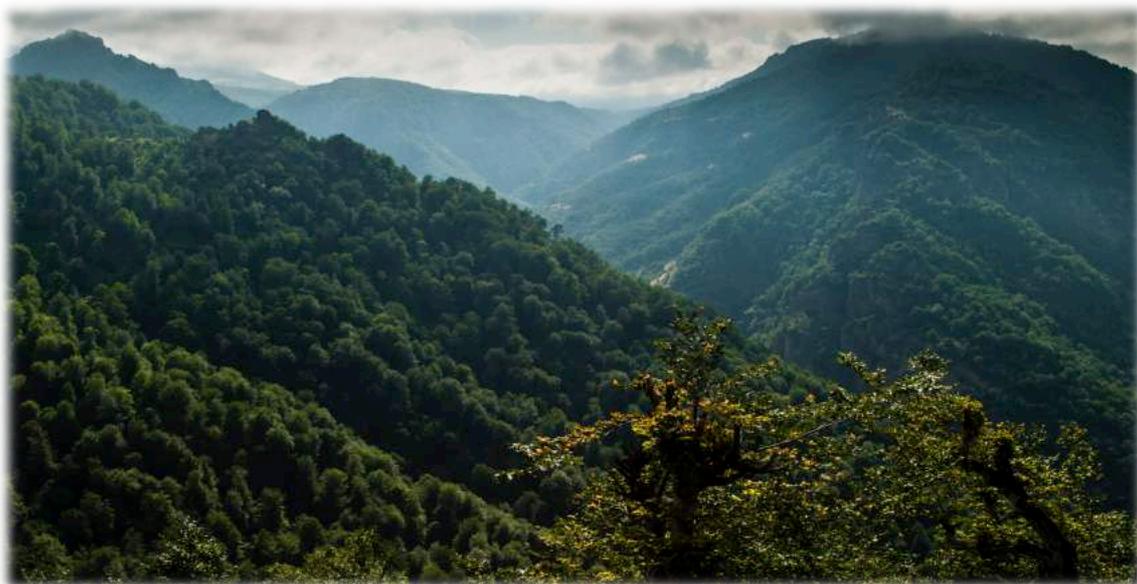


AZERBAIJAN & NAKHCHIVAN

WITH A FEATURE ON CASPIAN TIT

8th-21st June 2017

Ben Macdonald & Harry Hussey



THE HIGH TALYSH FOREST: LAND OF LEOPARDS, WOLVES & CASPIAN TITS.

I. INTRODUCTION

Not only geographically but politically and ecologically, Azerbaijan feels like a frontier country at the very edge of Europe. Still well outside of the traditional, 'safe' set of birding trips for the Western Palearctic, it offers superb landscapes and incredible birding, the strange prospect of still wandering in deciduous forests alongside the watchful eyes of leopards, bears and wolves, and the less welcome 'frontier' issues of dangerous dogs, corrupt police, poor infrastructure and some truly dangerous roads. All in all, Azerbaijan is the full whack - in every way.

A small but excellent number of trip reports, including one by Josh Jones have, in recent years, paved the way for more trips to the country. On this trip, one exceptional rediscovery stands out – the finding of Caspian Tit in the country, a near mythical species last reliably reported from the Western Palearctic in the late nineteen-seventies. We were also able to explore the enchantingly quiet Autonomous Republic of Nakhchivan, and see many of the strange and magically wild areas of the country, from the primary Hyrcan Forest to the remote valleys of the Caucasus. This trip report outlines in detail how best to bird in the country, it's many potential obstacles and logistical challenges, and GPS sites for all key species. We are particularly grateful to Kai Gauger, Elchin Sultanov and Josh Jones for their support prior to this trip.

II. TARGET SPECIES

Having never visited any of the Caucasian countries, including the easier and well-known birding circuits of Turkey, Georgia and Armenia, there was a large list of target species on this trip, most of which were achieved over the course of just under two weeks birding in the country. We were also keen to see, and succeeded in seeing, the distinctive Caucasian races of Great-spotted Woodpecker and Twite.

Caucasian Grouse; Caucasian Snowcock; Caspian Snowcock; See-see Partridge; Shikra; White-tailed Lapwing; Greater Sand Plover; Black-winged Pratincole; Radde's Accentor; White-throated Robin; Gldenstdt's Redstart; Persian Wheatear; Upcher's Warbler; Green Warbler; Mountain Chiffchaff; Red-breasted Flycatcher; Semicollared Flycatcher; Caspian Tit; Eastern Rock Nuthatch; Rosy Starling; Pale Rockfinch; Red-fronted Serin; Mongolian Finch; Great Rosefinch; Crimson-winged Finch; Grey-necked Bunting.

We spectacularly failed to find Great Rosefinch, we only heard Shikra, and due to a change in itinerary, had little chance to seek out Asian Crimson-winged Finch. Amongst the commoner species, we failed to connect with breeding White-tailed Lapwing. Nonetheless, the trip was an outstanding success, with the following notable species seen or, in the case of Shikra, heard:

Caucasian Grouse; Caucasian Snowcock; Caspian Snowcock; Black Francolin; See-see Partridge; Chukar; Pygmy Cormorant; Lammergeier; Black Vulture; Egyptian Vulture; Shikra; Black-bellied Sandgrouse; Alpine Swift; Blue-cheeked Bee-eater; Syrian Woodpecker; Caucasian Woodpecker; Alpine Accentor; Radde's Accentor; Rufous Bush-rob; White-throated Robin; Gldenstdt's Redstart; Isabelline Wheatear; Eastern Black-eared Wheatear; Finsch's Wheatear; Persian Wheatear; Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush; Mntries' Warbler; Eastern Olivaceous Warbler; Upcher's Warbler; Green Warbler; Mountain Chiffchaff; Red-breasted Flycatcher; Semicollared Flycatcher; Caspian Tit; Eastern Rock Nuthatch; Rosy Starling; Pale Rockfinch; Caucasian Twite; Red-fronted Serin; Trumpeter Finch; Mongolian Finch; Ortolan; Grey-necked Bunting.

III. KEY SPECIES NOTES

This section outlines the very latest on some of the most exciting species we targeted and saw during our trip, including information on rare specialities such as the Nakhchivan 'stone desert' specialities, the Caucasian endemics and, of course, the Caspian Tit.

Caucasian Grouse *Tetrao mlokosiewiczi*

A specialist of shrub-dominated high hillsides in the Caucasus. There is an established lek for seeing this species and, as previous reports have detailed, the word 'distant' fails to cover quite how far the birds can be. The lek is best viewed from the guest house in Laza Village (41.297835, 48.114161) and occurs on the high tree-studded slopes of Mount Shardagh, to the north (put scope on the area around 41.304407, 48.112769. Dawn, before 7am, is best by June). In addition, any of the least disturbed areas of wooded shrublands in the high mountains, less grazed by the enormous sheep herds (i.e. the shrubland ridge east of Laza around 41.295669, 48.147940) may still hold the species. Staying overnight at the guest house avoids a very long drive from the next available accommodation further down the valley.

Caucasian Snowcock *Tetraogallus caucasicus*

This is a spectacular species, haunting truly spectacular landscapes. It is, along with the redstart, definitely the easier of the high altitude species in the Caucasus in Azerbaijan to see – and see well. The core site to explore for Caucasian Snowcock is not the Laza region but the sparse, rocky slopes, below the snowline, of Kizilkaya Mountain, above the village of Khinaliq. The village is situated around 41.180782, 48.125655. By summer, to reach the prime site for the snowcocks, you need to find a way to get a good deal higher, and scan and search the slopes around the scree-line (41.219685, 48.131107). Excellent views of a territorial pair, and further singing male, were obtained here.

Whilst Josh Jones was able to negotiate a large part of this track by 4x4, the track was truly dangerous by the time we arrived, impassable by typical 4x4. In one of the typically mad adventures of the trip, we enlisted the help of Rufahadin, a respected local in the village, who owns an amazing Lada vehicle with two gear-sticks, capable of driving up scree slopes, overheating, then being watered down and carrying on. Furthermore, *do not attempt to go near the shepherd camps*. Even the locals warned of the danger of the dogs up there, and having seen these monsters from Rufahadin's vehicle, we are extremely glad we kept our distance. By paying in the village, you get a guide able to drive you right up into the snowcock's haunts, avoid Caucasian Shepherd dogs (which are trained to kill wolves), and stay alive. Morning is best but dawn is not essential. The far-carrying snowcock's call is a truly unforgettable sound amid the vast, red and snow-white cathedral rocks.

Caspian Snowcock *Tetraogallus caspius*

This equally spectacular montane species is very hard to see throughout its limited range, but extremely difficult in Azerbaijan, where it frequents only the high boundary between Nakhchivan and Armenia, at a site close to a tense military border. That said, Elchin Sultanov, as with all other species in this region, came through for us, and his guide Arbu was able to take us to the site. The site is Mount Kaputjugh, where Arbu will typically drive guests to a viewing point in a huge montane Amphitheatre (39.167727, 45.988994). From here, you must scan the high slopes. Birds are not vocal. Eventually, after several false alarms (Arbu finding golden eagle and our finding chukar), we did locate a genuine pair of Caspian Snowcock at great range on the mountain crest to the west (39.172111, 45.987950). I would strongly recommend that if anyone is considering an Armenia trip, views would be considerably better, and more reliable, at three or more sites in this country.

