Participants: Gordon Beck, Kris de Rouck, Ernie Davis, Josh Jones, David Monticelli and Dan Pointon

Introduction

Words Josh Jones | **Images** © Josh Jones unless stated

Following the resounding success of Pierre-André Crochet and Eric Didner's trailblazing trip to Yekaterinburg and the Ural Ridge west of Severouralsk during June 2013, European Russia has become firmly etched in many Western Palearctic birder's minds as an accessible and exciting destination on the eastern periphery of the region. For Josh, David and Dan, this was to be a first trip to Russia; Gordon, Kris and Ernie had already travelled to the area as part of an organized tour back in June 2010, although had endured a torrid time and missed a number of the target species and thus had vowed to return.

We dedicated a fortnight to the trip for a number of reasons. Despite Crochet and Didner proving a successful tour was entirely possible in less time, two weeks would give us plenty of leeway were we to struggle with any particular species; it also meant we could afford to take the trip at a (comparatively) relaxed pace and would also potentially allow us extra time for possible exploration of new sites/areas – either in the Urals, around Yekaterinburg or, as it proved, south towards the Orenburg region and the Kazakhstan border.

Logistics

Flying to Yekaterinburg is reasonably straightforward – though there are no direct flights from London, several airlines offer convenient connections. Though it is possible to fly via Istanbul or Moscow we opted to travel from Heathrow via Helsinki, with Finnair, at a cost of £390 return. Russian visa applications can be applied for online or at the

application centre along Gee Street, London (EC1V 3RD). A single entry visa cost £82.40 including administration fees. Further information can be sought at http://ru.vfsglobal.co.uk/.

The trickiest part of the trip to organise was on the ground. Russia can be a problematic place to explore for non-nationals with some areas restricted and requiring permits to visit, while only a very small percentage of the population speaks English of any quality – particularly away from the cities where it is more or less non-existent. Therefore, while it is possible to go without, I would strongly recommend hiring a Russian-speaking guide – at least when exploring some of the more remote areas such as the Ural Mountains.

We were fortunate in that Pierre-André Crochet had put us in touch with Pavel Gorbunov, an entomologist at the Ural Division of the Russian Academy of Science who had served as a guide, driver and cook for him and Eric Didner during June 2013. Happily, Pavel agreed to once again act as guide and, given there were six of us, arranged for his friend Sergey Melyah to drive a second car. Both were open to flexibility and also keen on the idea of visiting the South Urals (i.e. towards Kazakhstan) if we had time, which suited us well. As it turned out, we 'used' Pavel for five days in the North Urals at a cost of US $350 per day and, during the second week, for five days at a reduced rate of US $250. Adding food and fuel expenses to this, the total guiding costs for the ten days came to around US $560 per person which, although pretty basic and perhaps not the most comfortable, was a very reasonable sum.

There are alternatives, though, and my recommendation would be to contact Oleg Demyanenko at Ural Expeditions & Tours. Oleg (and his colleagues) proved most co-operative; Russian visa applications require an accompanying invitational letter from a local travel company, and Oleg and his team can supply these for €45 per person. Furthermore, the company fully organised a tour to the Ural Ridge and Kvarkush for a team of Finnish birders during our first week. For a cost of less than €600 each for the week, they had everything sorted out for them including train tickets north to Serov, local guides, drivers and cooks. Though a considerably more expensive fee, we were rather gripped by the quality of food their cook routinely produced as well as an enviable quantity of alcohol and, crucially in the poor weather we experienced in the North Urals, a warming campfire. For future teams looking to organise a trip to the Ural Ridge/Kvarkush area, contacting Ural Expeditions & Tours should be the first port of call.

As it turned out we ended up renting hire cars for only our first weekend in Russia. Car rental is expensive in Russia, and a Skodia Fabia – the cheapest option available from Koltsavo airport – cost us around £90 per day, translating to approximately £60 per person for the weekend. Note that it is not possible to explore the Ural Mountains west of Severouralsk without a 4x4, which would cost considerably more to rent. In contrast the Orenburg region is much more manageable in any road vehicle, but the comparative low cost of Pavel's guidance saw us opt to venture south with him.

Though we camped exclusively during both our excursions, we based ourselves at the Liner Hotel (http://www.vi-hotels.com/en/liner/) while birding around Yekaterinburg. The hotel is situated just a few hundred yards from the terminal at Koltsavo airport and so was ideally placed for our early morning flight back on Saturday 21st, while the 'airport marshes' at Bolshoy Istok is only a short drive away and other birding hotspots around the city can be reached with relative ease. In 2014 the price for a double room with breakfast included weighed in at a reasonable 3800RUB (about £65) per night, though the hotel also offered a short-stay, room-only rate of 2000RUB (£35) which, though excluding breakfast, we took advantage of on at least two nights. Incidentally the breakfast here is excellent, and is essentially all-you-can-eat for 320RUB (£5.50).

Alternatively, if organising an independent expedition is not for you, Birdfinders usually offer the choice of two week-long tours to the Ural Mountains during the second half of June.

Resources & Acknowledgements

Special thanks must of course go to Pierre-André Crochet and Eric Didner – the pioneers responsible for the realisation that a birdwatching trip to Yekaterinburg and the Ural Ridge is possible (and in fact fairly straightforward) to undertake on an independent basis. Pierre was also instrumental in the provision of a great wealth of knowledge and information, with GPS co-ordinates for all key species and sites provided as well as Google Earth maps and so on – without these, we would have endured an altogether more challenging two weeks and, in reality, perhaps not connected with some of the trickier specialities that inhabit the Ural Mountains.

Thanks also to Vaughan Ashby of Birdfinders, with whom I regularly corresponded both before and during our trip for up-to-date information either around Yekaterinburg or in the Ural Mountains. Daniel Mauras was also very helpful in providing GPS locations for his 2013 trip, while Jonathan Dean's report for the same excursion was also a useful reference.

Obtaining any sort of information on the birds of the Orenburg region is extremely difficult because, quite frankly, very little actually exists. By searching Google for each target species by their Cyrillic name I eventually discovered a handful of papers, published in Cyrillic and of varying ages, but these generally proved somewhat vague. Kris contacted Evgeny Barbazyuk, an ornithologist based in Orenburg, who provided vague second-hand information for Red-headed Bunting northwest of Orsk, but both he and his colleagues suggested other potential targets – such as Demoiselle Crane, Saker, and Black and White-winged Larks – were unlikely to be seen. As such, our trip to the Orsk region was purely exploratory and came with no expectations attached.

Itinerary

As is so often the case with these Western Palearctic trips, the pace of our fortnight in Russia proved intense. A combination of long hours of daylight (it never actually got fully dark in the Urals), lots of travel, plenty of walking and a general lack of sleep ensured that it proved an exhausting affair, even for the more spritely members of our team and despite a couple of days of rest peppered in to the schedule.

Friday 6 June late afternoon flight from London Heathrow to Helsinki with late evening connecting flight from Helsinki to Yekaterinburg.

Saturday 7 June arrival in Yekaterinburg early morning, birding at Bolshoy Istok throughout the morning before checking in to the Liner Hotel and returning to the airport to pick up the Belgians. Mid-afternoon birding at Raskuikha before returning to Bolshoy Istok during the evening.

Sunday 8 June early morning in the marshes east of Monetnyy followed by midday rest. Afternoon birding at Verkhnemakarovo before returning to Monetnyy during the evening.

Monday 9 June day of travel to the Ural Mountains via Severouralsk, arriving late evening; only birding stop at Nevyansk late morning.

Tuesday 10 June entire day spent birding around the main Ural Ridge.

Wednesday 11 June full day again spent birding around the Ural Ridge.

Thursday 12 June early morning birding around the Ural Ridge before heading west to Mount Kvarkush early afternoon. Late afternoon/evening birding at Kvarkush.

Friday 13 June birding around Kvarkush in poor weather conditions until mid-evening; overnight drive back to Yekaterinburg.

Saturday 14 June rest day at Liner Hotel, Yekaterinburg, but birded marshes at Bolshoy Istok in evening.

Sunday 15 June day of travel south to Orenburg region, birding on steppes along European side of Ural River before camping by river at N52°19'28", E58°55'48".

Monday 16 June early morning birding around camp before slow journey south, delayed by car breakdown. Mid-afternoon birding on steppes east of Gaynulino before evening spent birding around river at Malokhalilovo.

Tuesday 17 June early morning birding around Malokhalilovo before drive in to the hills SE of Gulberya. Birding on steppes east of Gaynulino from late afternoon until dusk.

Wednesday 18 June early morning birding around steppes east of Gaynulino before driving east of the Ural River, out of the Western Palearctic, to camp by Kumak River southeast of Novoorsk.

Thursday 19 June early morning birding around Kumak River before long drive back north to Yekaterinburg, arriving late evening.

