

Birding in Kazakhstan & Kyrgyzstan

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Depart UK
Day 2	Arrive Almaty; Kaskelen NP
Day 3/4	Sogety Valley & Charyn Canyon
Day 5	Drive into Kyrgyzstan
Day 6/7	Karakol for Himalayan specialities
Day 8	Morning birding; drive to Almaty
Day 9/11	Taukum Desert
Day 12	Almaty
Day 13	Depart Almaty; arrive UK
Korgalzhyn Extension	
3 Days	Korgalzhyn National Park

Departs

May

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code KAZ06)

Grading

Grade A. Mostly gentle-paced walks, with some longer walks at higher altitudes

Focus

Specialist birds and local culture

Highlights

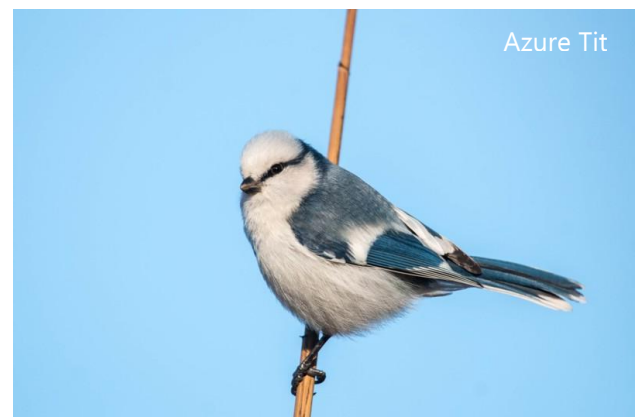
- Ibisbill, Himalayan Snowcock, Güldenstädt's Redstart, Pallas's Sandgrouse, Azure Tit and White-browed Tit-warbler.
- A gentle-paced holiday in search of the region's finest birds
- Led by a local expert, accompanied by a UK-based leader and local translator.



Ibisbill



Charyn Gorge



Azure Tit



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NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and 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 18 million, mostly living in the cities, this is a land of vast open and unpopulated 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, as we cross the border into Kyrgyzstan, this under-explored country gives way to some dramatic mountain landscapes away from the crowded scenes around Big Almaty Lake in Kazakhstan, therefore affording a tranquil setting as we search for the many high-altitude birds that reside here. 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, Himalayan Rubythroat, Eversmann's and Güldenstädt's Redstarts, Sykes'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 Buntings, plus much more!

White-browed Tit-warbler



Day 1

Depart London

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

Day 2

Arrive Almaty; Kaskelen National Park

We arrive at Almaty in the early morning. Almaty, situated at 2,500 feet above sea level and touted as the greenest city in Central Asia, 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.

As soon as we can after landing, we will drive westwards from Almaty towards Kaskelen with our local team of experts. Our base for the day will be the Ili-Ala-Tau National Park. Created in 1996, this 200,000-hectare park not only has spectacular views in all directions but also lush habitat in which to find a wealth of birds, wildflowers and some of the smaller mammals of the country.

It's a relatively short journey from Almaty and a location that attracts the commoner species of this region. Our main quarry of the day will be to try and find the attractive Azure Tit, but we could well come across the local subspecies of Goldfinch (Grey-crowned Goldfinch), White-crowned Penduline Tit and perhaps some local specialities, such as Meadow Bunting, Blue Whistling Thrush and the distinctive Blue-capped Redstart (right).



Blue-capped Redstart

We will overnight on the outskirts of Almaty.