See-see Partridge *Ammoperdix griseogularis*

A dapper species of very warm, dry, rocky valleys with vegetation at the base, whose limited range means that it can only be reliably seen, within the WP region, in Turkey, far southern Armenia and Nakhchivan, with in my view the latter country probably offering the best opportunity in the region (for Nakhchivan access, see section later). We had expected to struggle with this enigmatic species but were in fact surprised with its apparent abundance, similar to Josh Jones in 2015. Superb views of birds were obtained at the prime rock valley site of Nehram (39.052387, 45.534968) and exceptional views of a pair drinking below a dripping water pipe at Dari Dagh Yolu, otherwise known as Dan Dagh (38.986347, 45.671774). Most dry rock valleys and river-beds in lowland Nakhchivan should hold this species.

Shikra *Accipiter badius*

This is a species probably breeding more commonly than thought in the farmland deciduous copses of lowland south-east Azerbaijan, around the Caspian coast. A number of sites exist but currently, two pairs nesting in the small woodland near the Masalli Olympic Complex (wood at 39.022070, 48.696710 and best viewpoint at 39.022747, 48.697374) constitutes an excellent site to see the species. By our June visit, the female was established on a nest, and was heard on two occasions calling from the wood. Due to a number of factors we had to curtail our time at this site, perhaps a mistake in retrospect, and therefore failed to see the species. Few others have failed, however, and in May, especially, excellent views are obtainable here. Though the 'honeypot' site, we also heard the species from a café around 20 miles north of here, and many of the woods along the E119 road appear suitable.

Caucasian Woodpecker *Dendrocopus major poelzami*

A distinctive buff-coloured woodpecker, this race has sufficient mitochondrial DNA differences to merit distinction as a separate species, along indeed with a range of other subspecies in this geographically-isolated area of Europe including Caucasian Tengmalm's Owl and Caucasian Twite. We encountered this species with surprising ease along the road between Lankaran and Lerik, and around Lerik, in the Hyrcan National Park, and in the Caucasus around the wooded village of Nazli Bulaq (41.242494, 48.313074) above Quba on the road to Khinaliq.

Radde's Accentor *Prunella ocularis*

A lovely subtle bird of shrubby, rocky mountain slopes below the snowline, there are at least two reliable sites in Azerbaijan for this sought-after species. In the south of the main country, Josh Jones was successful at the high peak close to the village of Mistan (38.645, 48.449), in the remote area due south of Lerik. We however found a breeding pair and further territorial male at the beautiful montane site of Batabat in Nakhchivan (parking at 39.546037, 45.786527, with the birds frequenting the distinct outcrop at 39.549892, 45.782313).

White-throated Robin *Irania gutturalis*

Elchin Sultanov's chosen guide, Arbu, was again familiar with this species, which appears to specialize in very warm, bushy, rocky valleys across its range, including in Nakhchivan. Another 'eastern Turkish' species, it was found relatively easily on our descent from Batabat peak, in the Bichanak Valley. At the first site (39.512526,45.771251), a female afforded excellent views and Arbu found a nest with five eggs, concealed in a low thorn bush. The following day, in similar habitat below Mount Kaputjugh, a male was observed around the Gilanchay River, Bilav (39.082070, 45.846715).

Güldenstädt's Redstart *Phoenicurus erythrogastrus*

A spectacular species which appeared quite suddenly with an increase to c.3200m (J.J. noted 2800m in May) at Kizilkaya Mountain above Khinaliq (41.219685, 48.131107). Birds were quite confiding and frequent a montane 'lawn' habitat with the typical ground characteristics used by redstart species. In contrast, the great rosefinch is far rarer and more demanding in its habitat, which is often removed by excessive sheep-grazing in these parts.

Persian Wheatear *Oenanthe chrysopygia*

A subtle species, sexes unusually similar, with extremely restricted in the WP region, with one small area of southern Armenia, and Nakhchivan, the two most reliable areas to see the species. Like a suite of sympatric species in Nakhchivan, Persian Wheatears appear to specialize in highly arid, dried up river valleys with rocky outposts. They can be quite unobtrusive and take a while to see, but the call carries well. We had good views of a singing male, and heard a further male, at Nehram (39.052387, 45.534968), with two adults and a fledged juvenile at Dari Dagh Yolu, otherwise known as Dan Dagh (38.986347,45.671774).

Ménétries's Warbler *Sylvia mystacea*

A bird of dense tamarisk scrub adjoining water sources, 2 birds were heard and seen briefly at Shirvan fishponds (39.870589, 49.160146) in scrub lining the canal, alongside Black Francolin and Rufous Bush-robin, both apparently characteristic of this habitat.

Upcher's Warbler *Hippolais languida*

A far south-eastern species that is again quite easy to encounter within Nakhchivan, specializing in scant clusters of bushes at the edge of dry rock valleys and gulleys in the lowlands. We obtained excellent views of a bird that was most likely visiting its nesting bush at Dari Dagh Yolu (38.986347,45.671774) and I sighted another more briefly at Shirvan Fish Ponds, but after our first sighting made no further effort to find the species at other sites.

Green Warbler *Phylloscopus nitidus*

A delicate leaf warbler of fine-branched, younger deciduous woodlands in the Caucasus, usually sub-montane and growing in verdant valleys, and not as high up as Mountain Chiffchaff. We encountered this species very easily, with at least five birds around the woodlands surrounding the hotel at Nazli Bulaq (41.242494,48.313074) above Quba on the road to Khinaliq. We found a further bird behind the Suvar Resort above Laza (41.281793, 48.115399).

Mountain Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus sindianus*

A highly specialized species, which becomes relatively easy to find once the habitat is known. Frequents very high birch-dominated shrublands, at the natural tree-line, consisting of low dwarf forms of the tree. As per Josh Jones, we heard this bird at two sites close to Laza. Firstly, just below the village in scrubland (41.300181, 48.118660) and then obtained superb views of a singing male, responding well to playback, in identical habitat behind the Suvar Resort above Laza (41.281793, 48.115399).

Semicollared Flycatcher *Ficedula semitorquata*

The mature deciduous woodland 'pied' flycatcher of valleys in the Caucasus Mountains. As Harry and I discovered, however, it seems that as early as mid-June, this species has virtually vacated its breeding range and is already on the move. I was therefore very lucky, and surprised, to find one male in atypical habitat, perched on a rock and clearly on its way somewhere (local or migratory) behind the Suvar Resort, Laza (41.277816, 48.111676). Most people visit Azerbaijan in late May, and do not struggle to connect with the species in the spacious, mature deciduous woodland around Nazli Bulaq (41.242494,48.313074). That said, Josh Jones did fail at typical sites for the species, and ended up finding the bird instead in the mature, riverine woodlands, at lower altitudes around Qusar Valley (41.3365, 48.3418). JJ recommends exiting the road to this site with a good 4x4 at 41.4104, 48.4698, and notes a 4x4-essential river crossing at 41.3885, 48.4261.

Caspian Tit *Poecile hyrcanus*

Ever since first wanting to visit Azerbaijan, the challenge of refinding Caspian Tit, one of the world's most range-restricted and enigmatic birds, stood out at the key purpose of the trip. Until the 1970s, the species was observed by the naturalist Loskot around the village of Lerik, in the Hyrcan National Park, and it also has a more extensive distribution south of the Azeri border – in Iran. Virtually unstudied since this time by anyone, it seemed that the species was strongly tied to what were termed 'degraded' forests, in other words, wood pastures stewarded by cattle, and therefore spacious and rich in standing deadwood. Loskot's papers named sites around Lerik but these had, for decades since, fallen out of use due to habitat change.

The first thing that struck me was that extinction of Caspian tit appeared extraordinarily unlikely in Azerbaijan. The aerial maps showed the persistence of enormous tracts of near-pristine forest, containing species such as leopards, wolves and brown bears, so a small passerine extinction was improbable. More likely, its original habitat was wood pasture, and the 'degradation' would, in evolutionary terms, have been caused by wild cattle, with proxy habitats growing close to villages only in more recent times. In conversation with Kai Gauger, I mapped out an area on the aerial map that appeared to show very spaced out and old trees; a landscape generally created by the continuous action of extensive herbivory or pastoral grazing. This area was quite remote from Lerik and therefore I also carefully mapped out a route in case a normal 4x4 couldn't reach the location in question. Instead of focusing on sites similar to Loskot's, I targeted an area of higher altitude wood pasture (1250-1350m) on the edge of a really pristine section of forest, at a much higher elevation.

On our first day of searching, Harry Hussey and I encountered quite a few difficulties in even getting to the very remote village, some distance from Lerik, in our 4x4. The roads were extraordinary; usually a track has a slight 'dip' in the middle, but not a three-foot difference between where the tracks of a tyre should be and the middle. It was clear we'd wreck our vehicle in no time, so after much haggling at the Relax Lerik Hotel, we found ourselves a Lada taxi driver whose vehicle sported tractor-sized wheels. The driver took us to one of the most remote villages in the Hyrcan National Park. After walking up past a few sheep-fields and their alarming shepherd dogs, it was immediately clear we'd found degraded, ancient and spacious wood pasture – and were at least in the right habitat.

In spite of hearing one tantalizing call, Harry and I did not get lucky. Regrettably, the following morning, Harry's ankle sprain from our descent was still raw, so I headed off in my monster taxi at 7am back to the remote village by myself. I climbed straight into the woodland, to around 1325 metres. Here, there was an extremely high degree of ancient wood rot, and several small glades consistent with Loskot's description of the Caspian tit's habitat. I played tape for around 15 minutes and then, to my total delight, a pair of Caspian tit responded.