Friday 20 June rest day with only birding around marshes at Bolshoy Istok during evening.

Saturday 21 June early morning flight back to London, via Helsinki, arriving Heathrow mid-morning local time.

DAILY DIARY

7 June

For the British contingent of the team the overnight flight from Heathrow to Yekaterinburg via Helsinki went about as smoothly and uneventfully as it could have, but the two Belgians – David and Kris – endured an utterly torrid time. With no sign of them in Helsinki alarm bells started to ring, and a phone call confirmed the worse: their flight from Brussels had been cancelled due to technical issues, and they'd been re-routed on a flight to Moscow. As it turned out, the delay wasn't great and they were to arrive in Yekaterinburg mid-afternoon.

Despite one of our team forgetting the PIN number for the credit card with which he'd booked the hire car we somehow made it out of Koltsovo Airport in relatively decent time and scored **White Wagtail**, **Common Swift** and **Barn Swallow** as first birds of the trip. Soon we were on the way to our first birding location – the 'airport marshes', just north of Bolshoy Istok. As its name suggests this site is adjacent to the runway but, by road, it's over 10km from the terminal and we arrived here at short while after 07:00. On stepping out the car, we were instantly reminded we were some way from home: several **Siberian Stonechats** busied themselves about the dry scrub while **Booted Warblers**, **Bluethroats**, and *volgensis* **Common Whitethroats** were all numerous; a reeling *Locustella* was just a **Grasshopper**, **Caspian Gulls** flew over and a **Montagu's Harrier** floated by. Setting out towards the GPS position given to us by Pierre-André Crochet the first of many **Common Rosefinches**, **Blyth's Reed Warblers** and **Siberian Chiffchaffs** became apparent, as did a smart **Citrine Wagtail** zipping about.

Terrain at the airport marshes varies from poor to downright treacherous. The grass is long, making it difficult to see the unpredictable and uneven ground, and the entire area soon becomes boggy. We nevertheless battled on; common species were as above with additions including **Hobby**, **Marsh Harrier** and one or two singing **Thrush Nightingales**. Reaching the wetter areas which our target species religiously favours, it was not long until the water level was well above the ankle – wellington boots are essential at this site. Despite sodden feet and sweat pouring from my brow, I

soon caught my first distant yet unmistakeable glimpse of a male **Long-tailed Rosefinch** buoyantly flitting between willow bushes. Setting off towards the bird I quickly realised that underfoot conditions were rapidly worsening and instead I headed back to find Dan, Ernie and Gordon. Happily they had just seen a small party of **Long-tailed Rosefinches** in altogether more negotiable terrain themselves, and so we staked these out until at least two males gave pleasant views perched up in willows.

Moving in to photograph the rosefinches I heard a distinct call and, raising my binoculars to view the bush a rosefinch had been in just a few moments previously, I was delighted to see an **Azure Tit** perched up – our second target species quickly in the bag! Calling back the others we enjoyed great views of a pair toing and froing across the clearing, evidently feeding young owing to their beaks loaded with grubs and rather predictable repetitive flight path routine.

By late morning we returned to Koltsovo to meet Pavel, our guide for the Urals, at the Liner Hotel. After doing some supply shopping it was time to head to the terminal to pick up the late-arriving Belgians who, somewhat wearily, slumped in to the car with the terrible news that their hold luggage had been lost! On hearing that bombshell we attempted to cheer them up with our good news from the morning's birding and headed southwest towards Raskuikha. In the mid-afternoon lull we weren't too surprised to miss out on Oriental Cuckoo but **Greenish Warbler**, **Garganey**, two singing **Corncrakes** and a **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker** were all new for the trip list, while the usual singers included **Blyth's Reed Warbler**, **Siberian Chiffchaff** and **Thrush Nightingale**.

Returning to the airport marsh in the evening a similar range of species was seen to in the morning and, happily, Dan and I were quickly able to show David and Kris a few **Long-tailed Rosefinches**. Our first **River Warbler** of the trip had burst in to song on the west side of the main copse but we could not find the Azure Tits again. In the meantime Gordon and Ernie, who'd lingered near the cars, had gotten themselves in a spot of bother – answering my phone I was greeted by Ernie announcing that they had been arrested and, shortly afterwards, escorted back to a nearby police station which they didn't know the whereabouts of! This was slightly problematical – for starters, late evening was fast approaching and we were now stuck at the marsh, carless. Furthermore their captors spoke not a word of English and also refused to buy the classic 'show them the pictures in the *Collins* guide' get-out clause as a reason for possessing optics and cameras in the vicinity of an airport.

A number of nervous hours passed, punctuated by several stressful phone calls and a hunting **Long-eared Owl** over the adjacent grassland, until an altogether happier Ernie phoned with news that things were looking up – an English-speaking policeman had arrived and their story was beginning to be believed. A short while later the rest of us were rounded up by the police and taken back to the station where, after further gesticulating, questioning and general confusion, we were finally let go a short while before midnight. After such a long day of travelling, birding and general ups and downs, to say we were ready for bed would be an understatement!

8 June

Despite not making it to bed until well after midnight David, Dan and I were up at the crack of dawn and heading northeast towards the village of Monetnyy, where I had identified what looked to be a promising area of marsh worthy of exploration. Having nearly given up on finding the site we eventually chanced upon the right area after following a long and bumpy track eastwards for 6km. Driving slowly along the track with the windows down revealed a cacophony of common songsters including **Blyth's Reed** and **Greenish Warblers**, and **Common Rosefinches**. Our first stop produced a singing **River Warbler** and, almost instantaneously, a fine **Azure Tit**. It was a surprisingly chilly start to the day with slight ground frost and mist rising from the waterbodies which, in the warm early morning light and set to the backdrop of a rich dawn chorus, made for a magic few hours' birding. Exploring the marshes and meadows mainly from the track, we soon heard our first **Oriental Cuckoos** (3+) among the more numerous **Common Cuckoos**, managing brief flight views of one as it zoomed over. Species were of a similar ilk to that seen at the airport marsh the previous day, although in greater number and variety: additions included singing **Spotted Crake**, **Redstart**, **Red-backed Shrike**,

Golden Oriole, **Icterine Warbler** and **Willow Tit**, while waders included a **Marsh Sandpiper** flying around along with **Common Snipe**, **Redshank** and **Green Sandpiper**. The far-carrying bubble of lekking **Black Grouse** was distinguished, later confirmed when we unwittingly disturbed two males in a drier area where **Tree Pipit** and **Yellowhammer** also sang. Most exciting, though, were several sightings of at least six **Long-tailed Rosefinches** around the marshes, which were easily located by their regular calls and afforded far better views than those seen the day previous. **Azure Tits** were also vocal early morning, and seemed numerous – I suspect we saw and heard at least eight birds without any real effort.

Long-tailed Rosefinch

Thrilled with the morning's rewards, we returned to the hotel to round up the rest of the team, who'd been making the most of a lie-in, and enjoyed a lengthy breakfast. Our plan for the afternoon was to visit the village of Verkhnemakarovo, situated southwest of Yekaterinburg and a known site for **Long-tailed Rosefinch**. Sure enough three birds – a pair and a further singleton – were observed during a leisurely two-hour stroll along the river here. A pair of **Pied Flycatchers** proved the only individuals we saw all trip, while a pair of **Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers** afforded great views. Several male **Corncrakes** rampantly '*crexed*' from various patches of longer grass with numerous **River Warblers** also in full song despite the time of day; finches included **Bramblings**, **Hawfinches** and a flyover **Bullfinch**.

With the afternoon pressing on and 'Monetnyy Marsh' (as we dubbed it) having left a lasting impression on us we returned to the area for the evening. Though activity was naturally less frenetic than it had been early morning there were still plenty of birds on offer and we were again treated to good views of **Long-tailed Rosefinches** and **Azure Tits**. While the others stayed along the main track Dan and I walked up to a kilometre northwards through the marshes and fields, and were rewarded with flight views of an **Oriental Turtle Dove** as well as the trip's only **Common Crane**. Back on the track Kris located a drumming male **White-backed Woodpecker**, which gave superb views it alternated between dead birch stumps and an adjacent telegraph pole. We also saw both **Great Spotted** and **Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers** here as well as all the usual species, including **Citrine Wagtails** and **River Warblers**.

As part of the hire car deal Gordon and Ernie had agreed to have the vehicles back at the airport for 22:30 so we had to leave while it was still really quite light. We couldn't find Lanceolated Warbler anywhere and figured that they simply hadn't arrived yet, although an **Oriental Cuckoo** singing close to the track drew us to a standstill – a few minutes later we were afforded to excellent flight views as the bird flew across the clearing, even allowing for a few images to be taken. This had been preceded by the bizarre (at least to a British birder) sight of a **Greenshank** sat at the top of a tree!

