, a sight almost making me fall over backward, a simply stunning gathering of Great Black-headed Gulls on a sand bar at the other! Ooo, about 55 in all, they were truly the bee's knee, virtually all were adults and in full summer plumage. With the sun to my rear, this was heaven, the yellows of the bills vivid in the perfect light, the jet black of heads contrasting a treat. What I had never appreciated in these stunning birds before, and a feature not illustrated in guide books, is the bright scarlet of the gullet - as birds yawned, the flash of red breaking the yellows of the bill was startling indeed. After suitable time, I tore myself away from the gulls to check the other birds in the bay ...and yet again, I was stunned - way in excess of what I had been expecting, there were no less than 20 species of wader present, Black-winged Stilts and Common Redshanks the most common, but also several Terek Sandpipers, another Greater Sand Plover, five more Collared Pratincoles and odds and ends such as summer-plumage Curlew Sandpipers and displaying Kentish Plovers. Also six species of terns, including Caspian, Gull-billed, Black and White-winged Black, along with a small flock of Slender-billed Gulls, a few White Pelicans and loads of small passerines moving about in the reeds. Sitting atop the rocky ridge to admire all, a pair of Little Owls popped up to have a quick look at me and then, just as I thought it couldn't get any better, I heard the call of a penduline tit, scanned quickly and found a pair of Black-headed Penduline Tits feeding fledged young just below me! Well stone me, this was a halcyon moment indeed, this little cracker is not an easy bird to find in Kazakhstan and here they were, hanging off reed heads in full view, Great Black-headed Gulls the backdrop. I stayed at this spot till dusk, Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters also appearing to complete the picture, then headed off to find somewhere to camp. One flock of Spanish Sparrows just beyond the bay, then a Montagu's Harrier drifting over. A top day, albeit one that had hit 44 C at its height and half killed me. 10 July. Lake Alakol & Kanshengel. Probably exacerbated by the self-inflicted near total lack of food over the preceding week, the heat really began to knock me out today ...44 C, a draining wind and again no shade from dawn till dusk, open desert all the way. Close to my camp, a dawn stroll added two Lesser Sand Plovers to my tally, plus too a pair of Syke's Warblers, while a quick return to the sites visited the day before revealed that both the 18 Pygmy Cormorants were still present on their pool and the 55 Great Black-headed Gulls still decorated their sand bar, along with the supporting cast including such delights as Terek Sandpipers and Collared Pratincoles. One juvenile White-tailed Eagle here too. Departing relatively early, I made my way back to Kanshengel and half thought of continuing all the way to Zhelturanga. However, there was still the little matter of a couple of rather good birds in the Kanshengel area, namely Macqueen's Bustard and Caspian Plover! I decided to stay another day, so first of all made a point to revisit my little restaurant, meal number two of the trip - a small portion of shashlik, about all I could manage. Remarkably as I ate, peering out at the broad patch of dust stretching to the road, a Merlin shot by, swinging to the north and vanishing back into the desert! Hmm, that was a bit of luck. Anyhow, meal finished and a litre of ice tea purchased, I decided to try the Kopar road again. Stinking hot, but actually quite productive - amongst the waves of Short-toed Larks that scattered from the roadside, my Bimaculated Lark count (ten birds) was a little higher than on my first attempt and I also located two Eurasian Black Vultures, eight Long-legged Buzzards and a pair of Red-rumped Swallows (nesting in a culvert about 50 km from Kenshengel). Still no White-winged Lark however. Just north of Kanshengel, in a splash of green, a small well oozes life into a small patch of the desert, a stream trickling to a tiny marsh, birds pouring in to drink and bath. Seemed a good spot for Caspian Plover, but there sure wasn't one when I visited! Hundreds and hundreds of Short-toed Larks popping in to drink, a noisy pair of Black-winged Stilts agitating around grown chicks, but otherwise the highlights fell to one Common Snipe, five Lapwings, four Green Sandpipers and two Little Ringed Plovers. Waited a while to see if anything would appear ...and it did, a herd of about 300 ragged goats and sheep, a bunch of horses too! Well, I supposed, not much point lingering, so headed up to the well 10 km further north, i.e. where I had been two days earlier. Settled myself down for the evening entertainment, coffee in hand, 500 squabbling Rosy Starlings in front, acrobatics in the sky one moment, water flying as they splashed and bathed the next. A grand spectacle indeed. Again, Short-toed and Calandra Larks galore, Isabelline Wheatears everywhere. As the sun began to sink, I scanned again for Macqueen Bustards ...and then a movement, a bird stepping through the shade of a tussock. A fairly small bird, not a bustard. Popped the bins up and there was a Caspian Plover! 