What happened next was quite memorable. A very heavy fog rolled in, leaving me without phone reception on a very clear mammal track through one of the last tracts of forest in Europe home to the original diversity of large carnivores. I evaluated, as I tried to see the Caspian tits, which one I would least like to encounter, or startle, as the fog reduced visibility to a few feet. Whilst keeping one eye out for large hungry animals, with an odd 'feeling' that I wasn't alone in the forest, I could make out the pair of tits moving around me, with a very clear call (a willow tit like buzz) and several bursts of male song (an equally willow-like like 'chew, chew, chew'). At this point, my attention was diverted by a sudden skidding noise – as two grey wolves literally ground to a halt about ten feet away, straight out of the fog. We watched one another for about ten seconds, and then they vanished into the mist. So, regrettably, did the Caspian tits. Having found a good number of willow tit nests in the UK, I soon after identified a suspicious stump – and the clear remains of what I believe was this year's nest cavity – a ragged rectangular drilled hole in a dead stump, very similar to a willow tit nest in the UK. The fog worsened, and I determined to return here in future years, still frankly a little on edge at the idea that the next animal to come out of the fog could, quite feasibly, be a leopard or bear.

In 2018, a small number of birders including Kai Gauger, deservedly, have since found Caspian tit at another location above Lerik, with almost identical characteristics to mine: ancient wood pasture forest, with some free-roaming cattle, and spacious stands of dead trees, at around 1250m. It seems clear that the species has evolved in montane wood pastures, and only frequented for a shorter period the anthropogenic habitats at lower altitudes. Rare it probably is not, but specialized, and haunting some of the most remote areas of woodland in the Western Palearctic. A fragmented distribution is unlikely, due to the extent of woodland cover. Where its specific habitat occurs, then, it seems probable that Caspian Tit still breeds across the wooded crests of the hills between Lankoran and Lerik, at around 1300m or above.

For me, refinding Caspian Tit was one of my all time birding highlights. One site has since been put in the public domain by others. I would question whether this is a good idea. There is something innately special and unique about a forest still containing leopards, wolves and bears in the 21st century – and these animals are known shift their behavior patterns in response to regular visits by people to an area. The sites that hold Caspian Tits are almost devoid of people, and that makes them rather special. They are poorly suited to ecotourism. Whilst a small number of determined people will see Caspian tit, it's best to first work first a strategy, so they can do so in a way that contributes to the protection of these extraordinary forests - and the local economy.

Eastern Rock Nuthatch *Sitta tephronota*

Another 'rock gorge' specialist that is probably as easy to see in Nakhchivan as anywhere in the Western Palearctic, where it appears to exist alongside Western Rock Nuthatch in a similar niche. Harry and I enjoyed superb views of a pair near a nest site at Nehram (39.052387, 45.534968) but spent little further time searching for the species in the region. It does appear rarer and more specialized than Western Rock Nuthatch, and one habitat observation is that they seem to like vegetated areas adjacent to their steep, rocky nesting areas.

Rosy Starling *Pastor roseus*

By no means a difficult WP bird to twitch or see, watching breeding aggregations of Rosy Starling has always been an ambition of mine in Europe, and Azerbaijan represents one of the very best countries to do so. Huge colonies are reported most years along the Caspian coast, in low intensity agricultural habitats. But Harry and I were still blown away by well over 200 birds south of Xirmandali (39.498917, 48.658617), which were flying across the road, communally carrying nesting material to a single barn in the distance, a truly memorable sight.

Pale Rockfinch *Carpospiza brachydactyla*

Another enigmatic species of arid boulder lands in far south-eastern Europe, Nakhchivan again holds good populations of this species, and again the dramatic red rock landscape of Nehram (39.052387, 45.534968) appears to be the prime site. These birds are unobtrusive rather than rare, singing from the ground and it can be hard to gauge their distance. Once found, however, they do show well. In total, over 10 birds were heard at Nehram, with superb views of a few singing males; our belief was that the females were, at this time, incubating eggs.

Caucasian Twite *Linaria flavirostris brevirostris*

A very distinctive-looking bird with in my view excellent credentials as its own species. This species was not widely encountered in the high Caucasus, and like other twites, it favours areas of very high floral diversity, with a high range of seed-bearing plant species. It is also a high altitude species. Eventually, Harry and I gained superb views of a bird on the steep ascent from Laza village into the Caucasus (at 41.297874, 48.126813), which again encouraged our view that it is quite distinct from any other race of Twite.

Red-fronted Serin *Serinus pusillus*

A very smart species favouring montane slopes, with a mixture of low sward pasture, scant bushes and rocky outcrops. Ahead of our visit to the Caucasus, we enjoyed excellent views of at least five birds at Batabat Peak in Nakhchivan (39.549892, 45.782313). In the High Caucasus, we found birds easily around the Suvar Resort, Laza (41.277816, 48.111676), Laza village, and along the road descending around 2km down the valley towards Quba. This species should not pose problems and is also apparently common around Khinaliq too.

Mongolian Finch *Bucanetes mongolicus*

One of the highlights of the trip, these superb finches, incredibly hard to see in Turkey and now almost impossible in Armenia, had a thriving colony around the boulder fields at Nehram (39.052387, 45.534968). Not only did we encounter at least ten birds with relative ease, but were able to watch males and females changing over at nests, which are concealed in long, lateral crevices in very large boulders. Unlike a lot of the other dry rock species, Mongolian Finches appear to be extremely specialized. In Turkey, they favour an area of lava flow, and Nehram, too, is essentially a recently formed area of volcanic activity. Sites seem to be characterized by arid boulder fields.

Grey-necked Bunting *Emberiza buchanani*

Nakhchivan yet again delivered the goods for us. As J. Jones has observed, whereas grey-necked bunting in Turkey appears to be quite specialized in its habitat, most of the lowlands of Nakhchivan may hold this species, which appears to do well in semi-arid areas with access to low bushy areas and seeds, as buntings generally require. We heard 2-3 at Nehram (39.052387, 45.534968) but gained excellent views of at least five at Dari Dagh Yolu (38.986347, 45.671774) including a fledged juvenile.

White-tailed Lapwing *Vanellus leucurus* NS

A regular breeding species of the vegetated edge of fishponds along the Caspian Coast, Harry and I were rather surprised to fail multiple times to locate this species by mid-June. We could only assume breeding pairs were, as our lapwings are, early breeders that had by this time dispersed. For most birders, visiting in May, there are a few key sites that should yield the species. (1) the first section of the Shirvan fishponds (39.841113, 49.214887) and (2) the Hajigabul fishponds (39.952379, 48.912087). Other less accessible coastal wetlands will also hold the species.

Great Rosefinch *Carpodacus rubicilla* NS

Far and away the biggest let-down of the trip, this species is, in our view, in the Azeri Caucasus, extremely difficult to see. Josh Jones had problems in May, though did eventually connect. First and foremost, rosefinches are birds of an even higher altitude, in the breeding season, than either the redstart or snowcock. But they also haunt a much more specific habitat. Whereas the redstart is content with sheep-grazed pasture and the snowcocks with rocky slopes, rosefinches require subalpine and alpine meadows with a huge diversity of seeds and alpine plants. This not only means you have to climb above the rhododendron zone around Laza to find it, but that large areas, including Khinaliq, have been denuded by heavy sheep-grazing and are unlikely to contain the habitat needed by the species. Georgia is, most probably, a better country for finding this bird. That said, the Suvar Resort around Laza, and the area behind, is generally used by birds into May at least, and the range of flora here looks good. We either failed to find habitat or, where we got close, had to back off due to proximity to shepherd dogs.

IV. ACCESS, PERMITS & KEY CONTACTS

Azerbaijan is *not* an easy country to operate in at all, and very different in its level of complexity and paperwork from other Caucasian countries, or indeed other developing countries that appear more laid back on all fronts, such as Morocco. Do not underestimate the nastiness or complexity of officialdom in Azerbaijan, or people's determinedness to make simple matters complex or extract money from you.

The Autonomous Republic of Nakhchivan is an entire annexed state of highly restricted access to outsiders. All birding enquiries should be made, as Josh Jones and myself did, through Dr. Elchin Sultanov (elchin59@gmail.com). Elchin is the only person who can reliably arrange access to the country and as such, you get a package from him. You take a flight from Baku to the capital of the small country/annex – the city of Nakhchivan. Elchin may or may not join your birding group in person. If he does not, he will delegate Arbu. Arbu knows all of the sites and his birding skills are solid, although his snowcock-spotting has now become legendary, not entirely for the right reasons.

On our stay, the quality of accommodation in Nakhchivan was extremely basic, but sufficient, and the food cooked by Arbu's wife in the evening was first-rate. Elchin arranged in our package a translator, a lady who was so bored by the end of day one, that she subsequently didn't turn up again. That said, if there is only one way to do things, there is no point complaining, and Elchin will certainly deliver, in three days, the means to see the key target species in Nakhchivan. In fairness, I tasked Elchin with being able to see Mongolian Finch, Pale Rockfinch, Persian Wheatear, Eastern Rock Nuthatch, See-see Partridge, White-throated Robin, Radde's Accentor and Caspian Snowcock, and he delivered on all fronts. Please note, Crimson-winged Finch is not a reliable possibility in Nakhchivan: Arbu has seen it only once.

