

KAZAKHSTAN

the steppe, desert and mountains of Central Asia



Himalayan Rubythroat

Landlocked in the heart of Central Asia, Kazakhstan is a country of vast steppe, desert, lakes and mountains which once hosted the ancient trading routes of the Silk Road. The diverse and magnificent scenery, coupled with a feeling of remoteness, adds significantly to its appeal, with many sought-after species easier to see here than elsewhere. Our tour aims to experience, in comfort, a significant cross section of this avian diversity. A truly memorable birding experience awaits!

We begin in the north where steppe grasslands stretching to the horizon are peppered with a myriad of freshwater lakes. Black and White-winged Larks, Demoiselle Crane and Pallid Harrier all nest here. In the south, we radiate out from Almaty to visit several key ecological zones. The deserts and hills around the Sugaty Plain offer MacQueen's Bustard, Pallas's Sandgrouse, Asian Crimson-winged Finch and White-capped Bunting. Nearby Turanga forest is home to Azure Tit, Yellow-eyed Pigeon and White-winged Woodpecker. North of Almaty, lakes, fields and marshes host breeding Dalmatian and Great White Pelicans, White-headed Ducks, Little Bustards and large colonies of transient Rose-coloured Starlings. Finally, the mighty Tien Shan mountains provide a home for Himalayan Snowcock, Ibisbill, Guldenstadt's Redstart, Severtzov's Tit-warbler and much more.

The capital Astana is adorned with bold and futuristic architecture and Almaty, the largest city, with broad leafy boulevards. Both are modern and forward-looking cities, with a chic cafe culture, reminiscent of Europe. Standards of accommodation, restaurants and transport are generally better than elsewhere in Central Asia. Our group will enjoy the warmth and hospitality of the Kazak people and be reassured by the experienced hand of our ground agents.

ITINERARY

ASTANA AND THE KURGALZHEN STEPPE

We begin on the steppes west of Astana, spending three days exploring a number of carefully selected sites from our modern hotel. Less than one hour's drive out of the city, tree-lined roads have breeding colonies of Red-footed Falcons, and frequent pairs of Oriental Turtle Doves and Lesser Grey Shrikes. Roadside ditches hold singing Bluethroats, while low *Artemisia* scrub is favoured by Booted Warblers and Red-headed Buntings. Freshwater lakes are populated by breeding Whooper Swans and Slavonian and Red-necked Grebes, whilst Black and White-winged Black Terns ply daintily across the surfaces. The booming of Bitterns and the calls of Demoiselle Cranes resonate across the landscape, whilst Pallid Harriers ghost past. Muddy margins provide staging areas for migrant waders, including Little Stints and Terek and Curlew Sandpipers, whilst the waters offer rich pickings for large numbers of pirouetting Red-necked Phalaropes. Our first birding will be gently paced but we will still amass a superb list, so great is the species diversity.

Two Central Asian specialities, Black Lark and White-winged Lark, can be found in good numbers, singing and displaying all around us. Our local guide will assist in locating breeding pairs of Sociable Plovers, stunning birds, but now rare and declining. Receding floodwater provides suitable habitat for Black-winged Pratincoles and reed fringes hold Paddyfield and Great Reed Warblers. Small copses, gardens and willow thickets harbour breeding Common Nighthales, Golden Orioles, Blyth's Reed Warblers and Barred Warblers, all in fine voice at the time of our visit. A real highlight will be a visit to a colony of Great Black-headed Gulls.

Day five begins with a visit to a river valley north-east of Astana where our main target will be Pine Bunting. The area also holds Booted and Blyth's Reed Warblers, Siberian Chiffchaff, Penduline Tit, Grasshopper Warbler and Bluethroat. By midday we must return to Astana where a short sight-seeing tour around the city will incorporate a pleasant cafe lunch. First time visitors will be astonished by the bold, futuristic architecture that makes Astana such a vibrant capital. By early afternoon we must be at the airport ready for the 90 minute flight south to Almaty.

ALMATY, SUGATY PLAIN AND THE TIEN SHAN

We will use Almaty as a base, heading outwards to reach several key areas for birds. Northwards, the Sorbulak Lakes are a magnet for waterbirds. These include numerous Ruddy Shelduck, Garganey and Ferruginous Duck and feeding groups of pelicans. White-tailed Eagles breed and, by the time of our visit, the adults will be feeding young. We will also look for Little Bustard and encounter our first colonies of Rose-coloured Starlings, sometimes in their hundreds – a fantastic sight.