Day 3/4

Sogety Valley & Charyn Gorge

This morning we will travel 125 miles (200 kilometres) east to one of the more spectacular and well-known sites in Kazakhstan: the red, yellow and black canyons of the Charyn River Gorge. Amidst this lovely scenery, we should encounter beautiful species such as Chukar, Rufous-tailed and Blue Rock Thrushes, Hume's Whitethroat and Grey-necked, Rock and Red-headed Buntings. Raptors might include Egyptian, Himalayan Griffon, and Cinereous Vultures, Long-legged Buzzard, Golden Eagle, Saker Falcon and Lesser Kestrel. We may come across roadside colonies of the bizarre, pink-and-black nomadic Rose-coloured Starlings. In the evening, we visit a small artesian well, where leaking pipes have created small puddles where the likes of Mongolian Finches, and hopefully several of the much larger Asian Crimson-winged Finches, should pass by for a drink. After this spectacle, we will drive to our basic guesthouse, which is located in an oasis off the Charyn River.

Day 5

Drive into Kyrgyzstan

Demoiselle Cranes



This morning we will make one final walk out onto the Sogety Plains to ensure we do not depart without having seen the elusive Pallas's Sandgrouse. Once packed up, we will begin our exciting leg of driving into Kyrgyzstan. The journey may take up to six hours, but time will pass quickly as we admire the variety of habitats as we cross the border. There will be many birding opportunities along the way, as well as a lunch stop, with likely sightings including Rock Sparrow, as well as

Upland Buzzard, Saker Falcon and Demoiselle Crane which are most likely to be found around the cultivated areas.

For those interested in geology, a special treat this afternoon will be a stop to admire the Jeti Oguz rock formations. The area comprises many sandstone features and will be a lovely addition to our time in Kyrgyzstan.

Before reaching our comfortable and typical tourist hotel for the next three nights, we will search an area renowned for hosting Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler. In May, migrants can turn up anywhere, but Corncrake is one species we may be lucky to encounter here too.

Day 6/7

Karakol, Kyrgyzstan

We will spend two full days exploring the fabulous mountain habitats that surround the Karakol region.

There are two key areas in this spectacular area where we will concentrate our efforts, namely the Chon-Ashu Pass (3,822 metres) and the Barskoon Gorge (3,200 metres), both holding a range of exciting passerines that breed above the tree line.

At each location, we will be serenaded by the Himalayan Snowcock, though locating individuals on the rocky slopes can prove challenging, but with patience and diligent vigils of scoping, we should locate an individual or two atop a boulder.

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. 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 Spruce forests, Oriental Turtle Dove, Blue-headed and Eversmann's Redstarts, Songar Tits and Crossbills may all be found. Our time in Kyrgyzstan is bound to provide us with some excellent birds and all within an isolated mountain region where very few tourists get to.

Day 8

Drive to Almaty

Today, we make the relatively long drive back into Kazakhstan and towards Almaty, where we will spend a night at a very comfortable tourist hotel. Although the drive will take most of the day, we will endeavour to escape the minibus for lengthy durations to ensure a good leg stretch and time for some more sight-seeing and birding. Particular species we will be searching for along the route will include Lesser Grey Shrike, Long-tailed Shrike, Red-rumped Swallow and Indian Golden Orioles, and no doubt much more.

Day 9/11

Taukum Desert

Departing Almaty after a leisurely breakfast, we will make our way towards the Taukum Desert. The desert is highly variable in its appearance, with four known sections of the region separated by local sands, all named by the locals. As well as supporting a superb diversity of birdlife, this park is also excellent for mammals. Persian Gazelles are preyed upon by Grey Wolves, which are resident in good numbers and sightings are likely, while planned nocturnal sessions should provide us with many rodents, especially Jerboas and even perhaps a Wonder Gecko!

Our base for the two nights will be in a comfortable yurt camp and we will be well looked after by our splendid hosts. Our drive to the desert will initially be adjacent to vast poppy fields, with the mighty mountains off to our side, creating a beautifully scenic drive. Soon after our arrival at the camp in the mid-afternoon, we will visit a local well, where we hope both Black-bellied and Pallas's Sandgrouse come down for a drink, before we settle into our tranquil accommodation.