The Hyrcan National Park appears one of the easier areas to operate in from an officialdom point of view. We were able to reach the higher altitude deciduous forests without hassle, and the locals appeared either friendly or indifferent to us. The state of the road to Lerik is reasonable, though would still present a serious challenge to anyone not using a 4x4 (seriously, use a 4x4 for any trip to this country). Beyond that, those seeking Caspian Tit should either walk or hire a 'tractor taxi' to remote villages, which can be negotiated from Relax Lerik Hotel.

The High Caucasus is a mixed bag when it comes to access, and the situation had not improved as of 2017, since when Josh Jones visited the country in 2015. Communications with Kai Gauger (kai_gauger@yahoo.de) will elicit the latest information. Basically, in the Caucasus there are two levels of access. There is the usual road access around Laza and Khinaliq, and the higher altitude access, which gets you up into the habitat of Caucasian Grouse and Great Rosefinch (Mount Shahdagh). The best contact to make sure you will not be caught out by any changing access conditions is Hajibaba Imanli (h.imanli@hotmail.com / incoming@olivettravel.co). Hajibaba arranged our stay at the Laza and Khinaliq Guest Houses and can facilitate, if the authorities allow, the high-altitude permit, though during our visit, he could not. We were also fairly furious when, on our last day in Khinaliq, I was asked by him to pay a small bribe to locals just to 'keep things OK'. These communities still see some tourists as a short-term commodity to be rinsed, so keeping a finger on local attitudes, via Hajibaba, is an important thing to do.

V. POLICING AND BUREAUCRACY

The most important thing to emphasise is the officious and exploitative policing of Azerbaijan's road system. Like something out of *Catch 22* or a sketch on the old Soviet Union, speed limit signs will often state a speed, which then apparently drops as if by magic, allowing officers to claim you have exceeded the limit. On our 'best' day, Harry and I were pulled five times by the police on the stretch of road between Lankoran and Baku, for a range of offences, some clearly fictional, others exploitative, such as a smudge of dirt on the registration plate.

Police will wave you down, explain a real/fictional offence to you, and then demand money. Sometimes they will aggressively pull you in from behind. However, there is a polite way around caving in to this kind of behaviour. The sign for their wanting money is that they appear to write with a pen, as an indication you are to pay them. Instead, smilingly produce your passport, your driving license, and eventually, a pen and paper. By simply playing stupid but remaining extremely polite, smiling and hand-shaking, we in total escaped being charged for fictional driving offences at least 12 times. Speaking no English at all, the police eventually have to give up. The police make driving in Azerbaijan, and therefore travel, a constant hassle, and were one of the major factors in making this an unusually stressful trip at times. I've driven in 20 countries now, including those with fairly militant road policing, as in Morocco, but this is by far the worst country I've been in for policing.

It is also absolutely imperative to ensure your national permits and paperwork are beyond all reproach. Azerbaijan requires a full VISA (not the electronic visa, which you must book here before travel – www.azerbaijanonlinevisa.com) BUT if you remain in the country for more than ten days, you MUST get an additional visa. Enquiries about this should be directed to Hajibaba Imanli. Due to our hectic schedule, and decision not to carry on into Georgia at an earlier date, Harry and I were caught up by this at the airport as we tried to leave. Officials threatened to deport us and demanded an astonishing £800 *each*, and appeared to enjoy the process very much. Please learn from our example and do not give these people the chance to do what they do best, which is to exploit tourists to their maximum financial effect.

VI. INFRASTRUCTURE, CULTURE & CAR HIRE

ROADS. I have yet to travel in Armenia, where the road quality is legendary, but would describe Azeri roads as on average the worst I have seen in Europe. Immediately leaving Baku, the quality is excellent, with 2-3 lane motorways. During our visit in 2017, by the time you had passed around 70km S of Baku, the road south towards the Iranian border degenerated into single carriageway, and much of it appeared to be under reconstruction, which bodes well in the longer-term. Dangerous overtaking is a real issue and you have to remain extremely vigilant at all times – we often decided to be the slowest driver on the road, to allow maximum reaction time and prevent too many stops by the police. The Lankoran-Lerik road is pot-holed but perfectly drivable in 1.5 hours. The Caucasus roads are generally fine until you reach the sections immediately below Khinaliq (several landslides have created a small boulder field on one stretch). The Laza road gets fairly precipitous towards the end. Our 4x4 lacked the thrust to get us up a steep gravel track to the Suvar Resort, so we enlisted local help. Once at Khinaliq, as per the section on Caucasian Snowcock, enlisting Rufahadin will save wrecking your vehicle to get you up onto Kizilkaya Mountain. Expect across the country broken glass and a range of feral dogs along roadsides, bring a spare tire and have contingency plans in place.

NAVIGATION. The bread and butter of all my foreign trips is a carefully prepared Google Map, created on My Maps, with GPS points for all hotels, road turns, and birding sites. Of course, this must then be made accessible offline. This is readily done with the superb, free App – MapsMe. You download the KML file and can then navigate offline. However, before even leaving the country, ensure to download the full set of maps for Azerbaijan whilst you have WiFi access. In addition, I usually print off aerial maps for extremely remote locations where this system could fall through. This proved essential in helping my taxi driver get us to the site for Caspian tits. Clearly, a good old printed map is also a good idea in a country where phone signal varies enormously, though in fairness, we found phone signal, as a whole, to be excellent.

ACCOMMODATION. Accommodation options in Azerbaijan are still relatively limited compared to the beauty of the landscape and the potential scope for ecotourism. As English is spoken extremely rarely in the country, far less so than any other area of Europe to which I've yet travelled, a few places stand out. The Relax Lerik Hotel (+994 50 250 47 88), south of Lerik itself, proved a very useful base when searching for Caspian Tit, as English-speaking staff were able to facilitate taxis to the more remote villages. To save long drives into the Caucasus each morning, staying at the guesthouses in Khinaliq and Laza is best arranged through Hajibaba Imanli. Elsewhere, Booking.com can be useful in identifying places to stay in larger settlements, such as Quba, Baku or Masalli, as fits your itinerary. There are no choices on accommodation in Nakhchivan, and apparently no hotel on offer through Elchin's package, though enquiries could be made.

FOOD. This is of mixed quality. In Nakhchivan, the stuffed vine leaves and lamb we had were some of the best we've ever tasted, but the quality of food is generally not great, and fluctuates between individual houses or places you stay in. One notable example is a fresh dairy curd dish serves around Laza and Khinaliq. When dead fresh, it can be one of the most amazing things to eat, along with fresh herbs and eggs. If just a little older, it can be quite a different experience. The last of coffee in the country was perhaps the biggest set-back on long drives, and finding places along the road to eat can, compared to most countries, prove difficult – but you will find excellent kebab restaurants in the end. Make sure you have bottled water and buy food that keeps well at the start of the trip, in Baku, and these issues can be easily handled.

LANGUAGE/CULTURE. If I were to do this trip again, or lead a trip in future, investing in an Azeri/Russian-speaking translator, able to handle the police and understand the language, would certainly make for a much more relaxing trip. English is virtually unspoken in large areas of the country. Fascinatingly, the village of Khinaliq also has its own unique language, spoken by perhaps 250 people on the planet. Azeri is the main language, but Russian is understood, to some degree, by most people. Generally, the feeling of Azerbaijan is of a country where people are just going about their own lives. They are not overly interested to see you, nor downright unfriendly, and we never really felt either hostility or warmth during many of our travels. That said, we were extremely grateful for the kind hospitality of Rufahadin in Khinaliq who, for the price we paid for the snowcocks, also served us fantastic lunches and helped us change a tyre. Hajibaba knows good people across Azerbaijan, and will be of particular use in dealing with the Caucasus side of your trip.

CAR HIRE is again one of these very drawn out processes in Azerbaijan that would be simple in other countries. Again, we arranged car hire via Hajibaba, who set us up with a good 4x4 vehicle that was delivered to the hotel in Baku where we were staying. A huge cash only deposit was an issue for us, as usually this is done by Credit Card, so it's worth making a note of this on future trips. It is also worth noting that even a 'normal' 4x4, such as our Suzuki, really struggled with some Caucasian roads, so a heavier duty option, such as a Toyota Landcruiser, would be money well-spent, if you plan to tackle a lot of the higher-altitude areas in the Hyrcan NP or Caucasus.

VII. DAILY ACCOUNTS

Harry and I met at Tbilisi before flying together to Baku. Due to the flights, we arrived by 06:00am rather worn out, and after a phone chat with Elchin, who had sorted us permissions by phone, we took the 08:00 flight to Nakhchivan. Here, at the airport, we met with Elchin's guide Arbu, and set off into one of the least-known corners of Europe through the old streets, which were teeming with thousands of swifts. Arbu had brought a van with him, and a female translator, who appeared rather bemused at the whole operation. However, by showing Arbu clear images of the birds we wanted, started with Mongolian Finch, we were soon on our way. Please note, Arbu does not speak any English, and its worth liaising carefully with Elchin if you think this is going to be an issue.

8th June

10:30-17:00: Nehram Crater & Ridge, Nakhchivan (39.052387, 45.534968)

The predominant colour of the Nakhchivan countryside is red, and we drove through a range of red soil fields, red rock landscapes, to get to the striking crater of Nehram, a 'bowl' valley with deep dry river beds, surrounded by a large rocky escarpment. This is certainly the premiere birding site in Nakhchivan for the dry rock specialities and fighting off our fatigue in well over thirty degrees heat, we got to work.