'Super', I thought, and then I spotted another! A female and well-grown chick, these were birds that I had certainly hoped for, but didn't necessarily expect. Over the next half hour or so, with larks and Rosy Starlings continually flying in and out, the two Caspian Plovers gingerly approached, finally poking about in the mud of the waterhole. Black-bellied Sandgrouse dropped in, the sun finally broke the horizon, the day coming to an end. I camped aside the dunes again, camels strolling

past. As night edged in, a Red Fox wandered past, heading towards the now distant waterhole, a Short-eared Owl drifted across. Into my tent I went, time to write notes. 11 July. Kanshengel, Topar & Zhelturanga. So it passed, another dawn scanning in the vain hope of finding a Macqueen's Bustard, pinpointing a few distant Black-bellied Sandgrouse, but nothing else better than a lark! In reality, hopes of locating such an elusive species in mid-summer in the vastness of the Kazakh plains were always somewhat fanciful. The two Caspian Plovers were still present however and I did find another Asian Desert Warbler. Better still, following a dust track I also stumbled across a new well, one with a decent amount of water flowing into a channel about 40 metres long. And to this well, flocks and flocks of sandgrouse circling out of the skies and down onto the dirt, a chorus of the rich bubbling calls of the Black-bellied Sandgrouse a treat. But then, another call too, a call that had become familiar on the Sogety Plains, a kind of clear chirping call ...and then a flock dropped in, Pallas's Sandgrouses! Wonderful, occasional birders had seen them in this area before, but I truly considered myself privileged to be seeing this species again...and then more arrived, flocks of six, of ten, of eight, loads of them. I sat and admired, over about half an hour, at least 90 Pallas's Sandgrouse came to drink, little superstars strutting across the sand to the water's edge. Also present, about 60 Black-bellied Sandgrouse. Nice, nice, nice. And with that I left Kanshengel. My next destination was a fairly short hop to the east - a two-hour drive across low dunes to a series of pools in the Topar area and onward to Zhelturanga. If Short-toed Larks had been abundant in the Kanshengel area, in the dunes it was simply amazing - countless hundreds from start to finish, I very often had to slow down to avoid ploughing down whole flocks of them! Calandra Larks too, plus a few dozen Crested Larks. As I rolled on through the dunes, so too did my tally of other birds rise - two Brown-necked Ravens, 50 or so Isabelline Wheatears, 25 Red-headed Buntings, five Turkestan Shrikes, an absolute minimum of 20 Steppe Grey Shrikes, and so the list went on. Oddity of the morning though was a flight of birds heading low over the desert - distant initially, long-necked birds in a straggly V formation, my first thought was migrating Demoiselle Cranes ...but as they approached, they evolved into Great Cormorants, most odd they looked over a hostile desert! As the kilometres trundled by, I kept wondering when the pools would finally arrive ... and then, over a final dune crest and there was the first, a deep pool of clear water, fringed by reeds and populated by Great Crested Grebes, Red-crested Pochards and Ferruginous Ducks. Nice as it was, I didn't really spend much time in this area, but just stopped and scanned occasional pools as I passed. The highlights of the area, two male Little Bitterns, a couple of Little Grebes, females with ducklings for both the Ferruginous Ducks and Red-crested Pochards. Twenty kilometres further, by now midday and once again rather hot, I reached the small town of Zhelturanga. Not far from the Ile River, this settlement in itself is of no consequence to the visiting birder, but on the immediate fringes of the town lie the turanga woodlands, knarled old trees related to poplars but closer to willows in appearance. And in these woodlands, several rather special birds reside - Yellow-eyed Dove, White-winged Woodpecker, Turkestan Tit and Saxual Sparrow in particular. First priority however, a pattern beginning to establish itself, was to find a store selling ice cold milk ...oh groan, I failed, the one and only shop having milk and a fridge, but not the first in the second! Fortunately cartons of orange juice were available, so clutching my new supplies I retired to the shade of a tree opposite the shop and began gulping down the welcome refreshment. 