Following the Silk Road eastwards towards China, our next destination is the Sugaty Plain. Much of the day will be spent on the road but we plan a few carefully selected stops for species new for the trip. A mixed colony of Sand Martins and Pale Martins allows us to study their subtle differences. Rocky gullies support Chukar, Hume's Whitethroat and Rufous-tailed and Blue Rock Thrushes. Agricultural areas and scrub around villages hold Long-tailed Shrikes whilst marshes have Savi's and Great Reed Warblers. The highlight of the day will be a stop at a remote artesian well – actually no more than a puddle - where reliable water draws many desert birds to quench their thirsts. Sitting close by, screened by a sandy bluff, we should get fantastically close views of Horned Lark, Grey-headed Bunting, Mongolian Finch and Asian Crimson-winged Finch.

Careful scanning early morning could well reveal a MacQueen's Bustard and a few Goitered Gazelles, both of which inhabit this sparsely vegetated desert. At the Kegen Pass we will take a stroll, checking the skies for Himalayan Griffons and Golden Eagles. The surrounding hillsides have four species of bunting, all of which will be singing. Grey-headed and Red-headed are the commonest, Rock less so, whilst Meadow Buntings are somewhat scarce, here at the western edge of their range. Black Storks breed on the cliffs of the Charyn Gorge whilst below, stony plains are home to numerous Isabelline Wheatears, some Asian Desert Warblers and a few Pallas's Sandgrouse. We stay at a simple but conveniently located guesthouse here.

Our route then takes us into the Tien Shan, where gushing streams full of spring melt-water are home to Brown Dipper and Blue Whistling Thrush. Climbing higher we enter spruce forests and meadows, ideal habitat for Greenish and Hume's Warblers, Black-throated Accentor, Red-fronted Serin and Nutcracker. Boulder strewn hillsides covered with juniper scrub are home to displaying Himalayan Rubythroat, Sulphur-bellied Warbler, White-winged Grosbeak and Red-mantled Rosefinch. Patient waiting will be required for the emergence of a much sought after prize, the Severtzov's Tit-warbler.

We will take a pleasant afternoon stroll near Big Almaty Lake, where extensive shingle beds are frequented by the highly specialised Ibisbill. The open forest around here supports both Eversmann's and Blue-capped Redstarts.

The next day we will drive higher, to the snow covered scree just below the highest peaks. Early morning will give us the best chance of locating Himalayan Snowcock, whose curlew-like calls echo from high mountain ridges. Here too we will find the largest member of the redstart family - Guldenstadt's. This terrain is also home to Brown Accentor, Altai Accentor and Plain Mountain-finch, all viewable within a short walk. Water Pipits and both Red-billed and Alpine Choughs are

common. Overhead, Lammergeiers and Golden Eagles circle the valley sides providing a fitting end to a marvellous trip.

CLIMATE AND PACE

Kazakhstan has a continental climate and we can expect daytime temperatures in the range of 20 to 30°C in the steppes and deserts, and between 10 and 20°C in the mountains. In early June the tendency is for clear, sunny and even hot weather. In the high mountains of the Tien Shan conditions are more unpredictable, and changeable weather including some mist and rain is possible. Basic fitness is all that is necessary. Short walks on flat ground will be taken frequently. There is little uphill walking, done at a sensible pace. Typically the day will start at around 6am to make the most of the early morning. We finish around 6pm, perhaps a little later some days. On one morning we will drive to an elevation of 11000 feet in the Tien Shan mountains.

ACCOMMODATION AND FOOD

Full-board accommodation is provided, with four nights at the Hotel Kazzhol Astana, three nights at the Hotel Kazzhol Almaty, two nights near Charyn Gorge and two nights (plus day-room until departure for airport on last night) back at the Hotel Kazzhol Almaty. Hotels in Astana and Almaty are of a good standard with en-suite facilities and excellent restaurants. In the Charyn Gorge area, we stay for two nights in a rural guesthouse with fairly plain but comfortable facilities. These rooms are twin-bedded and have attached bathrooms, but some facilities might be shared, depending on numbers.

PRICE INCLUDES

All birdwatching excursions with Bird Holidays leader and expert local guide, full-board accommodation (starting with breakfast on 27th, ending with dinner on 6th), soft drinks at meal times, bottled water throughout, transport throughout by mini-coach, domestic flight and international flights.

WHAT IS NOT INCLUDED

Travel insurance. Personal items, alcoholic drinks, laundry.

INTERNATIONAL FLIGHTS

Return flights from London Heathrow and Manchester to Astana (via Frankfurt) using the scheduled services of Lufthansa. Return flight from Almaty. Outbound flight departs mid-morning and return arrives back late morning. **Domestic flights from other UK airports are available on this tour. See booking form for details. Please call for details.**

12 nights:	26th May to 7th June 2018
Principal leader:	Lance Degnan
Local guide:	Victoria Kovshar
Maximum group size:	10 clients with one leader and a local guide
Cost with discount (if you book before 10th February 2018):	£3590 per person sharing (£250 single supplement)
Full Cost:	£3740 per person sharing
Deposit:	£1000 per person