

Kazakhstan

Bargain Birdwatching Tour

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Depart UK
Day 2	Arrive Almaty drive to Charyn
Day 3	Charyn
Day 4	Charyn - Almaty – Tien Shan Mountains
Day 5	Tien Shan Mountains
Day 6	Tien Shan Mountains – Almaty - Kolshengol
Day 7/8	Kolshengol
Day 9	Almaty
Day 10	Depart Almaty, arrive UK

Departs
May

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code KAZ02) or brochure)

Grading

A. Birding day walks

Focus

Birds

Highlights

- Spectacular mountain scenery in the Tien Shan
- Himalayan Snowcock, Himalayan Rubythroat and Guldenstadt's Redstart
- Chance of observing breeding Ibisbill
- Stay in remote desert camp
- MacQueen's Bustard, Pallas's Sandgrouse & other Central Asian specialities
- Enjoy spring migration – many species uncommon or rare in Europe



Himalayan Rubythroat



Wildflower meadow and Tien Shan Mountains



White-browed Tit Warbler



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NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme at the last minute or during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Introduction

Kazakhstan, lying at the heart of Central Asia on the Old Silk Road, is a massive country spanning 2,717,300 square kilometres from the Caspian Sea to western China; an area the size of the whole of western Europe! Yet, with a population of just 17 million, mostly living in the cities, this is a land of vast open and unpeopled spaces. Great stone and sand deserts, and wide grassy steppes occupy the majority of the country, interspersed with such great inland lakes as Lake Balkhash and the Aral Sea. In dramatic contrast, along its south-eastern borders stand the mighty Tien Shan Mountains, the 1,000-mile spine of



Saxaul Sparrow

Central Asia and northern extension of the Himalaya which waters flower-filled alpine meadows, lush forests of Tien Shan Spruce and lowland Turanga, and feeds the great lakes and inland deltas to the north. It is in these diverse habitats that you may hope to see such exciting avian specialities as Dalmatian Pelican, Saker Falcon, Himalayan Snowcock, Demoiselle Crane, Macqueen's Bustard, Ibisbill, Pallas's Sandgrouse, Yellow-eyed Stock Dove, White-winged Woodpecker, White-tailed Rubythroat, Eversmann's and Guldenstadt's Redstarts, Syke's Warbler, Desert Warbler, White-browed Tit-warbler, Azure Tit, Turkestan Tit, Rose-coloured Starling, Saxaul Sparrow, Red-mantled Rosefinch, White-winged Grosbeak, White-capped, Grey-necked and Red-headed Bunting.

Day 1

Almaty

We fly from London to Almaty via Istanbul and arrive around dawn the following day.

Day 2

Almaty - Charyn

Almaty, situated at 2,500 feet above sea level, was built as a Russian military outpost in the latter part of the 19th century. Formerly known as Verny (meaning Faithful) and more recently Alma-ata, the city is today a pleasant and abundantly leafy modern capital with a fabulous backdrop, nestling as it does beneath the peaks of the Tien Shan. After clearing the airport buildings our birding begins with Blyth's Reed and Hume's Warblers, Masked Wagtails and Common Mynas all likely around the airport car park.



Roller

As soon as we can, we will drive eastwards from Almaty, following the Great Silk Route towards China. Our destination is the eastern edge of the Sugaty Plain where we stay for two nights at a very simple but conveniently situated Guest House.

After stopping for a roadside breakfast, much of the day will be spent on the road but we are sure to stop frequently to enjoy some of the way-side avian spectacles. En route eastwards from Almaty we will pass fertile agricultural lands, watered by rivers and streams that tumble from the

Tien Shan; here European Bee-eaters, Rollers, Isabelline Wheatears, Lesser Grey Shrikes and Red-headed Buntings adorn telegraph poles and wires. In the rocky gullies of the Tien Shan's outlying hills we will stop to search for breeding Rock and White-capped Buntings, Pied Wheatears and Long-legged Buzzards. In the Artemisia-scented steppes, as we near the Charyn River we may find huge numbers of exotic-plumaged Rose-coloured Starlings, which can sometimes be found breeding in colonies many thousands strong amongst wayside boulders. Other possibilities during the journey include; Long-tailed Shrike, Oriental Turtle Dove, Lesser Kestrel and if time permits visits to a Pale Martin breeding colony and an artesian well, where we will hope to see Mongolian Finch, Grey-necked Bunting and Crimson-winged Finch. If we don't manage to do all of this on this day these last two sites will be built into the itinerary over the next two days. We are also likely to encounter our first mammals - rodents such as the abundant Great Gerbil, numerous susliks, and perhaps some of the Goitered Gazelles that now roam the steppes in pitifully reduced numbers.