'Keek keek keek', a call echoed out disrupting my little break. 'Hmm, that has to be a woodpecker', I thought. And indeed it was, in a broken tree aside a parking lot, there was one of my main targets, an adult White-winged Woodpecker no less! Taking a little stroll over, almost forgetting the temperature had yet again soared to over 40 C, I watched with delight, the woodpecker was feeding a fledged youngster. Well, that was pretty good, I had not yet even entered the woodland proper! Finishing off my juice, I relocated to the woodland a couple of kilometres further south. Rather open in nature and quite fragmented, the turanga woodland offers quite easy birding, essentially no ground cover and limited depth to the low canopy. Given the stinking heat, I relaxed under a tree for quite a while before finally succumbing to the temptation to track down the Yellow-eyed Doves that I could hear cooing some distance off. Took a long winding meander through the trees, very quickly seeing several Yellow-eyed Doves bombing off through the branches. Was still very hot and the birding was not really that productive, I managed one halimodendri Lesser Whitethroat, bumped into a very nice pair of Azure Tits and found an unexpected pair of Oystercatchers in an arid clearing in the woodland! European Rollers here and there, a Hoopoe, two pairs of nesting Hobbies, but a seeming lack of Turkestan Tits, Saxual Sparrows and White-winged Woodpeckers. As evening finally began to approach, and temperatures subsided a degree or two, another hike proved far better - Yellow-eyed Doves were now sitting out prominently, quite stunning things all things considered, and finally I began to find Turkestan Tits - first a single, then a pair feeding young in the nest and then several more, a total of about ten by day's end.

Good to see, but it does have to be said, they basically just looked like rather drab Great Tits, decidedly scruffy in this mid-summer period! White-winged Woodpeckers however were very nice and my evening ended with the discovery of a pair feeding very near my car, a Shikra adding spice when it tried to catch one of the woodpeckers, the woodpecker then turning into a high velocity bullet that somehow doubled back and started pursuing the hawk! As sun hit the horizon, I collapsed into my tent. Darkness fell, voices of the night began ...at various stages of the night, one Pallid Scops Owl calling quite nearby, one European Scops Owl a little further off, one European Nightjar churring for a while, one Eurasian Stone Curlew calling just before dawn. I think the heat was beginning to affect me, I was far too lazy to emerge from my tent to search for any of them! 12 July. Zhelturanga & the Ile River. What bliss, hazy cloud at dawn holding the temperatures at bay for a while. Explored various woodland patches, plus scrub and isolated patches of reed along the dry river courses - loads of Turkestan Tits this morning, at least 25 in assorted small flocks and pairs, along with about six White-winged Woodpeckers and 12 Yellow-eyed Doves, but try as I might, Saxual Sparrows simply eluded me. In spring, these are supposedly fairly easy to find, so I can only imagine they move a few kilometres to the damper areas along the Ile River as the area bakes and dries in mid-summer. Still, plenty of Red-headed Buntings to compensate

somewhat, along with a pair of Booted Eagles, a few Syke's Warblers and several Shikra. Driving south, I tried several areas of parched reed and bushland, had several Pheasants in the process (the real McCoy out here!) and, quite a bonus, a pair of Long-tailed Shrikes feeding fledged young. A couple of flocks of Tree Sparrows, no Saxual Sparrows.

With the cloud long dispersed and the sun again burning down, I finally reached the Ile River and the fairly mighty bridge that spanned it. This area would surely have deserved greater exploration, the Ile River meandering between a patchwork of sand banks and bordered by extensive flanks of thick riverine vegetation. Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters hawked, Turkestan Shrikes sat atop snags, a few Black-eared Kites soared over the river. Not the best time of day to explore the dense bushland, so I sat a while and just scanned - Turkestan Tits came by in a small flock, Indian Sparrows and Tree Sparrows busied themselves around the bridge, Caspian Terns and Oystercatchers sat on a sand island. A male Montagu's Harrier hunted adjacent, a Marsh Harrier worked the river's edge. I however had a decision to make!