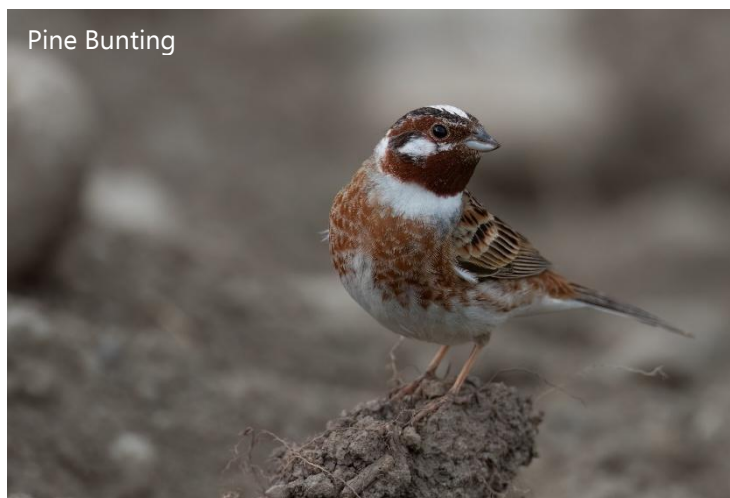
Black-bellied Sandgrouse



Caspian Plover

Awakening in the midst of this remote desert, we will likely be watching the amazing display of MacQueen's Bustards close to our camp; the characterful Caspian Plover also breeds nearby and even Grey Wolves are occasionally spotted, together with Persian Gazelles.

During our drive west, we start entering some small hill sites where we start to target Bimaculated Larks that favour this habitat. In the afternoon, we return to our camp, hopefully finding a good array of raptors like Steppe Eagle, Eastern Imperial Eagle or Crested Honey Buzzards. The list of birds here could far surpass our expectations as we will still be in the height of the migration season, meaning anything at any time could turn up. After dinner we plan on heading out for a night excursion searching for Jerboa and Wonder Geckos!



Pine Bunting

On our final full day in the desert, we will be driving towards an area of Turunga woodland, negotiating a variety of backroads where we should hope to come across a plethora of Greater Short-toed and Asian Short-toed Larks, Isabelline Wheatears, Red-tailed Shrikes, Rock Petronia, Azure Tit and even possibly the Black-headed Penduline Tit.

Once in the woodland, we will evenly spread out as we slowly walk through this unique habitat, searching for such specialities as

Turkestan Tit, Saxual Sparrow, White-winged Woodpecker and Yellow-eyed Dove, amongst many other species.

Tonight, we will stay in a basic guesthouse in Araltobe.

Day 12

Return to Almaty

Our return to Almaty will be slow due to our having the whole day to search a variety of habitats. Although we hopefully won't have any target species at this stage, the birdlife will still be abundant, with the likes of hoopoes, rollers and bee-eaters all being conspicuous, plus scrub patches will most likely hold Blyth's Reed Warblers and Sykes's Warblers. Red-headed Buntings would hopefully have returned to their breeding grounds and we should be able to capture some views of this very attractive bird.

We return to Almaty in the late afternoon, where we will freshen up at the hotel before having our final dinner together, reflecting on a wonderful trip to Central Asia.

Day 13

Almaty / London

Today we will take a mid-morning flight back to London, via Istanbul.

Korgalzhyn Extension

This extension is scheduled between the two first departures each year and will therefore operate either before or after your main tour, depending on which departure you choose.

N.B. The minimum number of participants required to run this extension is four; however, we may still be able to operate it with fewer guests for a small per-person supplement

Day 1

Arrive Korgalzhyn

If you are joining the post-tour extension, we will begin with an early-morning departure from our hotel in Almaty on Day 13, transferring to the airport for our domestic flight to Astana. Those joining the pre-tour extension will fly directly from London and meet the group on arrival.

We will then set off for Korgalzhyn, one of Kazakhstan's premier birdwatching destinations, set amid the vast Kazakh steppes. En route, we will make a number of carefully chosen stops to stretch our legs and explore the surrounding countryside. Nesting Red-footed Falcons should provide excellent views and photographic opportunities, while Short-eared Owls are often seen perched on fence posts or quartering low over the grasslands. We will also be on the lookout for elegant Pallid Harriers hunting across the steppe and, with luck, our first Sociable Lapwings, one of the region's most sought-after birds and a globally threatened species.