We quickly located Trumpeter Finches, a fairly common breeding species here, and with just a little more effort, our first Mongolian Finches, which favoured the large strewn boulders in the crater. Some appeared to be gathering food and we had superb views of the males attending a few nests deep in the boulder crevices, with their striking pink wing patches and flanks, with up to 10 in total. A large colony of Rock Sparrows was nesting around the higher promontories. Pale Rock Sparrows were heard and eventually seen, singing from low points on the ground, some close to probable nests. Common birds included fledged families of Finsch's Wheatear, many Isabelline Wheatear, Blue Rock Thrush, Calandra Lark, Tawny Pipit, Hoopoe, audible Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Crag Martin and Crested Lark. Overhead raptors obliged, with a pair of Long-legged Buzzard, 2 Egyptian Vultures and an excellent 2nd calendar-year Lanner Falcon.

Other species at Nehram proved slightly harder to locate. See-see Partridge was first seen by Harry in a deep vegetated wadi, but ended up surprising me with its continuous calling, and eventually walking into view; in total, give birds were seen well. Eastern Rock Nuthatches were found right at the back of the bowl valley, on a rock face with weedy vegetation, showing extremely well alongside Western Rock Nuthatch, whilst Persian Wheatear was also eventually found singing higher up again from a rocky promontory, with one male showing well. Grey-necked Bunting was actually the most elusive bird, with just distant scope views of a male at this location. Several large unidentified Grayling butterflies were also on the wing. Having found the majority of our target birds in one day, at one site, we retired happily to the van and spend the night in Nakhchivan city, where the chorus of evening swifts hawking through the old-fashioned streets was quite a sight.

9th June

As we sped through the countryside from Nakhchivan, the red and greens intermingled and in the lush stretches of traditional farmland, we were able to see 2 Lesser Grey Shrike, 1 Red-backed Shrike, 1 Roller, 1 Laughing Dove, 10+ European Bee-eaters, Cattle Egrets & White Storks.

09:45-11:00: Dari Dagh Yolu / Dan Dagh, Nakhchivan (39.052387, 45.534968)

We were back in the red rock countryside at this other excellent site for the region's 'arid' birds. As soon as we got out of the car, we spotted an ornate pair of See-see Partridge just below us, drinking below a leaking water pipe. An Upcher's Warbler soon obliged, flying to its thorny nesting bush beside the road. Two other specialties showed well – up to five Grey-necked Bunting, feeding in a weedy area below the road, including a fledged juvenile, and Persian Wheatears, including a singing male, and fledged juvenile. Delightfully regular across this region, two Lammergeiers were seen including a magnificent adult, whilst other birds included 2 Western Rock Nuthatch, 1 Chukar, 2 Finsch's Wheatear and Crag Martin.

12:30-15:00: Batabat Peak, Nakhchivan (39.549892, 45.782313)

The next site could not have been more different from the arid red lowlands, and was in my experience one of the most beautiful mountain sites I have visited in any European country. The forms of agriculture in Nakhchivan all appear to be extremely extensive and traditional, and at Batabat, just tiny herds of cattle had been grazing the hills. They had since been moved on, leaving an amazing landscape teeming with flower meadows, some scrubland and scattered trees. Our ascent towards the peak was alive with birds singing in configurations long forgotten in Britain. The meadow trees held Red-backed Shrikes, Corn Buntings and Cuckoos; the meadows held at least 3 Quail, one of which showed exceptionally well, singing in a short area of grass, with even the purple-blue colouration visit on the cheek. Other birds at this lower altitude (walking up from 39.546037, 45.786527) including a female Honey-buzzard, 1 Griffon, 2-3 Long-legged Buzzard, numerous Common Rosefinch, 1 singing male Barred Warbler, Tree Pipits and, as we entered the subalpine zone, superb views of up to 5 male Ortolan.

The main action of the day then took place around the juniper-clad rock faces higher up (39.549892, 45.782313). Here, as we searched for accentors, we gained superb views of a territorial male Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush, including a song-fighting display, up to six Red-fronted Serin flying around the rock faces and finally, after some playback, a close inspection by a pair of dapper Radde's Accentor. These were nesting in 'high altitude dunnock' habitat – juniper adjoining rocks at the natural tree-line; a habitat now rarely visible in Britain. In addition to the pair, which were commuting between their nesting bushes and meadow areas to feed, we also saw a further male. The exact focal point for the nest site was at 39.549947, 45.781991. The entire vista was stunning, with blue skies, snow-capped mountains, and the red and green countryside of this forgotten and gently farmed country rolling away into the distance.

Having enjoyed a superb introduction to montane birding in Azerbaijan, we descended and went farther down the valley. Around Batabat Golu (39.541653, 45.782585), we heard 1 singing Marsh Warbler, surprisingly the only one of the trip, whilst Harry encountered several Black-headed Wagtails around the lake edge, as well as Short-toed Eagle. Butterflies included European Swallowtail, Cardinal & Heath Fritillary.

15:30: Bichanak Valley, R49 – Stop 1, Nakhchivan (39.516385, 45.768727)

Our first search of a hot, scrubby valley for white-throated robin failed to produce the species but yielded two *Nymphalids* I've wanted to see for a very long time – Southern Comma and Southern White Admiral – flying along the streamside and taking salts from the mud, albeit too briefly to photograph, whilst a third new species for us both was Lesser Fiery Copper. A smart adult Golden Eagle flew over.

16:00-17:00: Bichanak Valley, R49 – Stop 2, Nakhchivan (39.512526, 45.771251)

We crossed a small gravel river-bed, where a Little Ringed Plover was alarming with her chicks. The scrubby hillside, with some mature trees, yielded a female-type Golden Oriole, 3 Black-headed Buntings, an Eastern Black-eared Wheatear and 2 Western Rock Nuthatch. The undoubted highlight was a female White-throated Robin who provided extremely confiding. Arbu had found a nest with five eggs, concealed in a low thorn bush. As I climbed to inspect it, the eyepiece from my scope, unbeknown to be at the time, bounced into oblivion. After an hour's search, we could not find it, and I'm extremely grateful to Harry for his kindness in letting me use his for the rest of the trip. With another extremely successful day, and only Caspian Snowcock left to see, we returned home for the evening.

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10th June

Our journey this took us to the border between Armenia and Nakhchivan, an area, therefore, of some considerable tension. Such is the hatred of Armenia here that people visiting Azerbaijan, and Nakhchivan in particular, are strongly advised not to show an Armenian stamp on their passport. The history here is raw, but during our visit at least, straying within a certain distance of the border was a feasible prospect. We drove through some truly beautiful countryside, the kind of ultra-light intensity farmland, with extensive grazing, that we have forgotten entirely in Britain – it was, as a result, filled with birds. Prior to arrival at the snowcock site, we encountered 2 Rollers, 1 Golden Oriole, 1 male Black-headed Bunting, 1 male 'Eastern' Black-eared Wheatear, 1 Hoopoe, 2 Lesser Grey Shrikes and a Red-backed Shrike.

10:30-13:00: Mount Kaputjugh, Ordubad, Nakhchivan (39.167727, 45.988994)

Most people who travel to Nakhchivan do not connect with Caspian Snowcock and immediately on arrival, it was very easy to see why. Arbu drove us to a spectacular glacial valley head, where we were surrounded by mountains. The burning heat and time of day by arrival quickly negated any chance of hearing the characteristic curlew whistle of any snowcocks, so we now faced the daunting prospect of finding them by hours of scoping alone. In the immediate vicinity, we noted Common Rosefinch, Lesser Whitethroat, Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush and Black-headed Bunting. Airborne raptors put on a good show, with Lammergeier, Griffon Vulture and Long-legged Buzzards. We then began to scan the boulder fields below the very highest peaks.

It gives an idea of how distant birds are at this site that Arbu twice picked up a Golden Eagle, with great certainty that he had found a snowcock. Ironically, this also happened to Josh Jones, two years before. That said, we soon joined the party, finding, at enormous range, a partially silhouetted Chukar. I couldn't quite reconcile why I was picking up some hint of orange on the flanks, but the elevation was so high, and the bird over a mile distant, that it took some time to entangle our mistake. Eventually, we changed position, and moved further down the track (39.167548, 45.986232). Eventually, from this position, we gained unambiguous views of a pair of Caspian Snowcock near the ridgeline to the west (39.172700, 45.992298), noting all the salient features at 60x. It would be untrue to say this was the evocative snowcock experience we had hoped for, and I will most certainly make a second attempt to see this species properly in Armenia in future.

13:15-13:45: Gilanchay River, Bilav, Nakhchivan (39.082070, 45.846715)

Our final stop of the trip, having seen every single one of our target species, was to see if we could encounter the considerably smarter male White-throated Robin. Yet again, we were successful, with a male, and female, seen carrying food in a typically dry, hot valley studded with scrubland thorny trees, alongside Isabelline and Finsch's Wheatears.

We had an early evening flight back to Baku, so took a lovely dinner with Arbu and his family at their house in Nakhchivan, where their olive groves held Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, Nightingale and Hoopoe. We then flew back to Baku, and arrived at our hotel – the ATFK Baku – to find it suffering a power cut – an omen for some of the chaos to follow in the days ahead.

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11th June

Harry and I had various things to attend to in Baku, as we secured funds for the rest of the trip, dealt with the unexpected demand for a cash only deposit for the car hire, and prepared for the main leg of the trip. By 13:00 we left Baku and drove south towards Lerik and the Hyrcan National Park. The southern edge of Baku and some of its outlying industrial wetlands yielded Purple Heron, 2 Black-winged Stilts, 3 Gull-billed Terns, 2 Little Terns and a few Lesser Kestrels.