A couple of kilometres beyond the bridge, a lonely road turns to the north, a no-through road leading 120 km through remote sand dunes to the small settlement of Karaoy situated a little short of Lake Balkash. Stretching endlessly to the east of this road, a land of rolling dunes and arid wadi systems ...this is the land of the Pander's Ground Jay. Gleaning information from various sources and studying satellite images, I had pinpointed a couple of areas where the birds could be located - but even the closest sites were 25-30 km from the road across a hostile terrain basically inaccessible to vehicles. To even get to the sites, I would have to endure an exceptionally difficult hike in temperatures still over 40 C. And the chances of locating the birds? I had no idea - very few people have ever seen this species in Kazakhstan, the only exceptions being persons travelling with several 4x4s and not going in summer. A decision I now regret, I turned right at the junction, i.e. I went south. In a cooler season at a later date, I will return to this locality - the hike will be far more pleasant and, in all probability, the Pander's Ground Jay more cooperative. So, as it was, several hours later, I arrived in Almaty, the snow-capped Tien Shan towering behind and the temperature a far more pleasant 34 C. A larger city than I thought, it took quite a while to drive from north to south, but with the aid of GPS, soon I through the city and on the flanks of the mountain. Common Mynas in the streets, this would be my base for the next days and here I checked into my accommodation, ah what luxury, my first bed and my first shower in Kazakhstan! 13 July. Kaskelen Valley. In the moderately cool foothills of the Tien Shan, today's destination was an easy commute a few kilometres to the west of my accommodation. A slight delay with a traffic policeman asking for an international driving license, then a further hold up as I found the road to the Kaskelen Valley blocked by a barrier, a guard manning it and requesting a permit. A couple of minutes of discussion and all was cleared, I could go up the valley, but entry into the national park (about 17 km further) was prohibited. So up the valley I went, a couple of Blue Whistling Thrushes on the stream, Oriental Turtle Doves on roadside wires and quite selection of very familiar birds - Eurasian Blackbirds darting across the road, Mistle Thrushes on grassy banks, Common Whitethroats singing in bushes. At about 11 km up the valley, a small side road peeled off to the right, this single lane asphalt then climbing through a quite picturesque valley. I was in Kaskelen Valley for one species in particular, the rather uncommon Meadow Bunting. According to the guidebook, the bird should like hillsides with grass and dense groups of bushes. A kilometre or so up this side road, the slopes to the side of the road were exactly this - open grass in some areas, extensive banks of bush in others. I quickly found a couple of Rock Buntings, then stopped to admire yet more Oriental Turtle Doves. To the rear, another Blue Whistling Thrush, on stalks all around, smart Siberian Stonechats. Parking the car, I found a steep track leading up one side of the valley and took a wander, a couple of Greenish Warblers in the cover, two Common Buzzards mewing in the sky, at least 30 Common Rosefinches scattered across the slope, smart males yodelling out their calls, drab females feeding on seed heads. A couple of Tree Pipits launched into aerial display, then a 'well-built' passerine zipped across, fairly long-tailed and immediately reminiscent of a bunting. Probably it would be a Rock Bunting I supposed, but I settled to watch anyhow. A few minutes of nothing, then a bird with bill stuffed full of insects flew straight into the bushes I was watching. A couple of 'tsset tssep' alarm calls and then up it popped, a gaudy male Meadow Bunting in all its glory! I hunkered down and let the bird calm down. A few moments later, it flitted across to an adjacent patch of bushes and vanished inside. Out it came, minus the food, and flew down the slope. And then arrived the female, a momentary pause to check me out, then straight to the same bush. I had stumbled across a breeding pair, the bush quite obviously containing a nest with young. With the birds thereafter paying no attention to me, I sat a while to watch the comings and goings, then slipped away to resume wanders further up the valley. Also found a pair of nesting Grasshopper Warblers, a calling Quail and several Eurasian Rollers. Returning to my accommodation briefly at midday, I thought I would use the afternoon to begin explorations of the Ile-Alatau National Park, surely the gem of all the Kazakh attractions. With 200,000 km² of pristine Alpine habitat, the landscape is a rich mosaic with forests hugging the mid-altitude slopes and boulder-strewn meadows thereafter rising to the snow-capped peaks. In its upper areas, the