Day 3

Charyn

Rising early, there will be an opportunity to walk around the village where we are staying, looking for some of the breeding birds of the area plus migrants such as Greenish, Barred and Blyth's Reed Warblers. We will then drive back eastwards across the Sugaty Plain, but on a different road to yesterday looking en route for such species as MacQueen's Bustard, Lesser Kestrel, Demoiselle Crane, Pallas's and the much commoner Black-bellied Sandgrouse, as we head for Charyn Gorge. The gorge lies close to the Chinese border, and has been carved over the millennia by the thundering Charyn River as it flows from the heights of the Tien Shan's Trans Ili range to ultimately join the great Ili River. It is one of Kazakhstan's most famous and spectacular geographical features, and home to Crag Martin, Azure Tit, Grey-necked Bunting and a variety of birds of prey including both Himalayan and Cinereous Vultures. From the tops of the dramatic walls of the canyon you will look towards the Ketmen range of mountains on the Chinese border.



Azure Tit

After visiting the gorge we will explore the surrounding hills above the gorge where we will search for Pine and Siberian Meadow Bunting, Shorelark as well as enjoy the carpets of wildflowers that cover the hills, before returning to our Guest House accommodation.

Day 4

Charyn - Almaty- Tien Shan Mountains



Blue Whistling Thrush

This morning we will either take another walk around the village or depart early on our long journey back to Almaty depending on how many of the Sugaty Plain sites we have been unable to visit over the previous two days. When we leave the Guest House we will probably make two or three stops on the Sugaty Plain looking for Steppe Eagle, Desert Warbler and Desert Wheatear and to explore interesting sites and unusual sightings made from the coach.

After we arrive in Almaty we then have the slow uphill drive into the mountains but we soon reach the high mountain spruce forests and meadows of the Tien Shan. We will stop en route to look for Brown Dipper on the river and Blue Whistling Thrush nearby as

well as any raptors we see as Bearded Vulture, Booted Eagle and the local race of Common Buzzard are all possibilities. Our accommodation is at the Alpine Rose Guest House and if we arrive in good time a short walk from here should produce Nutcrackers, Black-throated Accentors, Red-fronted Serins and the Tien Shian race of Goldcrest and Wren.

Day 5

Tien Shan Mountains

We will spend a full day exploring the fabulous mountain habitats that surround the Big Almaty Lake (situated at an altitude of 2600m, a reservoir that sits above a dam, whose shingle shores attract breeding Ibisbills.). On the mountain slopes lie colourful alpine pastures, stately forests of Tien Shan Spruce, and areas of boulders and Turkestanica Juniper cover beloved of accentors, warblers and finches. Above tower craggy peaks and snowbound summits from which Himalayan Snowcocks loudly proclaim their presence.



Ibisbill



White-winged Grosbeak

Up at dawn, the keener birders amongst the group will no doubt wish to take a morning walk in the vicinity of the Guest House before we head higher up into the mountains after breakfast. We will visit extensive areas of juniper scrub, where White-winged Grosbeaks, Sulphur-bellied and Hume's Warblers and White-tailed Rubythroats all sing, and Red-mantled Rosefinches may also be found. Birders will also be delighted to find the rather more exotic White-browed Tit Warbler, a superb little montane bird which looks as stunning as its name! This area is also favoured by Grey Marmots and appealing Red Pikas. In the forests of Tien Shan Spruce, Oriental Turtle Dove, Blue-headed and Eversmann's Redstarts, Songar Tits and Crossbills may all be found.

Throughout the day we will be searching for Himalayan Snowcocks that can be heard calling frequently from the high mountain ridges – with patience, careful and frequent scanning we should locate a calling bird or two perched on a high rock.

Then we visit the high Kosmostation at the Ozerny Pass in the mountains above the Lake. Here we will hopefully encounter the largest and hardiest of the redstarts - Guldenstadt's - together with Atai and Brown Accentors, Plain Mountain Finch, and perhaps even the rarer Brandt's Mountain Finch, and Wallcreeper. Bearded Vulture, Golden Eagles, and Alpine and Red-billed Choughs are amongst other high altitude species to be found here.