9 June

The Ural ridge west of Severouralsk is the best part of a day's drive from Yekaterinburg and today was our designated day of travel. The Belgian's luggage still hadn't arrived so, after loading up the cars with supplies and stopping at a supermarket for David and Kris to buy some essentials, we finally hit the road north. Pavel's 4x4 is something of a character – it's evidently seen better days and doesn't travel any faster than 80kph, making patience a virtue well worth possessing when travelling in it.

Perhaps an hour or so north of Yekaterinburg we stopped near the town of Nevyansk, where the French team had seen **Oriental Turtle Dove** in 2013. It took us a while but we eventually tracked down two birds including a displaying male not far from the road, the white tips to the tail feathers confirming them to be of the expected ssp. *meena* and the song rather more akin to a Collared Dove than European Turtle Dove. Also here a **Marsh Sandpiper** occupied a putrid roadside bog alongside **Green Sandpiper**, **Lapwing** and **Spotted Crake** while several **Thrush Nightingales** and **River Warblers** sang, and our first **Tree Sparrows** and **Northern Wheatears** of the trip were seen as well as a fly-through **Hobby**.

Continuing northwards we fluked another **Oriental Turtle Dove** flying over the road just inside the Western Palearctic boundary before a rather impressive puncture (more of a catastrophic failure of the tyre wall!) delayed us by 15 minutes as we replaced the tyre. This in turn meant that we had to find a garage to fit a new tyre before diverting in to the wilderness, and it was not until mid-evening (around 20:30) that we finally began the long and bumpy drive west from Severouralsk.

As the light began to fade, **Woodcock** activity became increasingly prominent and a female **Capercaillie** materialised on our right side, freezing for photos before thundering off in to the undergrowth. Dan, who had sat in the front and had an altogether better view out the truck, registered a **Goshawk** as we disturbed it from its evening meal at the side of the track.

The journey was slow and punctuated by several stops late on as we had to adjust various logs to cross eroded bridges. As we neared our camp site a fluty song stopped us in our tracks and Dan immediately located the culprit – our first singing **Red-flanked Bluetail** perched atop a pine, albeit a drab first-summer bird. A **Nutcracker** flopped over, **Oriental Cuckoos** were singing all around and just a little further on we were thrilled to hear the eerie (and slightly haunting) song of a male **White's Thrush** for the first time. On arriving at our camp (situated at N60°07'01", E59°05'51") several more **White's Thrushes** could be heard singing in the twilight and, after setting up the tent, I wandered off in to the forest to take some recordings despite the time being past midnight. A flock of **Two-barred Crossbills** – what turned out to be the only individuals of the trip – trumpeted as they flew over. In truth, it was all too exciting to sleep but we finally forced ourselves in to our tents as a very early start beckoned.

10 June

Rising at 04:00 to the mournful sound of singing **White's Thrushes** was hair-raising, though this was no doubt aided by the fact it was really rather a cold morning. The woods were alive with birdsong although we knew that at camp we were still situated several hundred metres from the Western Palearctic border. The walk up to the ridge is quite challenging; though the gradient is not too steep the terrain underfoot can be strenuous at times, and it's easy to get lost without GPS or a compass (as we were to find out on numerous occasions!).

Somewhat suitably the early morning mist began to clear as we reached the ridge, illuminating both the forest and the rocky peaks – some of which still retained off-white patches of snow – in a magical pinkish light. All around birds were singing – the melancholy of territorial **White's Thrushes** still apparent, but plenty more besides. **Willow**, **Arctic** and **Greenish Warblers** were all very common, as were **Olive-backed Pipits** giving their strangely *Prunella*-type ensemble. The far-carrying songs of both **Common** and **Oriental Cuckoos** were omnipresent, although seeing either was a far greater challenge. More familiar to British birders singing **Fieldfares**, **Redwings** and **Bramblings** were abundant, and **Willow Tits** busied themselves among the ancient pines.

Our primary aim was to try and find Black-throated Accentor. Armed with GPS, we split up and began to comb the forest in a northward direction towards where Crochet and Didner had seen the species in 2013. Among the regular species we found **Red-flanked Bluetail** to be reasonably common in the forested areas, while the odd **Black-throated Thrush** 'chacked' animatedly from the tree tops and **Nutcrackers** regularly flew over. In the birch bogs lower down the

valley **Yellow-browed Warblers** were truly abundant – the population density here was astonishing. **Little Buntings** and **Bluethroats** were not uncommon and other species seen included **Siberian Lesser Whitethroat** (*blythi*), **Garden Warbler**, **Goldcrest**, **Bullfinch**, **Dunnock**, and **Raven**. A male **Sparrowhawk** caused temporary mayhem as it scythed through the trees and we also flushed the odd **Capercaillie**.

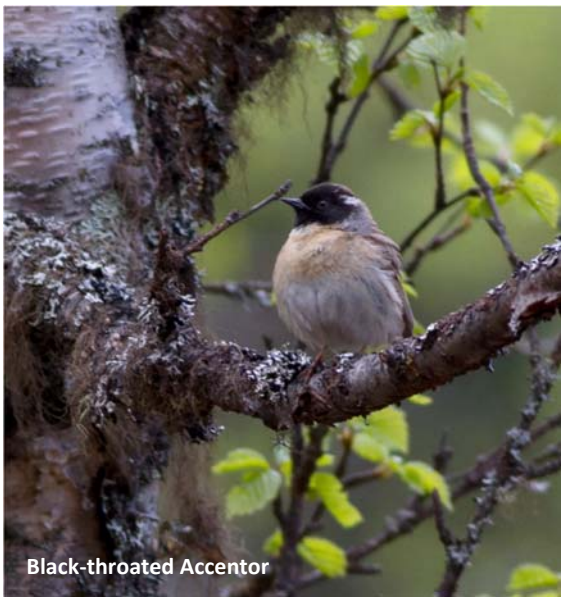
We spent the entire morning scouring the ridge up to 5km north of camp but failed to locate any Black-throated Accentors – despite the pleasant weather and everything else seemingly in full song. It was nevertheless an experience to behold: seeing many of the 'Sibes' that British birders fantasise about as autumn vagrants in such abundance on breeding grounds is really the stuff of dreams, only enhanced by the incredible setting. In fact despite not finding the accentor, it had proven a brilliant morning with three new birds for me: several **Hazel Grouse** could be heard giving their bizarre high-pitched calls in the forest and we eventually flushed a male; **Siberian Tit** was an unexpected bonus – I was fortunate to have brief views of two separate birds while the others managed more prolonged sightings. And, while making our way back to camp for some lunch, Dan located a **Pine Grosbeak** showing well on the forest edge. When I arrived one became two and we enjoyed some great views as they scoffed themselves full of berries on the scree slopes.

Unfortunately weather conditions deteriorated as the afternoon progressed and most of the team seized the opportunity for a rest. Dan and I headed back up on to the ridge and enjoyed more views of the expected species including some great **Black-throated Thrushes**, and we also heard *asiatica* **Nuthatch**. However, both the weather and exhaustion got the better of us and we returned to camp mid-evening, retreating for an early(ish) night.

11 June

The weather had deteriorated further overnight and it was with heavy hearts that we made the decision to stay around camp through the morning – not only was it raining and cold, but a stiff breeze had also developed. There wasn't a lot to do apart from sit around and listen to the **White's Thrushes**, and therefore a late morning break in the weather was most welcome when it came. All of the team apart from Gordon, who was still feeling washed out, seized the opportunity and headed up to the ridge to restart the search for the accentor.

The first few hours brought a similar range of species to the previous day albeit with some brilliant views of **White's Thrushes** darting among the pines and greatly improved looks at **Black-throated Thrush**, as well as a pair of *asiatica* **Nuthatches** on the climb up. While Dan had charged on far to the north, David and I spent some time looking for the previous day's Siberian Tits. With no sign we decided to slowly amble back through the forest towards the bog to photograph Yellow-browed Warblers, and it was at this point that we finally heard what we'd been hoping for – a fluty and undulating Dunnock-like song which, for once, didn't sound an Olive-backed Pipit. David and I immediately stopped in our tracks – we knew it sounded promising. A brief burst of playback produced some movement at the base of a nearby pine and suddenly there it was, sat out in full view – a cracking **Black-throated Accentor**!


Black-throated Accentor

Radioing the others with the good news, Ernie and Kris soon arrived although Dan was having a slightly more toilsome time: in the excitement he'd managed to firstly lose his GPS and latterly forget where he'd left his telescope – not the best move when lost in disorienting taiga forest. Abandoning his scope Dan was on site not long after and, within minutes, we were all enjoying great views of the accentor as it sang from the tops of pines and occasionally dropped down to feed. We were taken aback by the appearance of the bird, which completely lacked any sort of moustachial stripe and

only showed a restricted white supercilium behind the eye – really quite different to the illustration in the *Collins Guide* for example.