legendary Big Almaty Lake was just sitting there waiting my visit, the Observatory and Cosmo Station just above ...with these sites famous for such goodies as Ibisbill, White-tailed Rubythroat and lush mix of accentors, my mouth was watering at the thought of the delights to come. I was soon to discover however that Kazakhstan has a funny attitude to its number one national park - with the lower slopes popular with picnicking families from Almaty (it was the weekend), I decided to visit the higher slopes instead. This would have been a good idea, but I was shocked to say the least to find the road closed and the police absolutely ensuring that nobody tried to use it. Quite a number of locals also seemed bemused, but then we found out the reason - a motorcycle race had been organised and the single road that meandered up through the national park was being turned into the race track! Jeepers, not quite what I expected in this national park! Ah, I could not be bothered to do anything else, so I went back to my accommodation instead. And so ended the day, relaxing on the rooftop patio, admiring the mountain views, writing my notes. Next day would be my assault on the mountain tops. 14 July. Ile-Alatau National Park. The high Tien Shan, peaks rising to almost 5000 metres, a land of exquisite beauty and one that boasts a list of wildlife that includes elusive beasts such as Lynx, Brown Bear and even Snow Leopard. For the birder, the possibilities are equally mouthwatering -

as well as the famous Ibisbill and White-throated Rubythroat, the avifauna includes Altai Accentor, Himalayan Snowcock, White-winged Grosbeak and Eversmann's Redstart to name just a few. To see a slice of these, the basic idea is to take the road up to the Astronomical Observatory located just above the tree line at an altitude of 2750 metres. Here, on rocky slopes dominated by stunted juniper groves, some of the best birding in all Central Asia is on the doorstep, the area home to Red-mantled Rosefinches, Black-throated Accentors and most of the birds mentioned above. And for the few birds not available at the Observatory, a drive of a few kilometres more takes you to the old Soviet Cosmo Station at 3335 metres, the landscape then an absolutely stunning mix of Alpine meadows, boulder fields and snow slopes. With the jump in altitude, so too the birds change - amongst Grey Marmots, this is the best area for Plain Snowfinches, Altai Accentor, Guldenstadt's Redstart and Himalayan Snowcock. So an easy strategy, just drive up, see the birds and all would be hunky dory. Hmm, well that is not exactly how it turned out! The first thing I was not expecting was rain! Leaving my accommodation before dawn, spots of rain were already falling, but by 2500 metres it was turning to continual drizzle and as I got higher the rain just started to get heavier and heavier. I parked and wondered what to do.

A Blue-capped Redstart braved the elements to sing from the top of a fir, Hume's Leaf Warblers flitted in lower branches, but there was no way I was going out in the rain! After an hour or so, the clouds began to break, brightness crept in from the northern horizon, then patches of blue. By 9 a.m. the rain was no more, the sky was blue and the sun was shining. Eurasian Nutcrackers called from conifers, Wrens began to sing and Hume's Leaf Warblers seemed to be absolutely everywhere. And then came problem number two ...driving the last few kilometres to the Observatory, I first passed a battalion of Kazakh soldiers marching down the road, then began to notice many signs variously declaring the area as a military zone, a border zone or a closed zone. The access track to Big Almaty Lake had no less than five such signs, one with a big picture of Kazakh soldier and dogs to drum in the point! And then, at the Observatory itself, I happened upon a military checkpoint. A checkpoint manned by a soldier who made it absolutely clear that tourists were no longer permitted to travel any further. Despite protestations and a feeble attempt to say I wanted to stay at the Observatory (an easy thing to do in past years), it all made no difference, the answer to each plea to pass was 'nyet!' I got him to radio his captain and to call the Observatory, 'nyet', 'nyet' the response of both. Some young Kazakh tourists arrived and, almost falling about with laughter, told me to bribe him. It did not work! After 20 minutes of effort, I gave up and sat in my car by the checkpoint ...everything I wanted to see was beyond that checkpoint, so I was simply trying to think of a way to get around the checkpoint. Then, much to my amazement, the soldier approached my car and said he would let me through! Disobeying direct orders from his captain and not even wanting a bribe, I was quite impressed. He did however make it clear that I was to only go to the Cosmo Station and absolutely not the observatory. No arguments from the me, the barrier lifted and up I went.