Also we will be able to visit Big Almaty Lake in search of breeding Ibisbills. The walk alongside the lake will provide more opportunities to enjoy again many of the Tien Shan specialities we have seen already with potentially additional species such as Water Pipits and Azure Tit. On the streams we may be lucky enough to see White-bellied Dippers. The alpine meadows of the Marble Valley above the lake are a joy to behold at this time of the year, the slopes cloaked in a profusion of colourful montane flowers most notable being the wild tulips for which the Tien Shan mountains are famous.

Day 6

Almaty to Kolshengol

This morning we will make a slow decent from the mountains after an early morning walk out from the guest house. We will stop to look for any species we have missed so far and to stretch our legs before we head through Almaty and head north. Our first stop after leaving Almaty will be at the Sorbulak Lakes. Here we will, depending on time visit, one or more of the lakes to look for waterfowl and waders. The lakes are superb with flocks of Dalmatian and Great White Pelicans, fine Red-crested Pochard and Garganey and with a good chance of seeing one or more



Black-necked Grebe

White-tailed Eagles either loafing on the lake shore or circling amongst the Pelican flocks. Typically Temminck's Stints and Terek Sandpipers are the most numerous waders, but smaller numbers of fine summer plumaged Black-tailed Godwits and Spotted Redshank are frequently seen. On one of the smaller more reed-fringed lakes we will look for White-headed and Ferruginous Ducks as well as Black-necked Grebes in their breeding plumage. Great Reed Warblers sing from the reedbeds and the bushes attract migrant warblers. This will probably be the setting for our picnic lunch. On leaving the lakes we will continue towards our camp site organised by our agents at the site of an artesian well in the desert known as Kolshengol. The combination of water and desert is a guarantee of superlative birdwatching and this remote locality has already in the few years of the camp's existence gained a reputation as one of the best birding areas in the country, but we will probably have to wait until the next morning to fully explore the area. The clarity of the night sky in this relatively unpeopled region should make camping here a real pleasure particularly for those with an interest in astronomy and the night sky.

Day 7

Kolshengol and Tamgaly



MacQueen's Bustard

We will be woken by the sound of singing Bimaculated, Short-toed and Lesser Short-toed Larks and will be out early to enable us to head out as soon as possible before the heat haze develops. We will head out west from the camp, crossing the flat expanses as it is here that we may find MacQueen's Bustards warily keeping their distance, and perhaps Demoiselle Cranes. Recent observations include both Caspian and breeding Greater Sand Plovers whilst flocks of sandgrouse wing in from the desert to take advantage of the water supply at several wells. Other species seen during recent tours include both Mongolian and Desert Finch. We will spend some time searching the area for Caspian Plover and bustards, but also find time to visit a small isolated group of trees which usually holds good numbers of migrants ranging from Ortolan Buntings, Common Rosefinches to Blyth's Reed and Hume's Warblers and Lesser Whitethroats.

After lunch at the camp we will then head south in the afternoon to visit Tamgaly. The rolling hills and rocky valleys of Tamgaly are the famous site of some fine and extensive rock engravings dating from the early Bronze Age. Luckily, the site is remote and seldom visited and you will have the chance not only to enjoy the rock engravings at your own leisure, should you so wish, but also to explore the area for its avian potential. Here, Chukar, Bimaculated Larks, Eastern Rock Nuthatches, Pied Wheatears and Lesser Kestrels all occur, and the peaceful ambience of the site makes it an ideal place to birdwatch. A further attraction of this area is the sighting of White-winged Larks near here in recent years.

Day 8

Kolshengol and Zhelturanga

Those keen to maximise their chances of Pallas's Sandgrouse are likely to rise at dawn this morning to watch for sandgrouse coming in to the well and surrounding damp areas to drink. They are not guaranteed at this site but it is an exciting experience to search among the gathering flocks of Black-bellied Sandgrouse for their rarer relations. However, we have an exciting day ahead of us so we will be departing quite early.