With Gordon still loitering around camp and unreachable over the radio, Ernie selflessly went back to fetch him. Kris, David and I spent a couple of hours photographing **Yellow-browed Warblers** and **Little Buntings** nearby, Dan latterly joining us after successfully locating his telescope. Gordon eventually appeared but unfortunately we could not relocate the accentor despite a prolonged search of the area in to the evening – several singing **Hazel Grouse** were at least some consolation.

12 June

As Gordon still needed the accentor Dan, Kris and I made another early start up on the ridge. It was a bright morning, with the sun breaking through as it rose but there was again no sign of the accentor in its original spot. Dan and I decided to head further north and came in to contact with a couple of singing **Hazel Grouse**, which we stalked for a while. As always seemed to be with the case with this species, they were incredibly difficult to see and again we only managed flight views. However it was a pleasant surprise when we heard a distinct song from above our heads – looking up, there was a **Black-throated Accentor**, singing from the top of a pine!

Dan immediately set off to find Gordon, who was about 500 metres away, while I stayed with the bird. Alas our efforts proved in vain – the bird disappeared within a couple of minutes of Dan leaving and, despite spending another hour or so exploring the immediate area (and another half-hour trying to find Gordon, who'd wandered off in to the forest and gotten himself hopelessly lost), we never saw it again. With a distance of about 450m between our two sightings over the two days we suspect it to be one and the same wide-ranging individual – presumably this scarce species tends to hold large territories in the Ural Mountains.

Leaving Gordon and Kris to search for the accentor, Dan and I cut west across the valley to explore some promising areas of *Salix* which we suspected looked ripe for Siberian Rubythroat. Sadly no rubythroats during our three-hour detour but we enjoyed great views of both **Willow** and **Black Grouse**, a few more **Pine Grosbeaks** and at least four **Golden Plovers** on the moor as well as finding a **Fieldfare** nest complete with eggs.

European Golden Plover

Returning to camp late morning, the executive decision was made to pack up and move west to Kvarkush as planned, despite Gordon's lack of success with the accentor. A couple of stops en route included for an obligatory touristic photo-shoot at the Europe-Asia border and latterly at the River Uls, where most of us snoozed while David searched unsuccessfully for Rustic Buntings.

By late afternoon we were at our next camp, at the foot of the steep slope up to the top of Mount Kvarkush. Here we met up with a group of Finns, most of whom were old friends from Corvo, and we set about exchanging information to a backdrop of singing **Oriental Cuckoo**, **White's Thrush** and **Greenish Warbler**. On hearing that they'd scored Siberian Rubythroat within a couple of hours of arriving, we were soon getting changed and heading up the hill!

The walk up Kvarkush is punishing; the gradient is quite steep and essentially involves walking up a riverbed. As we ascended early evening it began to rain, but it didn't seem to put the birds off. Species selection was similar to the Ural Ridge with **Greenish** and **Arctic Warblers** common in the forests and, as one ascended in to the more open areas above the treeline, **Yellow-browed Warblers** became abundant in the stunted birch. **Black-throated Thrushes** were noticeably more common here, their distinct '*chak-chak-chak*' seemingly coming from all around. We also flushed the first of several **Great Snipe** while other common species included **Little Bunting**, **Bluethroat** and **Willow Warbler** as well as both **Common** and **Oriental Cuckoos**. Unfortunately a bank of low cloud rolled in reducing visibility to a matter of metres not long after we reached the rubythroat spot. However, a gloriously rich and unmistakeable song came from the *Salix* – it was the **Siberian Rubythroat**! The main problem was actually seeing the bird – in the ever-worsening conditions it was proving extremely elusive and, between the five of us, we accumulated no more than a few split-second flight views, the best of which was had by Kris who managed to actually see the face pattern on one occasion. As the weather deteriorated further we decided it was becoming a lost cause and headed back down the mountain to camp, hopes high for the morning.

The team on the WP boundary

13 June

Once again the changeable North Ural weather showed us its worst side – awakening to low cloud and drizzle, we disappointedly dragged ourselves up Kvarkush to the site of yesterday's rubythroat. Though a female **Dotterel** unwittingly disturbed from the snow line was a nice bonus along the way, there was alas no sight or sound of the rubythroat and a good soaking in the miserable weather ensured our spirits were pretty low; underfoot conditions were also pretty horrendous and wet feet meant I genuinely felt like hypothermia was taking hold. Other sightings were as the day previous, though a male **Hen Harrier** was new for the trip list as we scoured the slopes below the snow line. Heading back to camp late morning to recuperate, the rest of the team soon followed. Recovering over some lunch, we discussed sightings and David had scored a couple of **Ptarmigan** – a new bird for him – while Gordon had altogether more significantly managed brief perched views of a male **Siberian Rubythroat** near to the original location.

Dense *Salix* scrub – Siberian Rubythroat habitat

One thing that surprised us at Kvarkush was its popularity with Russians of the macho, outdoorsy type. As it happened our visit had coincided with a four-day national holiday, which meant that many were making the most of the long weekend to head out in to the country. Though we failed to see any Russians riding around topless on horseback there were plenty dressed in camouflage, swigging vodka and driving their ludicrous 4x4 vehicles up the side of the mountain – we were all a little unsure whether to be offended by or simply admire what we were seeing. Either way, despite the noisiness of what seemed like a small army of well-oiled, boisterous Russian lads along with their their quads, trucks and whatever else they were using to ascend the mountain, they were all very friendly and in good spirit.

Afternoon came and it was time to head back up the mountain – after much deliberation we had decided that with the weather seemingly set poor and our bodies having taken a battering by the wet and cold, we would head back to Yekaterinburg either that evening or early on the Saturday morning. This meant we had one last chance at rubythroat, and our search restarted with renewed vigour after Gordon's morning sighting. The weather, however, quickly started to get to us again and despite plenty of **Great Snipe** and **Black-throated Thrushes** among the assembled 'Sibes', we soon found ourselves despondent and cold once more. Returning back to camp late afternoon we packed up the tents and readied ourselves for the off, but with one of the team missing – Kris, ever-reliable, had not come down the mountain. Had he lost track of time or, more worryingly, gotten lost himself?

Not long later we knew the reason for his delay. He'd found and photographed a male **Siberian Rubythroat** not far above the treeline and left some of the Finns watching it! There was nothing for it, we had to try again – and so for the third time that day, we ascended Kvarkush. On arrival it was apparent that the clouds had lowered and the area was once more plagued by thick fog. It was Dan who we were to be indebted to; arriving up the hill a few minutes behind myself and Ernie, he located two male **Siberian Rubythroats** hopping around, mouse-like, on the path in front of him! Panic was initially rife as we convened at the spot, but we all eventually enjoyed decent views in the abominable conditions – one particularly memorable moment coming as two males scrapped in the snow just twenty metres in front of us. Both birds gave occasional bursts of sub-song, their behaviour suggesting that they had been pushed down off the mountaintops by the weather or had only just arrived.

Male Siberian Rubythroat (Kris de Rouck)

Thrilled to have connected in such dramatic circumstances, our spirits were immediately lifted and it felt like a huge dose of pressure had been relieved as we journeyed back down the hill. Collapsing in to the cars on reaching the campsite, some of us tucked in to beer while some of us simply fell asleep in time for the long return journey south.

14 June

Pavel and Sergey both did fine jobs of driving us back to Yekaterinburg overnight and we arrived back at the Liner Hotel early morning. The day was largely spent lazing around the hotel with each member of the team doing their fair share of eating, sleeping and washing throughout the day. Happily, David and Kris had been reunited with their lost baggage and were able to change their clothes for the first time in almost a week.

Not wanting the day to be a total write-off David, Dan and I decided to catch a cab back to the marshes at Bolshoy Istok in the evening but Gordon and Ernie, with recollections of their time in a cell presumably still fresh in their minds, declined to join and stayed in the hotel with Kris. With some difficulty, Dan had apparently managed to communicate to our taxi driver that we wanted picking up at 22:30, leaving us a few hours to explore the marshes on what was a particularly muggy evening.

Initial impressions were that very little had changed in terms of species composition and that most species were still in full song. At least half a dozen **Long-tailed Rosefinches** again showed well along the edges of the wettest areas but it wasn't until the sun sank low in the sky that we finally heard what we'd been hoping for. Dan and I were fortunate to be serenaded by a short burst of a **Lanceolated Warbler** song very close to where we were stood and, using a brief loop of playback, we watched the bird creep up a willow branch and sit not ten metres away, staring around intently. Here it remained until I began to rummage around for my camera but, instead of flitting out of view, it bizarrely crawled back down from whence it came and didn't show again! As the evening wore on, the species became more prevalent with at least three others heard singing around the marsh – unfortunately though, we didn't manage any further views after David, who'd been a couple of hundred metres away during our sighting, arrived. Nevertheless, a showy pair of **Siberian Stonechats** posed for photos near the adjacent cemetery and cheered him up somewhat.