Over six kilometres the road is a steep meander upwards, sharp turns and impressive views - high mountain peaks to the direct south and east, the hazy backdrop of the lowlands and Almaty city far far to the north. Looking back to the observatory, a military camp ominously occupied one part! I however was in a paradise - large flocks of Plain Mountain Finches flushed up from the roadside with frequency, Northern Wheatears and Water Pipits became rather commonplace. As I reached the Cosmo Station, a collection of dilapidated building on the edge of a mountain pass, the loud whistling alarms of Grey Marmots rang out, these chubby critters sunning themselves on adjacent boulders. With a few folk still based at the Cosmo Station, I was initially a little nervous of being discovered - I had a 'hit list' of species I wanted to find before getting evicted - but I fairly soon realised that they didn't care if I should be there or not. And so followed a few very nice hours - the number one bird I wanted to see was Altai Accentor, so after a quick look round the buildings of the Cosmo Station where two pairs of stunning Guldenstadt's Redstarts were feeding young in the nest, I then began to hike up the surrounding Alpine meadows, concentrating on areas at the edge of boulder scree and any damp patches. More Plain Mountain Finches, a few Red-fronted Serins, mixed flocks of Red-billed Choughs and Alpine Choughs ...and one military helicopter on one occasion. I actually hid behind a boulder when this approached - I had read a report of some hikers that were caught by the military in a helicopter! Rather more welcome, two stunning Lammergeiers cruising down the valley beneath me, then doubling back to soar directly overhead. Still no Altai Accentor however. Climbing a ridge beyond the Cosmo Station, soon the calls of Himalayan Snowcocks began to echo across the valley, birds certainly both sides of me. I sat and scanned a while and then, rather to my surprise, I spotted some trundling across the meadow not far above me! A flock of about 12 birds, it was a mix of adults and young of assorted ages, the smallest like long-necked partridges running to keep up! These were superb birds indeed, the adults pausing every now and again to step upon a rock and begin calling, truly an evocative call. I scanned a boulder field to my rear for another bird calling, but then spotted him as he took to the air, sailing directly across the valley to land beyond the group I had been watching. And yet more Himalayan Snowcocks called from peaks higher. As for Altai Accentor however, I could not find one and reluctantly decided to return to lower altitude before my luck with the military ran out. Back at the checkpoint, a different soldier was on duty and was quite confused to find a tourist in the restricted area. With no common language, I mumbled something about the Cosmo Station and after checking for my name on his papers, he just decided to let me through. By now mid-afternoon, I thought I would have a quick look at Big Almaty Lake (site of the Ibisbill), but almost immediately got whistled at by a guard on the dam. I returned to the Observatory area, carefully parking a couple of turns down from the checkpoint, and scrambled up through the juniper to see if I would get caught and check out the military surveillance. Well, I didn't get caught and better still, saw three very nice Red-mantled Rosefinches and one Brown Accentor. Also saw a rather cute Turkestan Red Pika! By now quite late afternoon, I decided I didn't really want to play cat-and-mouse with the Kazakh army, so I retreated. Despite the restrictions, I had actually seen quite a number of good birds during the day, but frustratingly the list of birds I had not seen was bigger than the list of birds I had. A couple of ideas crystallised in mind ...first, I would return next day and to my darndest to get to all the areas I had failed to on this day, and second, I would change my air tickets and return home the day after. And so the day ended, two of my key birds (Altai Accentor and White-winged Grosbeak) not seen, nor White-tailed Rubythroat, Ibisbill,

Black-throated Accentor, Sulphur-bellied Warbler, Songar Tit, White-browed Tit-Warbler or Eversmann's Redstart. Shucks, I'd not even managed a Brown Dipper. Having committed to leave Kazakhstan, next day would be critical!!! 