Bearded Tit

Pallas's Sandgrouse

Initially we pass through the Taukum Desert, a vast expanse of fairly well vegetated sand dunes, and we will stop to look for Steppe Grey Shrikes and Rufous Scrub-Robins but after a couple of hours we reach a series of lakes set which are frequented by numbers of waterbirds including Ferruginous Duck, Red-crested Pochard, Great Egret and White-winged Black Tern. This is also a good locality for watching a Hobby dashing after prey and to observe the high-speed dash of a hunting Shikra chasing after an unfortunate victim. We should also find Citrine and Black-headed Wagtails, Bearded Tit, Paddyfield Warblers, and with some luck Little Bitterns and perhaps Black-headed Penduline Tits, which unfortunately have declined in recent years as a result of their favoured reedbed habitats being cultivated. Beyond the lakes we begin to search for Saxual Sparrows and the halimodendri race of Lesser Whitethroat that breeds in the desert habitats along with Turkestan Shrikes. After this we head further north to Zhelturanga and the light Turanga woodland an endemic species of poplar tree- *Populus diversifolia* - found along the banks of Kazakhstan's rivers and inland deltas. The Turanga forests have increasingly (though perhaps not yet adequately) been afforded some protection from the livestock overgrazing and deforestation that would otherwise destroy so unique and important a habitat. In the woodland the Yellow-eyed Stock Dove nest relatively commonly in the hollows of mature Turanga. Other specialities of this unique habitat which we hope to see here include the very local White-winged Woodpecker, Pallid Scops Owl and Turkestan Tit.

We will return along the same route as we came – again stopping if time permits or we spot something interesting from the coach.

Day 9

Kolshengol to Almaty

We will have time to look around the camp again this morning before we start the return journey south to Almaty. We will stop in Kolshengol to check the trees and an Artesian Well for migrants and have a quick look at the famous “Wishing-tree” at Aldarly. The tree is now almost dead, but still, in 2016, held a good variety of migrant birds. If there is time we will stop again at the Sorbulak Lakes and possibly at the Kurty River - either place will provide a good place to enjoy our picnic lunch, before continuing south for a further 120 kilometres to reach Almaty by midafternoon. Our final evening in the Almaty hotel will allow us to relax, wash off the desert dust and enjoy a nice meal before retiring early as we have an early start in the morning.

Day 10

Almaty /London

An early morning transfer to Almaty airport to catch the return flight home.

Grading

This is a straightforward birdwatching tour. No trekking or great hardship are involved, with the exception of the camping content which may not be to everyone's taste! However, please note that the camping on this tour is done out of necessity and not through choice; there simply are no hotels or lodges in the wild areas where the birds and other wildlife are to be found, so camping is our only option. You should not be too alarmed however, as we provide "fully serviced" camping; i.e. the cooking and all camp chores and construction are done for you by local staff travelling with the group. The holiday is therefore quite suitable for those of all ages and degrees of fitness... provided a spirit of adventure travels with you! After all, this is Kazakhstan - a former Soviet state with a great deal of development ahead of it!

Weather

Kazakhstan lies in the northern hemisphere and therefore shares our seasons. Its weather is best likened to that of such eastern European countries as Romania, Bulgaria or Turkey, i.e. long hot summers, and long cold winters! Our tours are scheduled to run during late spring/early summer - the best time for birding - and you can reasonably expect mainly clear and sunny weather. Daytime temperatures are likely to range between 20 and 30°C in the steppes and deserts, and between 10 and 20°C in the mountains. They are likely to fall by 10 to 20 degrees during the nights. Rain, if it is going to fall, is most likely in the mountains, and in the occasional cold snap snow is also possible - even in late May.

Accommodation

When staying in Almaty we will use a tourist hotel, each room with private facilities.

Once outside the capital there are limited tourist facilities. At Charyn (Day 2 and 3) and in the Tien Shan Mountains (Day 4 and 5) we will use simple guesthouses with twin rooms and private facilities. During our time in the desert (Day 6 – 8) we will use a camp site providing the necessary tents, loo tents, cook and camp staff for these nights. The tents each have two camp beds in them and a small porch area for your bags. Blankets are provided and we suggest taking sleeping bag liners rather than full sleeping bags.

Mammal, bird & plant lists

Where available these will be provided with your Final Joining Instructions, and will gladly be sent to you before, if you wish for a more detailed preview.

Your safety & security

You have chosen to travel to Kazakhstan. Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – www.fco.gov.uk/travel or telephone 0870 606 0290 regularly prior to travel.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking. Please note that as all our Bargain Selection tours are carefully costed on groups of 16 persons to maximise value for money, it may be necessary to impose a small group surcharge of 10% on groups falling short of this size.