Arriving in Korgalzhyn by evening, we will settle into our guesthouse, which will be our base for the next two nights.

Day 2/3

Korgalzhyn National Park

Today we will spend a full day exploring Korgalzhyn National Park, a vast mosaic of pristine steppe, marshes and shallow lakes that ranks among Central Asia's most important wetland reserves. This remarkable landscape supports an abundance of wildlife, including Wolf, Marmot and Saiga Antelope, the latter becoming increasingly easy to observe in recent years. Birds, however, are undoubtedly the park's greatest attraction. Situated at the crossroads of two major migration flyways, Korgalzhyn serves as a crucial stopover and breeding area for millions of birds each year.

The scale of the wetlands is truly astonishing, with Lake Tengiz alone capable of supporting up to 15 million birds during migration periods. Our principal target will be the globally threatened Sociable Lapwing, for which the surrounding steppes hold one of the most important breeding populations in the world. Along the roadsides we may encounter



Black Lark

colonies of Black-winged Pratincoles and breeding-plumaged White-winged Terns, whilst the wetlands themselves can host an impressive variety of waders, including Red-necked Phalaropes, Spotted Redshanks, Terek Sandpipers, Ruffs, Little Stints and Temminck's Stints.

The lakes and reedbeds should also yield a wealth of other waterbirds, including Dalmatian Pelicans, Great Bitterns, White-headed Ducks, Red-necked and Black-necked Grebes, Whooper Swans, Greylag Geese, Red-crested Pochards and Caspian Terns. Particularly memorable are the often close views of magnificent Great Black-headed Gulls, accompanied by Steppe Gulls and Slender-billed Gulls.

Away from the wetlands, the damp grassy steppe supports elegant Demoiselle Cranes, whilst scattered scrub may hold Booted Warblers, hunting Pallid Harriers and nesting Red-footed Falcons. We will also search for two of the region's most distinctive specialities: Black Lark and White-winged Lark. Often seen feeding beside the roadside, both species are closely associated with the Central Asian steppes and are among the highlights of any visit to Kazakhstan. After a rewarding day in the field, we will return to our guesthouse for the night.

Our final morning in the Korgalzhyn area will be spent exploring the lakes and wetlands to the west of the village, searching for any species we may have missed and enjoying further opportunities to experience this remarkable reserve. Later, we will return to Astana where, after checking into our hotel, we will enjoy a tour of Kazakhstan's modern capital. This evening we gather for a celebratory farewell dinner, reflecting on the many highlights of our time on the Kazakh steppes.

Day 4

Onward flight

Today we return to Astana Airport. For those travelling home, this marks the end of a rewarding extension, offering an unforgettable introduction to the spectacular wetlands and steppes of central Kazakhstan and some of the finest birdwatching in Central Asia. For others, the journey continues with a flight to Almaty, where further adventures await. Having experienced the remarkable birdlife of Korgalzhyn, from Sociable Lapwings and White-winged Larks to the vast congregations of waterbirds on Lake Tengiz, they will no doubt continue with a renewed sense of anticipation and a desire to discover even more of Kazakhstan's natural treasures.

Grading

This is a straightforward birdwatching tour. No trekking or great hardship are involved; however, during our time in Kyrgyzstan, one must be prepared for high altitude (2,500m above sea level) and cooler temperatures. There are some long drives also on this tour, but these will be broken up with many birding stops en route.

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 at night. 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 early May.

Accommodation

Please note: when we use the hunting lodges and yurts, one must be prepared for shared bathrooms, though these are separate to rooms themselves.

For the other nights, we will be staying in comfortable, but at times simple, 3* hotels/establishments.

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.



White-crowned Penduline Tit © Chris Griffin