15 July. Ile-Alatau National Park. Make or break day, I had a whole stack of birds I wanted to see and only the Kazakh army potentially stood in the way! In total contrast to the previous day, dawn was a glorious affair, not a cloud in the sky and everything looking perfect. Carefully parking a few hundred metres before the military checkpoint, my challenge today was to access the juniper scrub and meadows around the Observatory without getting caught (or at least see the birds before getting caught). Before beginning the illicit trek, I sat a while and watched the slope between the road and Big Almaty Lake, slightly dismayed to see a group of soldiers already walking along the track beyond the lake, but absolutely delighted to see a fantastic bunch of birds on the slope directly below me. A big blob on top of a low juniper turned out to be a female Black Grouse taking in the morning sunshine, while the very next bush supported not only a stunning male Red-mantled Rosefinch, but two most resplendent White-winged Grosbeaks! Having searched in vain for these in the mountains of Iran just a couple of months before, these were pretty much close to the top of the list of birds I wanted to see. And there they sat, for ten minutes and more, just peering around, great chunky things. One Oriental Turtle Dove and Red-fronted Serins too. Ah, the morning was going well and I had not even left the road! So, with a quick scan for any soldiers venturing my way, up the steep slope I began to clamber, several more Red-mantled Rosefinches en route, plus the first Black-throated Accentor of the day, rather a neat bird indeed. Cutting up a little track, I skirted the edge of a razor wire fence, then wove my way through a boulder field to reach the back of the Observatory. With no sign of life, and certainly no soldiers, I continued and very soon was at a semi-open area immediately behind one of the domes of the Observatory, a very good looking area of mixed juniper scrub, assorted bushes and meadow. Black-throated Accentors again, hopping up onto rocks, yet more Red-mantled Rosefinches, then a bird flitting out onto the grass ...a juvenile redstart! Clearly recently fledged, the size and jizz pointed to a lesser brute than the Guldenstadt's Redstarts of the higher altitudes! I was already pretty sure of the identification when out popped the stunning male, flying over to feed the juvenile and then land atop a rock. Eversmann's Redstart! I've seen them on the wintering grounds several times, but these birds are simply gems. And soon, the female appeared too, one more juvenile also lurking nearby. Feeling pretty pleased with myself, I still had big desires to find a White-tailed Rubythroat, apparently quite common in this very spot, so on I meandered, keeping the Observatory in sight, but trying to myself out of actual sight! One Black Redstart next, then another Black-throated Accentor, then another White-winged Grosbeak. A tumbling flock of Alpine Choughs called in the sky above, several Mistle Thrushes and Eurasian Blackbirds flushed from the conifer edge. And then I set a dog off! Oops! Immediately supposing it would be followed by less than welcoming soldiers, I rapidly retreated into the scrub and boulders! From a distance, the only sign of human activity I could see was a lady working aside one of the buildings, she glancing my way, but not seeming very fussed. Emboldened, and with many of my desired birds under the belt, I then decided to drop into the broad valley beyond the Observatory, small scattered conifer groves visible beyond and slopes of juniper. By now, hidden by the lay of the land, I had given up caring about the military and the next hour or so was just pure bliss. Grey Marmots yelped as I went and arriving at one particular juniper patch I could hear a rich melodious song originating just yonder. What was to follow was perhaps the best moment of the entire trip - on a beautiful warm sunny slope with snow-decked mountains to my rear, I settled down in the juniper. Directly in front of me, displaying the most vivid splash of red imaginable, was one superb male White-tailed Rubythroat sitting atop a juniper trig in full song! Half an hour I lay there, the White-tailed Rubythroat moving about a little, but singing continuously. And then a Red-mantled Rosefinch landed in a conifer alongside me, followed a split-second later by a very small bird onto one of the lower branches. I wiggled round to get my binoculars into place ...White-browed Tit-Warbler! And a male at that! Quite an amazing moment, White-tailed Rubythroat singing 50 metres to the one side, White-browed Tit-Warbler and Red-mantled Rosefinch mere metres away and, for added good measure, another bird flitting amongst boulders nearby turned out to be my first Sulphur-bellied Warbler! Much to the annoyance of Magpies, a very noisy pair of Barbary Falcons complete with fledged juveniles were screeching in and out of a group of trees further up the slope, while on the ridge below yet another pair of White-winged Grosbeaks fed quietly! Yep, for all the hassle it had taken, this was nevertheless, was on the absolute highlights of the trip! From that spot, I descended through the valley to reach the tree line and thereafter cut back across towards my car. One Red Squirrel in the trees, one singing Blue-capped Redstart too, plus many Hume's Leaf Warblers. Back at the car, thoroughly pleased with my morning's endeavours, and pleased that the military had not spotted me, I still had one nagging regret ...Altai Accentor! I was still at a too low altitude to see this and I had blown my chance the day before at the Cosmo Station. Hmm, could I bluff, bribe or plead my way through the checkpoint again?