Heading back to the road it was evident that the mother of all thunderstorms was rapidly approaching from the south and we were unanimously pleased that our taxi driver had so kindly offered to return for us. Five minutes passed, then ten, and there was no sign of our reliable Russian. The sky was darkening and the sheer intensity of lightning on the horizon looked ominous. Nice views of both **Short-eared** and **Long-eared Owls** did nothing to quash the reality that a long and potentially very wet walk back to the hotel seemed on the cards. When we reached the main road we desperately started trying to hitch and, just when we were beginning to think it was a no-hoper our proverbial knight in shining armour – a toothless Russian fellow in a clapped out Lada kitted out with cheap LEDs and a tinny sound system – pulled over as Dan hysterically waved a fistful of roubles in the air. Slightly unsure as to whether we were about to be kidnapped or taken back to our hotel in one piece, we collapsed in to the back and let him drive – happily he turned out to be a good soul, dropping us off at the hotel and even donating a few of his cigarettes to us as he did so! And, as if timing could not have been more perfect, the rain began to bucket down as we walked in to the hotel lobby, a short while before midnight. All's well that ends well!

15 June

Morning arrived and although the thunder and lightning had ceased, the rain continued to beat down. Pavel and Sergey arrived at the hotel around 07:30 – today was to be a long day of travelling south and so we were all keen to leave fairly early. However, we had a little surprise – Pavel's wife Elena was to come with us and seeing as we were now one extra person, the already limited space in the vehicles became non-existent – to the point that we actually ended up doing much of the drive with various bags and supplies strewn across our laps!

Though we were keen to make it south as quickly as possible it seemed Pavel's jeep had other ideas. We'd only been on the road an hour or so when a load bang signalled the muffler on his exhaust coming loose. Piling out in to the pouring rain he set about repairing it – Dan and I simply stared at each other, glad it was neither of us getting utterly soaked. His job didn't seem to do the trick as, perhaps another 20km down the road, it came off again! Thankfully the second time seemed to sort it out and we were back on the road before too long. With the weather poor and the windows in the back of the jeep small to say the least, birds were few and far between but we did add **Rook** to the trip list and, just southwest of Chelyabinsk, a number of **White-winged Black Terns** and a **Marsh Harrier** were seen over a marsh next to the motorway.

The further south we travelled the better the weather became, and the temperature increase was also noticeable on our numerous fuel and food stops. The countryside had also changed with more open, rolling plains replacing the dominant birch forests and both **Kestrel** and **Montagu's Harrier** became regular roadside species. The other car had a **Golden Eagle**. Incidentally, Pavel's muffler fell off yet again somewhere in the south Chelyabinsk Oblast and this time he did the decent thing and threw it in a roadside copse. This of course meant that the rest of the week was destined to be extremely noisy with both Dan and I genuinely concerned whether we'd have much of our eardrums left by the end of the trip. By evening, we reached the northernmost periphery of the Orenburg region and some excellent looking steppe habitat – a couple of **Rose-coloured Starlings** in a roadside tree – which happened to be the only ones we saw – encouraged us to stop for a while at N52°24'30", E59°01'29" and take in our surroundings. On stepping out the car a wall of **Skylark** sound greeted us; words cannot describe just how abundant this species is everywhere in the Orenburg region, particularly in the areas of undisturbed steppe – it was simply incredible. Also common were **Ortolans**, one or two of which nervously posed for photos, beaks full of grubs indicating they were feeding young in the vicinity. Dan picked up a distant **Long-legged Buzzard** and a couple of tussling falcons turned out to be **Red-footed Falcons**.

Time was fast pressing on and Pavel was keen to set up camp, so we broke off for the night at a lovely spot by the banks of the Ural River at N52°19'28", E58°55'48". The last hour of daylight was spent around camp with birdlife again abundant: a stunning male **Barred Warbler** had us all very animated while **Paddyfield Warblers** sang from the riverside scrub alongside **Booted** and **Blyth's Reed Warblers**, **Lesser Whitethroats**, **Common Rosefinches**, **Red-backed Shrikes**

and countless **Bluethroats**. **Cetti's Warbler** was an addition to the trip list as was a distant adult **Eastern Imperial Eagle** on the Asian side of the river. An immature male **Red-footed Falcon** gave great views as it rushed over, while a **Long-legged Buzzard** loafed around on the cliffs just downriver and further **Montagu's Harriers** were seen. As dusk fell a spectacular thunderstorm had us scurrying for the tents and, with that, it was time to retire for the night.

Steppe scenery in the south Chelyabinsk region

16 June

Waking some time before the others I was up to witness a beautiful sunrise, the steppe bathed in rich golden light. Birds were similar to the previous evening although more vocal and easier to see – for example, we established at least two pairs of **Barred Warblers** were present around camp and **Paddyfield Warblers** were numerous. Highlight, though, were two separate pristine summer-plumaged adult **Pallas's Gulls** majestically cruising along the Ural River past our camp. **Cormorant** and **Little Ringed Plover** were both new for the trip list.

Leaving the site mid-morning, our journey south recommenced. A pair of **Ruddy Shelducks** with two pied youngsters were seen on a small roadside pool and our first **Pallid Harrier** of the trip – a 3cy male – flew across the road in front of the car. **Montagu's Harriers** were much more regular while the odd loose flock of **Steppe Gulls** (*barabensis*) were seen, albeit never particularly well. **Steppe Marmots** and **Russet Ground Squirrels** were common on the more open areas of steppe, though the highlight was a family of **Corsac Foxes** – the adult quickly scarpered, but a couple of dopey cubs gave much better views as they sat around the entrance to their den. Not much further south, and Pavel's car once more showed its untrustworthy side by breaking down yet again. This time the problem seemed a little more serious with the car failing to start, and the decision was made that we'd have to be towed to a nearby village by Sergey in order to a) assess what was wrong and hopefully b) fix it. Every cloud has a silver lining as they say, and a large dark blob in a distant stand of trees transpired to be an eyrie which, on closer inspection, contained four **Eastern Imperial Eagles** – two fluffy eaglets, a magnificent adult and, bizarrely, a first-summer bird. The surrounding fields were riddled with **Yellow Wagtails** (*beema*) – interestingly their population density did seem to be highest among the cultivated crops across the region.

On reaching a nearby village, we let Pavel, Elena and Sergey do the dirty work of solving the car crisis while we ambled off for a stroll in differing directions. We secretly dared to hope we might fluke one of our target species (Red-headed Bunting) around the village but it was not to be, and the best we could manage was a large flock of **Jackdaws** and a

few **White Wagtails**! Still, studying the former wasted some of the time while we waited for the jeep to be fixed as did a visit to the local shop where, using little more than the refined art of gesticulation, we all managed to buy an ice cream while some also doubled up with an early afternoon lager.

Corsac Fox cub

An hour or so passed and the jeep had surprisingly been reinvigorated – not wanting to waste its new lease of life, we piled in and once again headed off south. Unfortunately the roadside steppe towards the town of Gai was rather suboptimal for our two target lark species and so we didn't stop here. After a quick bowl of fairly bland soup in the town we once more headed southwest, aiming for the village of Khalilovo – an area Kris had managed to glean vague information that Red-headed Buntings had been seen at in the past. About 12km SSW of Gai, we encountered a promising area of *Artemisia* steppe and David suggested we stopped to explore for half an hour, despite the brisk breeze and mid-afternoon heat. **Skylarks** and **Yellow Wagtails** were literally everywhere but, despite being well spread across the plains, we saw little else – that was until, after about a kilometre of walking, I virtually trod on a large lark with an unmistakeable broad white trailing edge to the wings. Immediately my tired mind focussed and I lifted my bins to confirm what I already knew – it was a **White-winged Lark**!

Given that this was one of our least expected yet most wanted targets, I didn't hesitate in radioing the others – Ernie, Gordon and Kris were soon on their way across to meet me and David, who didn't have a radio, was fortunately within shouting distance. Dan, however, had characteristically ploughed off towards the horizon and must have been about 800m away, almost lost in the heat haze. He too was radio-less and so we had to resort to a more primitive way of communication – namely waving like headless chickens until he eventually turned round, clocked us and quickly stumbled back across the steppe. Happily we flushed the White-winged Lark again and, over the next half an hour, obtained reasonably good flight views in the difficult mid-afternoon conditions.