15:00-16:30: Shirvan Fishponds, Caspian Coast (39.870589, 49.160146)

Having already encountered the hassle of three police stops and the navigation nightmare of leaving Baku, we were already a little on edge by the time we arrived at the Shirvan Fish Ponds. The shallow, vegetated pools looked ideal for White-tailed Lapwing, but we just couldn't find the species at all, which remains a puzzle as they were almost certainly still on site. The rich tamarisk margins along the drainage canal yielded a brilliant surprise in the form of a smart Black Francolin, which walked across the track in front of us, as well as 2 Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, 3+ Rufous Scrub Robins, 1-2 Ménétries's Warblers, 3+ Great Reed Warblers, an adult Caspian Gull, some Slender-billed Gulls, 2 Great White Egrets, 1 male Ruddy Shelduck near a potential sand burrow nest, a few Kentish Plovers (including small chicks and fledged juveniles), a Purple Heron, 2+ 'Caspian' Reed Warblers – our first encounter with this race - and 3+ Marsh Harriers, including a fledged dark-headed juvenile.

Between Shirvan and Lankaran, where we stopped for the night, we entered the arid semi-desert inland of the Caspian Sea. In between further increasingly unamusing mime acts with policemen, various species characteristic of this habitat were seen from the road by either Harry or myself, namely 5+ Collared Pratincoles, 2 Rose-coloured Starlings, 1 Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, 2 European Bee-eaters, 10+ Lesser Kestrels, 2+ Eurasian Rollers and 2+ Common Nightingales.

A stop for dinner at a site north of Masalli (GPS not noted) was rather tantalizing. Not only did we hear golden oriole and find a very low but predated nest in poplars behind the restaurant, but the call of a Shikra in the trees behind. Certain we'd see this species later, we did nonetheless inspect the copse, but found no sight of the bird or a nest. After a long day, we eventually found a very basic hotel in Lankaran, having decided not to push on in the dark to Lerik, a decision we were thankful for in the morning when we saw the state of the roads.

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12th June

The ever-changing landscape of Azerbaijan is one of the real highlights of visiting the country. A few days ago we had been in the green and red world of Nakhchivan, then the orange bleakness of the flat Caspian Coast, but now we rose up through some of the most impressive and lush deciduous forests I've ever visited as we drove towards Lerik from Lankaran on the R48.

The journey alternated between stretches of ancient forest, with some newer growth, and very traditional farmland, where birds like red-backed shrike and woodlark were present. Along the road as a whole, we gained excellent views of Caucasian Woodpecker in the first major village along the road (38.733939, 48.653899) along with 2 Hawfinches. Further on, 2 singing male Red-breasted Flycatchers were heard but not seen, but deemed to be a common species in the valley by later experience. More interesting in some ways were 3 extremely dark Common Buzzards, lacking any pale breast band at all. We arrived at Lerik by around 11:30 and took a large lunch. Then, the hunt was on.

To reach the site for Caspian Tit, we began our climb by 4x4 out of Lerik. Almost immediately, the road quality became unbelievably bad, with enormous ruts in the road capable of seriously damaging a car. We got stuck in one, and a strange hour followed, where a large number of local farm workers walked by entirely ignoring us, before a more helpful local arrived and helped us out. Having nearly damaged the car severely, we had to revise our plans, and drove slowly back down the R48 to the Relax Lerik Hotel. We showed a map of our intended site to the hotelier, who, speaking English, was able to reach out to his friends in Lerik. By 14:00 or so, our extraordinary 'tractor taxi' arrived, a normal Lada with wheels almost as tall as we were. We headed off and into some of the remotest village terrain in the region. The taxi drove us down a 'road' that it appears only this taxi is capable of navigating. The drop between the tyre tracks on the road was enormous, and even the driver appeared unusually attentive. There was not one car in the village where we arrived; a tiny, poor subsistence farming community with pigs, cattle and chickens wandering around: we could see why.

14:00-18:30: Lerik High Forest, Hyrcan National Park.

We arrived in due course at a tiny remote village, well beyond Lerik, and walked a further half an hour into the land of Caspian Tits. The cattle-grazed hillsides were alive with Nightingales and Red-backed Shrikes, the commonest two birds here. Soon, we entered a section of wood pasture that was clearly very suitable for the species. One thing I'll never forget is that every now and again, a huge, black primitive-breed cattle would appear out of the woodland. It really was, with the view across the unbroken deciduous forests beyond – a land of leopards - like stepping back into a time when aurochs still wandered the land. Large Tortoiseshells were particularly common here, as were Black-veined White and nominate Clouded Yellow. At one point, Harry and I were sure we'd heard the species, but silence followed, and eventually we conceded defeat. Harry was suffering with ankle pain, made worse, regrettably, as the gravel gave way under him as we got back into our taxi. So the following morning, one of us was out of action as we continued the hunt for Caspian Tit.

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13th June

09:00-12:30: Lerik High Forest, Hyrcan National Park.

As described in the species account, this morning was more successful. After the same and now very bemused taxi driver collected me from the Relax Lerik Hotel, we headed back to the remote village, and I took a different route, higher into the forest. In addition to calling in a territorial pair of Caspian Tit, which I believe by this time would have had fledged or perhaps independent young, and an unforgettable encounter with a pair of Grey Wolves, other birds here included Caucasian Woodpecker and a singing Red-breasted Flycatcher. Thinking we would try again tomorrow, with Harry's ankle better, I returned to my taxi, which eventually refound me and took me back to Relax Lerik. On my return, the heavy mist had turned to rain, and we were both still on sleep deficit, deciding to stay one further night around Lerik.

14:30-18:30: Olympic Stadium Woodland, Masalli (39.022747, 48.697374)

With the weather still poor, Harry and I decided to try and see if things were better down on the Caspian Coast, particularly as the outstanding target for the south of the country, for both of us, was now Shikra. On arrival at the site, the weather was still inclement, and we conjectured also that the females in the wood may probably be on eggs. In spite of zealous scanning, we really never felt we got close to seeing Shikra, which considering the ease of other birders at seeing the species, was either unlucky or a reflection of the time of year. A single Night Heron and Pygmy Cormorant were observed overhead, and a female Syrian Woodpecker seen. Not wishing to drive any of the Lerik road in darkness, we headed off and intended to return for a second attempt on our way north.

14th June

We made a difficult decision this morning. Having just refound Caspian Tit, and with the sun shining, the temptation to go back and get definitive photographs and sound recordings was a very strong one. However, we were at least one day behind our overall itinerary, and risked eating into valuable time in the Caucasus Mountains. It was perhaps not the right decision, given what was at stake, but we decided to push onwards with our trip, and head north towards Baku once more.

Around 1km north of Relax Lerik Hotel, however, I finally caught up on a bird I had steadfastly refused to see, for several years, until I saw a male on its breeding grounds. It was worth the wait, with a superb 4th calendar-year male Red-breasted Flycatcher singing and showing extremely well in the understory of the mature woodland here (38.777335, 48.554661).

09:30-11:30: Olympic Stadium Woodland, Masalli (39.022747, 48.697374)

A return visit here again failed to yield views of Shikra, but again, we now had time against us on this transit day. Soon after arrival, we heard the female calling from the wood, presumably at her nest, but this failed to elicit any obvious attention from the male. Short-toed Eagle, Hoopoe and nest-prospecting European Bee-eaters were observed here before we reluctantly pushed on.

12:30-13:00: N of Xirmandali, E119, Caspian Coast (39.498917,48.658617)

As described in the species account, our journey north ground to a screeching halt when the first of an enormous black and pink army of Rosy Starlings began crossing the road in front of us. What followed was one of most impressive communal nesting spectacles either of us have seen, with wave after wave of adult birds, each one carrying nesting material, flying back from a large hayrick (which was being raided) towards a distant farmstead where the starlings were soon to be nesting. Along with Red-breasted Flycatcher, this was a long overdue lifer for me, a bird I'd always wanted to see on breeding grounds – and this wonderful spectacle lived up to how I had hoped it would be. Rosy Starlings are irruptive breeders, and this year, it seems, they had really gone the distance. Alongside were 3+ Collared Pratincoles, 2 Lesser Grey Shrikes and 2 Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters.

13:30-13:45: Xirmandali Fishponds, E119, Caspian Coast (39.481736, 48.735536)

A male Great Reed Warbler was heard in song, with 3 Collared Pratincoles and 3-4 Little Terns seen. At Shirvan area to the north, 2 Whiskered Terns, 2+ Common Terns, a few Little Terns, 2 Collared Pratincoles and some Lesser Kestrels were encountered along this stretch of road headed north.

14:30-15:00: W of Salyan on R45, Caspian Coast (39.624117, 48.944532)

Even main roads in Azerbaijan are, often, not main at all – indeed the entire country appears to exist in a state of continuous disrepair and reconstruction, as if they are either starting from scratch or have run out of money in the middle. We decided to take the R45 as a 'shortcut' from the E119 towards Hajigabul, only to find the dual carriageway, essentially unbuilt, fade out into a boulder field. This fairly typical experience nonetheless yielded a superb by-product in the form of a colony of nesting Blue-cheeked Bee-eater (8 active burrows) in low disturbed soil beside the road, as well as Black-headed Bunting, Lesser Grey Shrike, and memorable views of a pair of Roller, with the male feeding beetles to the female on wires. Giving up on the R45, we took the longer route towards Hajigabul.