Well, at the checkpoint episode was pretty much a repeat of the day before's palava ...the soldier on duty (complete with dog) seemed even less responsive to discussion and the offer of a bribe initially shifted no ground. Perseverance however paid off ...by sitting tight at the checkpoint, fifteen minutes and a few uncomfortable moments passed and then over he wandered again, a nifty bribe exchanged hands and, open sesame, the barrier lifted ...I had access the Cosmo Station again! No messing around this time, I drove straight up and opted to check the meadow on the opposite side of the valley to the buildings. And stone me, one of the very first birds I encountered was ...Altai Accentor! Superb, a mini Alpine Accentor in many ways, the bird hopped about on the turf, popped up onto boulders and generally gave quite superb views. The ghosts of the day before had truly been dispelled. And to add to the overall pleasure of the moment, a Stoat also came over to investigate, spying me from a distance then sneaking up through the boulders to get closer and closer. Again, Himalayan Snowcocks called from the higher slopes, Grey Marmots sunbathed on rocks and Guldenstadt's Redstarts bobbed on the old buildings. So my grand list of missed birds from the day before had whittled away to almost nothing, what a stunning day it had been. There was still however the little matter of Ibisbill, so without further ado, I returned to the lower altitudes, gave my soldier a wave on the checkpoint and stopped near Big Almaty Lake. But oh strewth, half the Kazakh army was now playing war games on the eastern banks of the lake120 soldiers I counted, the rattle of machine guns echoing across the valley, smoke bombs dropped in their midst, little groups of

soldiers advancing on supposed enemies! I sure didn't see much possibility of sneaking past that lot to get to the braided streams at the opposite end, the favoured locality for Ibisbill. After watching them a while, I realised I could use the west bank to get a little closer, but the troops were slowly moving towards the end of the lake, so the Ibisbill area was certainly out of bounds. Getting as far as I dared, I resigned myself to the fact that Ibisbill would elude me, but I decided to scan anyhow. A few Ruddy Shelduck were easy enough to pick up, but I was genuinely surprised at the ease with which I spotted both Common Sandpiper and White Wagtail quite close to the braided stream. As for Ibisbill however, knowing this species from India and Nepal, I was still under little illusion as to the difficulty of finding one of these cryptic birds against a pebble background ... they tend to be virtually invisible even at close range! An hour passed, the troops continued along the lake and then began to cross the stream beyond the area favoured by the Ibisbill. Rattle-tat-tat, troops bunkered down, smoke began to rise into the air ... 'maybe, just maybe' I thought, 'if these troops are disturbing the areas further up, the Ibisbill might come a little closer'. Whether that is what happened I do not know, but not long after, a wader appeared middle distance on a shingle bank, and then it bobbed into the water, floated down the channel on the ripples and emerged on the other side of the stream...Ibisbill! Jeepers! Almost immediately I lost it as it apparently stopped on the stones, but about ten minutes later I located what I think was a second bird ...this however was much closer, feeding on the sandy banks of the lake itself. Splendid views, albeit still a little distant. And for the closing cherries to the day, managed to find Brown Dipper on the stream below Big Almaty Lake, had a fantastic Lammergeier land below me to pick up a discarded chicken bone and found a singing Wryneck near the national park entrance. Simply an excellent day from start to finish. 16 July. Out of Kazakhstan. Never before have I cut a trip short, but with virtually all the targets seen and four days still to spare, I could have either returned to the desert for an attempt on the Pander's Ground Jay or stuck it out in the mountains. A multi-day hike in an exceptionally remote desert at over 40 C did not really seem very sensible and dodging the military for days on end seemed a little pointless, so it was I changed my ticket and at 5.30 a.m. boarded my plane in Almaty. Two Common Mynas aside the plane, nothing else seen. Four hours later, as we cruised at 10,000 metres above Luhansk, I gazed down at the sunny plains of eastern Ukraine. With the events below, I truly doubted the wisdom of flying this route, but at the same time supposed that our altitude would put us beyond the range of the weaponry in action. Touchdown in Kiev an hour later, a flight then taking me to Lithuania. Less than 24 hours later, above those same sunny plains of eastern Ukraine, the Malaysian jet was shot down. As news of this appalling action broke, to say I was a little numbed is an under-statement. What if...? For full systematic list of birds and mammals seen, [CLICK HERE](#) .