Buoyant by the early success we headed off towards Khalilovo in the hope of finding Red-headed Bunting that evening. Unfortunately on arrival, it became apparent that the reference to 'Khalilovo' seemed to be an amalgamation of at least separate three villages covering a large area along the river valley, which made our gen even more ambiguous. Nevertheless, we located a suitable campsite by the river near the village of Malokhalilovo (N51°24'54", E58°09'27") and then split up to search the area. In the late afternoon heat there was a relative paucity of bird activity, but a few **Hoopoes** were pleasant distractions around the village. After about an hour, some us returned to camp for refreshments and came up with a plan of attack for the evening. This time, with the sun slowly starting to sink, I headed southeast out on to the areas of open steppe to search for larks while the others concentrated along the river valley. I was struck by the comparative dearth of Skylarks around the area despite the habitat, but the proximity to civilisation

and resultant heavy presence of corvids in the area was perhaps to blame for this – needless to say I couldn't find anything scarcer than the usual **Yellow Wagtails** and **Northern Wheatears** in the mile and a half that I walked. At this point my phone rang – it was Dan. Having agreed before he set off that he'd ring if he found Red-headed Bunting, the call could only mean one thing. Sure enough: "I've got one. Cross the bridge…"

The phone went dead before I could glean any further directions. Ringing Dan back went straight to answerphone over and over again. His phone battery had presumably died – and we had no idea in which direction he'd gone. Radioing the news to the others (and ignoring the slightly confused and angry sounding Russian voices being relayed on the channel), we regrouped back at camp and crossed the bridge, searching desperately for any sign of Dan. Then as if by magic, a large white apparition came hurtling around a stand of poplars along the river a few hundred metres to the north – optics revealed it was our hero, albeit topless and somewhat sweaty. We rushed over to join him, only to find that he'd seen the buntings about 2km to the north of where we were!

A sweaty pursuit entailed but eventually we reached an excellent area of scrub where Dan had seen the buntings, via a small marsh that contained both **Redshank** and **Green Sandpiper**. By this point, the wind had dropped completely and it was a beautiful evening – the area was bathed in golden light and there was plenty of bird activity around the scrub. **Yellow Wagtails**, **Ortolans** and **Yellowhammers** were both abundant, and several **Barred Warblers** were seen among the commoner **Booted Warblers** and **Whitethroats**. At least one **Golden Oriole** also sang from the adjacent poplars but, despite the bounty of birds on offer, we could not relocate the Red-headed Buntings.

After a 90-minute search the sun was setting and we decided to call it off for the evening – while we still had plenty of time in the coming days, missing out on our big target so narrowly that evening was deeply disappointing. There was an air of dejection (and plenty of cursing!) as we trudged back to camp. Nearing the village and with the sun having gone down, a small bird with bright yellow underparts flitted across the path in front of Dan and I – fully expecting it to be a Yellow Wagtail I raised my bins out of habit and immediately let out a couple of expletives. There, in full view just twenty metres away, sat a male **Red-headed Bunting**! Dan was quickly on to it and after an excited embrace, we urgently ushered the others, who were a couple of minutes behind, in our direction. Thankfully, the bunting showed no interest in moving very far and all five of us were able to enjoy some excellent views in the twilight, the bird's yellow and red plumage still managing to look utterly vivid. In a matter of seconds, and thanks to just a single bird, the team's despondency had transformed to sheer elation, and we returned to camp that night in very high spirits – such is the wonderful fickleness of birding.

17 June

Kris, who'd risen early, was the first to venture back to the site of the previous evening's **Red-headed Bunting** and soon confirmed that it was still in the same spot. The rest of the team arrived shortly after and over the next few hours we obtained some magnificent views and photographs of what was clearly a territorial bird (video footage here). Regularly flying between and singing from various perches, we were also treated to the odd view of a much more elusive female and, on one occasion, a second male appeared in the vicinity and a remarkable aerial battle ensued – the birds busily chasing each other around the scrub as they sang in flight, creating an amusing spectacle. The presence of two birds at this spot seemed to confirm that Dan's original sightings, over a kilometre away, must have related to different birds. A supporting cast similar to the previous evening plus a flyover **Honey Buzzard** and an extremely showy **Thrush Nightingale** made for a great early morning's birding.

Red-headed Bunting

Unfortunately, this actually transpired to be the only birding we managed all morning. Packing up camp, the aim of the day was to explore steppe areas in order to find our other target – Black Lark. Sadly though, this was lost in translation and despite repeatedly pointing out that we needed to explore areas of flat, unspoilt *Artemisia* steppe Pavel, who had a vested interest in looking for insects, seemed keener to try green areas closer to water. This caused some friction between both parties and we ended up spending the rest of the morning and early afternoon driving around, not really seeing a lot. Dan did see a **Red-headed Bunting** by the roadside between Izhbeda and Istok, and Pavel also identified one along the same road (but in a different location) as we drove slowly past.

By the afternoon we still hadn't managed to spend time exploring any promising steppe and patience was wearing thin. However, the frustration was put on hold as we drove back through the main village of Khalilovo, not far from where we'd camped overnight. A muffled message came through on the walkie-talkie from the second car of "two cranes overhead", which suddenly had us alert. Dan and I urged Pavel, who wasn't in the best of moods, to turn round and we headed back to rendezvous with the other car, which was several hundred metres back. One quick look at David's camera screen and it was obvious it was a pair of **Demoiselle Cranes**, but which way had they gone?! I scanned in the direction they'd disappeared and, yes! There they were! With Dan's telescope trained on them, views were pretty poor but the differing shape and structure to Common Crane as well as overall small size were nevertheless obvious until they disappeared over a ridge.

With the birds being so low we decided a wild crane chase was a worthy cause and headed off in their direction. Unfortunately on reaching the ridge, it was apparent that they hadn't landed anywhere nearby and so we soon knocked the idea on the head. With that, we opted to head back to the area of steppe where we'd seen White-winged Lark the previous day – after all it was the best-looking habitat we'd found and it was no doubt worthy of further exploration.

On returning to the area, which is situated east of the village of Gaynulino, we strategically split up and became to work the area of steppe around the large lake north of the road while Pavel and Sergey drove up to the lake itself to set up camp. A couple of panicked **Ruddy Shelducks** flushed from the lake as we approached with waders including **Marsh**, **Green** and **Wood Sandpipers**, **Greenshank**, three **Black-tailed Godwits** and a female **Ruff**. A **Mute Swan** was new for the trip as was **Little Tern** – one was seen among many **Common** and at least 20 **White-winged Black** and five **Black Terns**. **Gadwall** and **Shoveler** were present alongside the commoner **Mallards**, at least three **Bitterns** were booming and both **Paddyfield** and **Great Reed Warblers** in full voice. Several **Marsh Harriers** patrolled the margins and, among them, two **Pallid Harriers** (including a fine male) gave some great views. An outrageous number of **Yellow Wagtails** were present in the area, while several pairs of **Short-eared Owls** were evidently nesting in the area – in fact I nearly trod on a well-grown juvenile, only noticing its part terrified, part disgusted stare at the last moment!

The steppe itself was full of Skylarks and we soon relocated the **White-winged Lark** in the same areas as the previous day – this time alongside a second bird. In fact the male gave some brilliant views as it sang in the warm evening light, hanging in the air high above us and thus easy to track in the telescope. If that wasn't enough we were then treated to great views of an adult **Eastern Imperial Eagle** sat on pylons to the east and at least two **Red-footed Falcons** winging hurriedly around the steppe. Returning to camp just prior to sunset we sat and enjoyed dinner by the lake – only breaking off for point-blank views of a male **Little Bittern**.

Singing male White-winged Lark (David Monticelli)

18 June

I was the only person up in time to see the sunrise – everyone else was seemingly exhausted. It was clear, calm and the light was beautiful, steam was rising from the lake and the calls of **White-winged Black Terns** and **Bitterns** penetrated through the mist as a **Little Bittern** and several **Great Reed Warblers** busied themselves among the reeds adjacent to the jetty on which I was stood. With no sign of life in camp I decided to head off for another walk around the steppe in the hope of locating Black Lark. Alas it was not to be, but it was a brilliant trek with **Skylarks** singing just about everywhere. The highlight, though, was a superb male **Little Bustard** unwittingly flushed as I traipsed around the far side of the lake.

The lake itself held a similar range of species to the previous evening although a couple of **Red-necked Grebes** looked stunning; a male **Ruff** in full breeding plumage and a **Pochard** were the other highlights and, on returning to camp, the others had found a male **Penduline Tit** giving excellent views in willows by the lake.

Leaving the area mid-morning our plan for the day was to explore further areas of steppe in the quest for Black Lark. However we'd only managed to get a couple of kilometres down the road when I clapped eyes on a distinctive and familiar upperwing pattern – **White-winged Lark**! Stopping the cars, a half-hour search of the steppe south of the road revealed that there was actually a pair present, though we only ever managed flight views. Dan also scored what turned out to be the only **Isabelline Wheatears** of the trip.