16:30-17:30: Hajigabul Fishponds (c. 39.952040, 48.912163)

We had now encountered no fewer than five police stops in the day, and were at the low point in the trip where we were fairly sick of the country's poor roads, food and most of all, the police. The last set of officers had pointed out that our car was dirty, tried to fine us for this, then asked us to wash it down – which of course removed our remaining drinking water. Nonetheless, we cracked on in an attempt to locate White-tailed Lapwings. These ponds were however extremely quiet, with just Little Ringed Plover, Black-winged Stilt and Great Reed Warbler noted. Feeling it best to get off the roads before dark, we headed into Baku where we found our hotel for the night.

15th June

Refreshed after a decent night's meal, sleep and breakfast, we began the journey north to the Caucasus. Around 30km N of Baku, we noted 2 Black Vultures and a 'ringtail' harrier, most probably a female Pallid, close to the road. Otherwise, we just had a few Gull-billed Terns, Lesser Kestrels and Lesser Grey Shrikes. We now began our quest for Caucasus specialties by the afternoon.

14:00 – 16:00: Nazli Bulaq, Quba Valley, Caucasus (41.242494,48.313074)

The landscape changed again as we entered the higher valleys of the Caucasus, with dripping dense green woodlands, rich in birch, rather than the oaks and ironwoods of the Hyrcan National Park. Just above Nazli Bulaq hotel, where we took a late lunch, at least five Green Warblers were singing and, with a little patience, we obtained excellent views of a male as it blended with the leaves in the roadside trees. With absolutely no sign here of Semicollared Flycatcher, we returned towards Quba before making our way up to Laza, where Hajibaba had arranged our stay at the only guesthouse there.

18:00-19:00: Upper Laza Valley above Caqar, Caucasus (c. 41.333438, 48.171975)

After attempting dinner in Quba, another strange situation came to pass when all the staff mysteriously disappeared. Unfazed by now, Harry and I continued onwards towards Laza, hoping there would be food at the other end, which, fortunately, there would be. As we drove up the valley, a particularly productive stop at Caqar yielded the excellent spectacle of 50+ Alpine Swift, hawking very low over the road and affording my first ever first-rate views of this extraordinary flyer. A male goshawk was seen overhead. Gaining just a fraction more height and entering the work of rocks and upland 'lawn', we found Ring Ouzel, Griffon Vulture and 3 Red-fronted Serin. Our final bird of the day was a singing Mountain Chiffchaff in a dwarf birch zone (41.300181, 48.118660). On arrival at the Laza Guest House, we were introduced to typical Caucasian mountain cooking, as our hosts kindly plied us with fresh mint, dairy curd, sheep meat and beer, before we took an early night.

16th June

06:00-11:00: Laza Guest House & Village, Caucasus (41.297835, 48.114161)

Filled with expectation for lekking Caucasian Grouse, Harry and I's hopes were swiftly dashed the moment we woke up. An impenetrable blanket of fog had rolled in, and we made a few difficult decisions. Originally, the plan had been for us to fly onwards to Georgia and drive into Armenia, to connect with several other species including Crimson-winged Finch and Paddyfield Warbler. It was clear that by now, we should instead devote all our remaining days to Azerbaijan, which, in retrospect, was a good decision to make. It took the pace off the trip, and allowed us to enjoy not only our birding but one of the most spectacular regions in Europe. We waited for several hours for the fog to lift.

In terrible weather, we nonetheless enjoyed the forgotten UK spectacle of red-backed shrikes foraging in a cabbage patch, and feeding their young in a garden thorn bush, as well as Common Rosefinch, Red-fronted Serin and Black Redstart. A brief attempt to walk towards Suvar yielded 2-3 Caucasian Water Pipit.

11:30-12:00: c.1km below Laza Village, Caucasus (41.300181, 48.118660)

We again heard Mountain Chiffchaff at this regular site, in dwarf birches, without seeing the bird. Three Cuckoos, two males and a female, were chasing, and we also noted 3 Common Rosefinch and 2 Tree Pipit.

12:45-13:30: River Crossing in Qusar Valley, Caucasus (41.367439, 48.297988)

We decided to explore a section of mature riparian forest in the hope of finding Semi-collared Flycatcher. We didn't gauge the habitat right but did find Golden Oriole and Spotted Flycatcher here.

13:45-14:00: Qusar Forest, Caucasus (41.375685, 48.317688)

This proved an excellent site for breeding Red-breasted Flycatcher, with three males seen well, but again a complete absence of Semi-collared Flycatcher. We took lunch in Qusar before moving back through Quba towards Khinaliq. A succession of unproductive stops failed to yield Semicollared Flycatcher, and we began to realize we may already be too late to see this species on its breeding grounds. An afternoon around Nazli Bulaq yielded more Green Warblers but again no flycatchers.

With weather still very poor, we headed towards Khinaliq for the evening, where Hajibaba had arranged our accommodation, after a fairly depressing day's birding. Our hosts again walked us to a local person's house for dinner, which again consisted of local mint, curd cheese and sheep's meat. It really did feel like the end of the world here, with stone houses intermingled with a few homestead cattle all build onto the sloping rock, against the backdrop of the enormous mountain massif of Kizilkaya.

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17th June

06:30-9:30: Khinaliq Village, Caucasus (41.180544, 48.125534)

The whole tone of our Caucasus trip changed along with the weather, as we awoke to glorious sunshine. Outside of the Guest House, a pair of Snowfinches were nesting and we saw 4 Griffon Vulture. We then began an attempted drive towards Kizilkaya Mountain. Our 4x4's tyres barely managed to clear the first road in the village and, as in Lerik, we had to concede defeat and started the walk on foot. Fortunately for us, three young men from the village warned us not to go up the mountain by ourselves with just one word: "dog". They gestured to a local house (the house is at exactly 41.181272, 48.128054) where one of the village's best drivers, Rufahadin, could take us up the mountain. Using Harry's Azeri-English translation app, we established two things. Firstly, the dogs up the mountain were 'extremely dangerous'. Secondly, from the Collins Guide, it was clear from Rufahadin's whistling impersonation that he was familiar with the call of Caucasian Snowcock.

Rufahadin, having settled terms with us that equated to around 30 Euros, loaded Harry and I into his 4x4. Whilst it didn't have the tractor tyres of the Lerik tractor-taxi, it did sport two gear-sticks, the second of which was brought into play when extreme torque was required – as it regularly was. I have never seen a vehicle overheat seven times in the course of a short journey, without any apparent frustration by the owner. Every time steam billowed from the engine as we made it up the mountain, Rufahadin simply whacked the engine a few times with a hammer, poured water on it and up and up we went. The birding ascent was excellent too, with 10+ Snowfinches, 4 Alpine Accentors, 2 Caucasian Shore Larks, a few Griffon Vultures and 4 Ravens.

10:00-13:00: Kizilaya Peak, Khinaliq, Caucasus (41.219685, 48.131107)

Eventually, Rufahadin stopped the car about half a mile below the shepherd camp. Above, we could through the telescope see the spike-collared and free-roaming Kangol and Caucasian Mountain Dogs guarding the shepherd camp (at 41.206984, 48.131843), but the one thing to note is that these dogs do have a 'radius' beyond which they will not go. The scope view was quite enough, and we took a very long circuit to avoid them. At one point, a truly enormous small-bear sized dog raised itself up quite close behind us and started to follow, but fortunately it looked incredibly old and soon gave up. On one another occasion, we came across a shepherd with four not-remotely-cute Kangol pups. Rufahadin explained our purpose but the pups looked extremely unimpressed, and we were glad they were not a little older.

With the canine distractions out of the way, the green pastures and boulder-strewn slopes (around 41.212742, 48.130493) yielded 3 Alpine Accentors (including a fledged juvenile), 10+ Snowfinches, 2-3 very close Lammergeiers, 1 Griffon Vulture, 3-4 Shore Larks (including a fledged juvenile), 2 Alpine Swifts, Caucasian Water Pipits, Black Redstarts, Red-billed Chough and the first glorious prize of the high peaks – three territorial male Guldenstadt's Redstarts. We deduced the females were at egg-stage, and enjoyed superb views of a bird that probably haunts the imagination of many younger birders when they first open the Collins Guide.

Eventually we reached the base of the snowline, and the dense scree-slopes home to Caucasian Snowcock. We fairly soon heard the whistling of 1-2 birds, and around half an hour later, picked out a pair, with the male following the female and wagging forwards his head, apparently a display. After our very distant Caspian Snowcocks, it was good to see this species in such detail. Another posed evocatively above us, whistling from a rock silhouetted against the sky. Afterwards, on our descent, we found Whinchats and Rock Sparrows above the village. We then had a superb lunch with Rufahadin, who showed us exactly how fresh curd cheese from his local herd could be.

With fog rapidly pushing in by early afternoon and light levels dropping to dusk levels, we began the drive back towards Laza, where we had, thanks to Hajibaba, secured a second night at the Guest House for the grouse lek. The area below the village (41.171601, 48.146610) yielded 10 Alpine Swifts, 2 Griffon Vultures and 8 Red-billed Chough, and a few Green Warblers and Common Redstarts were present further down, at Nazli Bulaq itself.

We then stopped at a wooded area further back the road closer to Quba (41.341810, 48.419041), and had a female-type Red-breasted Flycatcher, a female Hawfinch, 2 Great Spotted Woodpeckers and a Green Warbler, with singles of Common Buzzard and Black Redstart seen on a very foggy drive to Laza, where our hosts against welcomed us with hearty mountain food.