For the next few hours we searched areas of steppe between Gai and Orsk that I had identified as potentially promising on Google Earth. Unfortunately, we found most of these to be quite heavily degraded, with agriculture and over-grazing primarily to blame. Therefore, during the afternoon, we made the executive decision to head east across the Ural River and out of the Western Palearctic for our final evening. Our destination was along the Kumak River southeast of the town of Novoorsk, around 30 kilometres east of the Western Palearctic boundary – an area dominated by sandy steppe.

Arriving in the area early evening, we found a small pool which was evidently home to a colony of **Black-winged Pratincoles** – at least 15 birds were hawking insects around the area. While watching the pratincoles, one or two **White-winged Larks** also dropped in to drink, and a handful of **Greenshanks** and **Green Sandpipers** were feeding around the margins. Reluctantly leaving the pool we headed a few kilometres further on to set up camp by the river itself at N51°15'28", E59°09'31", where we enjoyed a swim and numerous **Bluethroats** and **Paddyfield Warblers**. Kris, Dan and I then returned back to the pool where we enjoyed better views of the **Black-winged Pratincoles**. Dan, ever the adventurous, decided to walk the 6km back to camp and had several further **White-winged Larks** in the area as well as a **Little Bustard**. Back at camp at least five **Red-footed Falcons** were showing well along the river, and both **Cetti's Warbler** and **Hobby** were logged before darkness fell, after which a **Nightjar** began to chirr.

Black-winged Pratincole

19 June

Today was scheduled to be a day of driving, our aim being to make it back to Yekaterinburg by the evening. Pavel's hideously slow 4x4 made it a pretty horrendous 800km-long trip, punctuated only by a couple of stops for fuel and food. Without clean windows to look out of, decent birds were naturally few and far between. A pair of **White-winged**

Larks flew across the car just a couple of kilometres from where we'd camped, but the next notable sightings were a pair of **White-winged Larks** south of Kartaly closely followed by several **Black-winged Pratincoles** over a roadside marsh at roughly N52°52'33", E60°34'41". A male **Pallid Harrier** over the car approximately 20km south of Bapha provided the last quality of our southern excursion.

By the time we reached Chelyabinsk the weather had deteriorated and it was surprisingly cool and overcast – a theme that continued all the way back to Yekaterinburg. Unfortunately, due to the late cancellation of a number of flights due to poor weather, the Liner Hotel was fully booked(!) and after watching Luis Suarez destroy England in Brazil in the early hours, it was time for a few hours' sleep on the airport floor.

20 June

After a long and exhausting trip we had only one thing on our minds for our last day, despite the improved weather – relaxing. Now familiar faces at the Liner Hotel the great majority of the day was spent sleeping, eating, catching up with notes and processing photos within its walls.

David, who still needed Lanceolated Warbler, was keen to return to the marshes at Bolshoy Istok, and Pavel kindly agreed to take us for a few hours in the evening. Sure enough a **Lanceolated Warbler** duly performed, sitting right out in the open as it sang. A new species at the site for us was **Oriental Turtle Dove** – one flew low overhead as we listened for Lancies. Other sightings included a male **Long-tailed Rosefinch**, **Honey Buzzard** and all the usual bird species while a couple of **Siberian Roe Deer** were seen around the airport perimeter.

Siberian Roe Deer

Back at the hotel, we enjoyed a hearty meal and a couple of beers while reflecting on what had been an extremely successful trip. Aside Swinhoe's Snipe (which we never considered a realistic objective), we'd seen all our targets to along the Ural Ridge and around Yekaterinburg. Our prospective trip to the South Urals and steppes of the Orenburg region – which wasn't a confirmed part of the schedule until we were actually in Russia – had exceeded all expectations with three (Demoiselle Crane, Red-headed Bunting and White-winged Lark) of the four theoretical targets duly seen. With that, it was time to head for a few hours' sleep before our morning flight back to Helsinki and then onwards to London and Brussels.

SELECTED SPECIES NOTES

Demoiselle Crane – a pair flew WNW over the main road in Halilovo (N51°23'42", E58°07'10") mid-afternoon on 17 June. Of our four main targets in the Orenburg region this was the species we least expected to see, and our sole sighting was a fortunate one. Nevertheless, the species is known to be thinly distributed through the Orenburg and Chelyabinsk regions, and therefore must be considered a possibility for birders prepared to put in time looking for them.

Oriental Cuckoo – a reasonably common species both around Yekaterinburg and in the Ural Mountains west of Severouralsk, but difficult to see well and always outnumbered by Common Cuckoo. At least three birds were heard giving their distinct, resonating '*kuck-kuck*' in the marshes at Monetnyy early morning on 8 June, and one was seen well (and photographed) in flight there that evening. Further north, several were heard daily on the Ural Ridge and at Mount Kvarkush, with one showing well perched in a pine by our camp at dawn on 10 June – other sightings involved flight views only. We failed to see this species along the river north of the bridge at Raskuikha (N56°35'18", E60°21'03"), although the Birdfinders tour saw them here in 2014 as did Crochet & Didner in 2013.

Oriental Turtle Dove – two birds, including a displaying male, were seen just east of the town of Nevyansk on 9 June. Park by the bridge over the small stream/marsh at N57°28'22" E60°17'02" and explore the area on foot; we saw two birds in the mature trees along the marshy valley, about 200m west of the road. Crochet & Didner also saw the species on wires and in agricultural fields here in 2013. Other sightings involved flyovers at Montenyy on 8 June, just inside the WP boundary at N58°08'12" E59°52'60" on 9 June and finally at the airport marshes at Bolshoy Istok on 20 June.

White-winged Lark – within the Western Palearctic boundary, a male was seen on a large area of wormwood steppe east of the village of Gaynulino at N51°22'06", E58°21'52" mid-afternoon on 16 June; returning to the area the following evening, we recorded the male in song and a second bird in the vicinity – presumably a female. A second pair was located nearby, just south of the road at N51°21'02", E58°22'29" mid-morning on 18 June. Habitat was heavily degraded in many areas north and west of the Ural River, which presumably accounts for its apparent scarcity in the area. However, suitable habitat was found in much larger swathes east of the Ural River (i.e. outside the WP), and we found the species to be fairly common on the sandy steppes southeast of the town of Novoorsk on 18 June. Though also outside the WP, we recorded the species as far north as the village of Kartaly, in the Chelyabinsk region (roughly N52°52'33", E60°34'41"), where a pair was seen from the car on 19 June.

Black-throated Accentor – a scarce species in the Ural Mountains west of Severouralsk, which is apparently declining in conjunction with the increase of Dunnock in the area. Using Crochet & Didner's information from 2013 we eventually located a single singing male at N60°08'22", E59°04'12" on 11 June, where it gave good views until mid-afternoon when it disappeared. What was presumably the same male was then found singing and showing well almost 450m away at N60°08'35", E59°04'02" early the following morning, though it quickly moved on. On both occasions the bird was discovered singing from the very tops of the pine trees – beware that the song is similar to both Dunnock and Olive-backed Pipit, the latter in particular had us repeatedly fooled until we discovered the real thing. Another point to note is the species' distinct appearance in the Ural Mountains, which is quite unlike birds from further east (and what is illustrated in guides such as the *Collins Bird Guide*) in that the head is almost totally black, with supercilium limited to behind the eye and lacking a malar stripe altogether.

Siberian Rubythoat – another scarce breeding bird in the Ural Mountains west of Severouralsk favouring areas of dense *Salix*, up to 1.5m in height, above the tree line. Due to appalling weather conditions, we really struggled to see this species but eventually observed two males feeding in the snow just above the treeline on Mount Kvarkush at approximately N60°08'43", E58°46'33" on the evening of 13 June. In the foggy conditions, both birds could be very skulking though occasionally gave bursts of sub-song. The previous evening we had heard a male in song in a large patch of *Salix* approximately 650m northwest of here (up the slope), but it had only showed to one of our party.

Long-tailed Rosefinch – we found this species in the marshes around Yekaterinburg with relative ease, recording birds at three different sites. We saw birds on every visit to the known site (the 'airport marshes' at Bolshoy Istok), always finding them in the wetter areas around N56°44'06", E60°46'24", generally keeping low among the willows and often quite mobile – something that echoed Crochet and Didner's experiences in 2013. Wellington boots are essential for reaching their favoured spots at this site. We also recorded three birds at the other previously-known site at Verkhnemakarovo on 8 June – a pair was by the main track at N56°43'13", E60°15'41" with a single bird seen another 400m or so to the west. At this spot, the terrain is drier underfoot and the vegetation a more mature mix of alder and willow, and a walking along the river for up to 2km should produce sightings. Most exciting for us, though, were sightings in the marshes east of the village of Monetnyy – we had at least six birds by the track at N57°01'11", E60°59'02" early morning on 8 June with further sightings in the immediate area later that afternoon. Again, birds preferred the wetter areas with a mix of alder and willow. We concluded that the species must be quite common in the right habitat in the Yekaterinburg area, and searching areas of similar suitable habitat (of which there is plenty) would no doubt produce further records.