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18th June

06:00-07:30: Laza Guest House, Caucasus (41.297835, 48.114161)

Our luck was changing and it was a stunning morning. We immediately angled the scope towards Mount Shahdag, where we picked out the unmistakable, albeit extremely distant forms of two lekking male Caucasian Grouse (see species accounts). The lyre-shaped tails and animated postures were apparent, and it was a good study of a bird in its extremely remote and little studied-habitat, but probably close to a mile distant. I quietly put closer views on the Georgia hit list, for when I return to the region in future years.

09:00-11:30: Suvar Resort, Laza, Caucasus (41.281793, 48.115399)

Our battle now began for Great Rosefinch so we visited the most reliable site, where Kai Gauger has often been successful in May. The area behind the resort is where the infuriating 'restrictions' come into play, with signs warning you not to go any further into Shagdagh National Park. This is where Hajibaba's assistance was required but on this case, unsuccessful, in getting us the permits to go farther. Harry remained close to the resort whilst I quietly pushed as far as I could.

Two Mountain Chiffchaffs were heard in the dense dwarf birch stands (41.281793, 48.115399), with one male called up and showing superb close range. A Green Warbler was also present in these trees. A good range of Caucasus birds, including close Lammergeier, 5 Griffon Vultures, 'Caucasian' Dipper, 3 male Ring Ouzels, 6+ Red-fronted Serins, Common Rosefinches and Caucasian Water Pipits were all noted in the boulders and sheep-grazed pastures behind the resort (41.280550, 48.111864). That said, the lawn habitat appeared denuded of species like dandelion and sorrel, and equally denuded of Great Rosefinches. The highlight was unexpected, in the form of an early (return?) migrant male Semicollared Flycatcher, which entirely threw me as it landed close by on a rock before moving on (41.277816, 48.111676).

12:15-15:00: Track above Laza Village, Caucasus (starting 41.302442, 48.120968).

Determined to get up into the habitat of Great Rosefinch, we remained in the Laza area, where sheep densities are far lower and we therefore felt we'd more chance of locating the flower and seed-rich subalpine meadow habitats that they prefer. We embarked on a very steep walk upwards out of Laza village, right through the juniper treeline and beyond. The grasslands on the ascent here provided 1 Cuckoo, 1 Quail, 2 Whinchats and plenty of Common Rosefinches. We climbed until we could clearly see across to the scree and snowline at the back end of Kizilkaya (at 41.297874, 48.126813), but once again also espied a shepherd camp, complete with an array of free-roaming, spike-collared dogs. The entire habitat looked denuded too, but we did come across the very distinctive Caucasian Twite in the grasslands here.

We then drove back down from Laza towards Quba, making various unsuccessful stops, where we stayed the night at the Rixos Hotel, one of those strange places where the staff appeared not in any way to expect us, or be particularly pleased that we had arrived.

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19th June

08:00-09:00: Rixos Hotel, Quba, Caucasus (41.331957, 48.500365)

Having had vanishing staff at one hotel and surprised staff at the other, it was by now little surprise to Harry and I to find absent breakfast (and staff) this morning. Fortunately the hotel grounds did provide a lovely fledged family of Golden Oriole, with songs, calls and begging heard, a calling Wryneck and a Hoopoe. Yet another hotel to avoid in this part of the world: it is perhaps designed for ghosts. We then drove back to Khinaliq, with our last full day dedicated to finding Great Rosefinch.

12:30-17:30: Kizilkaya Mountain, Khinaliq, Caucasus (41.219685, 48.131107)

Once again, we hired the services of Rufahadin to get us up the mountain, this time in a search for the Rosefinch. It was interesting that whilst Rufahadin instantly recognised the snowcock and redstart from the Collins Guide, he appeared fairly unsure of the Rosefinch, which for us highlighted its rarity and high altitudinal habitats in this region. This time, we drove even higher, right up to the scree-line, whilst I then added another 700 metres, eventually reaching some subalpine meadows, even above the sheep-line (around 41.224315, 48.136825). In spite of this, and feeling quite short of breath, I was still well below the snowline. I truly hammered the slopes for any sign of Great Rosefinch, but got the feeling I never even came close.

The general birding was nonetheless excellent, with 2 male Guldenstadt's Redstarts, 10+ Alpine Accentors (adults and fledged young, and some adult males seen in song flights), 1 adult Lammergeier, 10-15 Griffon Vultures, 15+ Alpine Chough, 1-2 heard only Caucasian Snowcock, Water Pipits, Black Redstarts and Red-billed Choughs. Eventually we had to descend and call it a day – perhaps the most spectacular bird of the high Caucasus has this time got away.

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20-21st June

One final piece of drama was changing a car tyre in Khinaliq, arguably the last place you want to break down with a flight to catch later in the day. That said, we were on the road before 10am, thanks again to Rufahadin, and made our way swiftly towards Baku without any stops. From here, Harry and I flew to Tbilisi, where we spent the night. It was very interesting waking up in Georgia. The feel of the country is very different, and somehow we felt that future trips here might be a little more measured, and a little less intense. After hammering one of the Western Palearctic's most exciting frontiers, from corner to corner, we went our separate ways.

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VIII. SPECIES LIST

1. Ruddy Shelduck
2. Mallard
3. Teal
4. Caucasian Grouse
5. Caucasian Snowcock
6. Caspian Snowcock
7. Black Francolin
8. Chukar
9. See-see Partridge
10. Quail
11. Pygmy Cormorant
12. Night Heron
13. Cattle Egret
14. Little Egret
15. Great White Egret
16. Grey Heron
17. Purple Heron
18. White Stork
19. Lammergeier
20. Griffon Vulture
21. Black Vulture
22. Egyptian Vulture
23. Golden Eagle
24. Short-toed Eagle
25. Marsh Harrier
26. Long-legged Buzzard
27. Common Buzzard
28. Eurasian Honey-buzzard
29. Northern Goshawk
30. Shikra
31. Common Kestrel
32. Lesser Kestrel
33. Hobby
34. Lanner
35. Moorhen
36. Black-winged Stilt
37. Collared Pratincole
38. Little Ringed Plover
39. Kentish Plover
40. Common Sandpiper
41. Redshank
42. Black-headed Gull
43. Slender-billed Gull
44. Caspian Gull
45. Little Tern
46. Gull-billed Tern
47. Common Tern
48. Whiskered Tern
49. Black-bellied Sandgrouse
50. Rock Dove
51. Woodpigeon
52. Collared Dove
53. Eurasian Turtle Dove
54. Laughing Dove
55. Common Cuckoo
56. Common Swift
57. Alpine Swift
58. Hoopoe
59. Eurasian Kingfisher
60. European Bee-eater
61. Blue-cheeked Bee-eater
62. Eurasian Roller
63. Great Spotted Woodpecker
64. Syrian Woodpecker
65. Green Woodpecker
66. Wryneck
67. Crested Lark
68. Woodlark
69. Calandra Lark
70. Shore Lark
71. Sand Martin
72. Crag Martin
73. Barn Swallow
74. House Martin
75. Tawny Pipit

76. Water Pipit
77. Tree Pipit
78. White Wagtail
79. Yellow Wagtail
80. Grey Wagtail
81. Dipper
82. Dunnock
83. Alpine Accentor
84. Radde's Accentor
85. European Robin
86. Common Nightingale
87. Rufous Scrub Robin
88. White-throated Robin
89. Common Redstart
90. Black Redstart
91. Guldenstadt's Redstart
92. Northern Wheatear
93. Isabelline Wheatear
94. Black-eared Wheatear
95. Finsch's Wheatear
96. Persian Wheatear
97. Whinchat
98. Common Stonechat
99. Song Thrush
100. Mistle Thrush
101. Common Blackbird
102. Ring Ouzel
103. Blue Rock Thrush
104. Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush
105. Barred Warbler
106. Garden Warbler
107. Blackcap
108. Common Whitethroat
109. Lesser Whitethroat
110. Ménétries's Warbler
111. Sedge Warbler
112. Cetti's Warbler
113. Reed Warbler
114. Marsh Warbler
115. Great Reed Warbler
116. Upcher's Warbler
117. Eastern Olivaceous Warbler
118. Common Chiffchaff
119. Mountain Chiffchaff
120. Green Warbler
121. Goldcrest
122. Eurasian Wren
123. Spotted Flycatcher
124. Red-breasted Flycatcher
125. Semicollared Flycatcher
126. Great Tit
127. Blue Tit
128. Caspian Tit
129. Long-tailed Tit
130. Eurasian Nuthatch
131. Western Rock Nuthatch
132. Eastern Rock Nuthatch
133. Common Treecreeper
134. Lesser Grey Shrike
135. Red-backed Shrike
136. Magpie
137. Jay
138. Jackdaw
139. Red-billed Chough
140. Alpine Chough
141. Rook
142. Hooded Crow
143. Raven
144. Common Starling
145. Rosy Starling
146. Golden Oriole
147. House Sparrow
148. Rock Sparrow
149. Pale Rock Sparrow
150. Snowfinch
151. Common Chaffinch
152. Linnet
153. Twite

154. Goldfinch
155. Greenfinch
156. Red-fronted Serin
157. Bullfinch
158. Hawfinch
159. Common Rosefinch
160. Trumpeter Finch
161. Mongolian Finch
162. Ortolan Bunting
163. Grey-necked Bunting
164. Cirl Bunting
165. Black-headed Bunting
166. Corn Bunting
167. Rock Bunting