Azure Tit – another species of the marshes of the Yekaterinburg area favouring silver birch and, to a lesser extent, willow. A pair, seemingly feeding young, were regularly seen flying across the clearing in the marshes at Bolshoy Istok (N56°44'02", E60°46'21") on 7 June, though we didn't see them on other visits to this site. The marshes east of Monetnyy proved most fruitful for sightings with at least eight birds seen well early morning on 8 June and again in the evening. The first was seen by the obvious junction in the track at N57°01'12", E60°58'49", with birds seen in suitable habitat stretching several hundred metres to the east. As with Long-tailed Rosefinch, we suspect this species to be reasonably common in the right habitat.

Red-headed Bunting – at least three males and two females were seen along the river near the village of Malokhalilovo on 16 and 17 June. A pair were seen in the thick scrubby area N51°25'27", E58°08'12 mid-evening on 16th with a separate singing male later located at N51°24'59", E58°08'46". The following morning, the latter male was still singing in the same area, with both a female and a second male noted in the vicinity. Two further males were seen from the moving car along the track between Haliliovo and Izhberda. Based on our limited experience, Red-headed Bunting appears to favour areas of scrub in the Orenburg region, perhaps close to water, and it would not surprise us if the species proves fairly numerous around here.

TRIP LIST

- Mute Swan
- Ruddy Shelduck
- Mallard
- Gadwall
- Shoveler
- Northern Pintail
- Eurasian Wigeon
- Eurasian Teal
- Garganey
- Tufted Duck
- Pochard
- Willow Grouse
- Ptarmigan
- Capercaillie
- Black Grouse
- Hazel Grouse
- Grey Partridge
- Quail
- Great Crested Grebe
- Black-necked Grebe
- Little Grebe
- Red-necked Grebe
- Cormorant
- Bittern
- Little Bittern
- Grey Heron
- Golden Eagle
- Eastern Imperial Eagle
- Black Kite
- Marsh Harrier
- Hen Harrier
- Pallid Harrier
- Montagu's Harrier
- Steppe Buzzard
- Long-legged Buzzard
- Honey Buzzard
- Sparrowhawk
- Goshawk
- Kestrel
- Red-footed Falcon
- Hobby
- Peregrine

- Merlin
- Water Rail
- Corncrake
- Spotted Crake
- Moorhen
- Coot
- Common Crane
- Demoiselle Crane
- Little Bustard
- Oystercatcher
- Black-winged Pratincole
- Little Ringed Plover
- Dotterel
- European Golden Plover
- Lapwing
- Ruff
- Wood Sandpiper
- Green Sandpiper
- Common Sandpiper
- Redshank
- Spotted Redshank
- Greenshank
- Marsh Sandpiper
- Black-tailed Godwit
- Woodcock
- Common Snipe
- Great Snipe
- Black-headed Gull
- Common Gull
- Caspian Gull
- Heuglin's Gull
- Pallas's Gull
- Little Tern
- Common Tern
- Black Tern
- White-winged Black Tern
- Feral Pigeon
- Stock Dove
- Wood Pigeon
- Turtle Dove
- Oriental Turtle Dove
- Common Cuckoo
- Oriental Cuckoo
- Long-eared Owl
- Short-eared Owl
- Nightjar
- Common Swift
- European Bee-eater
- Hoopoe
- Great Spotted Woodpecker
- Lesser Spotted Woodpecker
- White-backed Woodpecker
- Wryneck
- Sky Lark
- Short-toed Lark
- White-winged Lark
- Barn Swallow
- Sand Martin
- House Martin
- Meadow Pipit
- Tawny Pipit
- Tree Pipit
- Olive-backed Pipit
- White Wagtail
- Yellow Wagtail
- Citrine Wagtail
- Grey Wagtail
- Wren
- Dipper
- Dunnock
- Black-throated Accentor
- Robin
- Thrush Nightingale
- Bluethroat
- Red-flanked Bluetail
- Siberian Rubythroat
- Common Redstart
- Whinchat
- Siberian Stonechat
- Song Thrush
- Redwing
- Fieldfare
- Mistle Thrush
- Blackbird
- White's Thrush
- Black-throated Thrush
- Northern Wheatear
- Isabelline Wheatear
- Barred Warbler
- Garden Warbler
- Blackcap
- Common Whitethroat
- Lesser Whitethroat
- Cetti's Warbler
- Sedge Warbler
- Paddyfield Warbler
- Blyth's Reed Warbler
- Great Reed Warbler
- Grasshopper Warbler
- Lanceolated Warbler
- River Warbler
- Icterine Warbler
- Booted Warbler
- Willow Warbler
- Siberian Chiffchaff
- Arctic Warbler
- Greenish Warbler
- Yellow-browed Warbler
- Goldcrest
- Spotted Flycatcher
- Pied Flycatcher
- Great Tit
- Coal Tit
- Azure Tit
- Siberian Tit
- Willow Tit
- Long-tailed Tit
- Penduline Tit
- Eurasian Nuthatch
- Treecreeper
- Red-backed Shrike
- Lesser Grey Shrike
- Magpie
- Jay
- Nutcracker
- Jackdaw
- Rook
- Hooded Crow
- Raven
- Starling
- Rose-coloured Starling
- Golden Oriole
- House Sparrow
- Tree Sparrow
- Chaffinch
- Brambling
- Linnet
- Common Redpoll
- Goldfinch
- Greenfinch
- Siskin

- Bullfinch
- Hawfinch
- Pine Grosbeak
- Common Rosefinch
- Long-tailed Rosefinch
- Common Crossbill
- Two-barred Crossbill
- Reed Bunting
- Little Bunting
- Ortolan Bunting
- Yellowhammer
- Red-headed Bunting

Total: 195 species

APPENDIX I: Gallery

Below you will find a small selection of photographs depicting some of the many highlights from our fortnight in Russia. Both Josh Jones and David Monticelli have uploaded full galleries to their respective websites. Links can be found below:

- David Monticelli on pbase: Birds of the Russian Federation
- Josh Jones on Flickr: Russia, June 2014

Below: Blyth's Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus dumetorum*, Monetnyy, 8 June 2014

Above male Long-tailed Rosefinch *Uragus sibiricus*, Monetnyy, 8 June 2014 (Josh Jones)

Below Azure Tit *Cyanistes cyanus*, Monetnyy, 8 June 2014 (David Monticelli)

Above male Oriental Cuckoo *Cuculus optatus*, Monetnyy, 8 June 2014 (Josh Jones)

Below male White-backed Woodpecker *Dendrocopus leucotos*, Monetnyy, 8 June 2014 (David Monticelli)

Above first-summer male Pine Grosbeak *Pinicola enucleator*, Ural Mountains, 10 June 2014 (Josh Jones)

Below Siberian Tit *Poecile cinctus*, Ural Mountains, 10 June 2014 (David Monticelli)

Above Arctic Warbler *Phylloscopus borealis*, Ural Mountains, 11 June 2014 (Josh Jones)

Below Yellow-browed Warbler *Phylloscopus inornatus*, Ural Mountains, 11 June 2014 (Josh Jones)

Above Siberian Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca blythi*, Ural Mountains, 11 June 2014 (David Monticelli)

Below male Red-flanked Bluetail *Tarsiger cyanurus*, Ural Mountains, 12 June 2014 (Josh Jones)

Above male Little Bunting *Emberiza pusilla*, Ural Mountains, 11 June 2014 (David Monticelli)

Below Barred Warbler *Sylvia nisoria*, south Chelyabinsk Oblast, 16 June 2014 (Josh Jones)

Above singing Paddyfield Warbler *Acrocephalus agricola*, south Chelyabinsk Oblast, 16 June 2014 (Josh Jones)

Below Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica*, south Chelyabinsk Oblast, 16 June 2014 (Josh Jones)

Above Steppe Marmot *Marmota bobak*, Orenburg Oblast, 16 June 2014 (David Monticelli)

Below male Red-headed Bunting *Emberiza bruniceps*, Malokhalilovo, 17 June 2014 (Josh Jones)

Above Demoiselle Cranes *Anthropoides virgo*, Khalilovo, 17 June 2014 (David Monticelli)

Below male White-winged Lark *Melanocorypha leucoptera*, near Gaynulino, 17 June 2014 (David Monticelli)

Above adult Black-winged Pratincole *Glareola nordmanni*, SE of Novoorsk, 18 June 2014 (Josh Jones)

Below male Lanceolated Warbler *Locustella lanceolata*, Bolshoy Istok, 19 June 2014 (David Monticelli)