MONGOLIA

28th June - 2nd July 2012



Graham Talbot Chris Campion

Introduction

With a long weekend approaching I was thinking of going to Laos for the Bare-faced Bulbul but as it was the rainy season and birding would have been tough, I turned my attention to Sarawak to try for the Ground Cuckoo having missed it twice in Borneo, but the logistics were difficult and there was a good chance of not being able to arrange access to the best areas of forest at Sungai Wain. The possibility of going to Mongolia to try for my final Snowcock sprang to mind. Chris had had the same thought and after a bit of investigation we found that there were direct daily flights between Hong Kong and Ulaan Baatar with a journey time of only four hours. This made a long weekend trip feasible however as one of the sites required an internal flight we decided to add an extra day making this a four and a half day trip.

Logistics

After speaking to a number of people and reading the available trip reports, everybody recommended Nomadic Journeys http://nomadicjourneys.com/ as the best ground agent. We made contact and explained we were birders and wanted an intensive four day itinerary birding from early morning to late evening and when we received a response from Jan the owner that he released birders were "not normal people" we knew they were for us. It was not cheap as there were only two of us, there was an internal flight involved and we also needed an English-speaking guide and a driver, but the quality of service was excellent and we had no issues with starting early or finishing late. There were few independent trip reports available, however we were soon able to determine the best areas to bird. We were lucky in the Gobi desert as the guide arranged by Nomadic Journeys had recently guided another independent group of birders and had Pallas's Sandgrouse, Oriental Plover and Mongolian Ground Jay staked out, we would have struggled to find the latter two on our own. The guide can be contacted on oyunaa bavuu@yahoo.com.



Accommodation and Food

The quality of accommodation was good. In Ulaan Baatar we decided to stay in a cheap hotel as we were only going to be in it for a few hours. It turned out to be the oldest hotel in

town, but it was clean and there was hot water. In the Gobi desert we stayed at the Jullin ger camp, a large somewhat regimented camp about 35km north of Dalanzadgad, about one hour's drive. It had hot showers and the food was good. The camp had a large belt of trees on one side which must be an excellent migrant trap at the right time of year. At Terelj we again stayed at a ger camp on the outskirts of the town located only a fifteen minute drive from the valley. It was relatively new, had hot showers and again the food was good. The Terelj area is very popular at weekends and the nights can be very noisy with karaoke as we found out when we arrived. If possible avoid weekends.

Weather

On our arrival in Ulaan Baatar it was quite windy making birding along the Tuul River challenging, however by the following morning the wind had dropped. The following two days in the Gobi Desert area saw clear blue skies and very little wind with daytime temperatures reaching the late twenties, dropping significantly at night making it pleasantly cool. At Terelj we again had blue skies on the first day, though the second day was overcast after a little overnight rain, however by the time we reached Gun Galuut the skies had cleared.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to everyone who took the time to post trip reports. Special thanks to Axel Braunlich for providing us details of the Tuul River area and other useful information also to Jon Hornbuckle for some very recent information.

References

Field Guides

Collins Bird Guide - Lars Svensson et all.

A Field Guide to the Birds of China - Mackinnon & Phillipps

Trip Reports

Mongolia 3-29 June 2003, Mattias Gerdin, Måns Grundsten and Johan Ställberg, Stockholm, Sweden. This report although somewhat dated gave a number of co-ordinates for some of the important sites which are still good today.

Sites

Tuul River

We birded the pools and the adjacent river created by gravel extraction just a ten minute



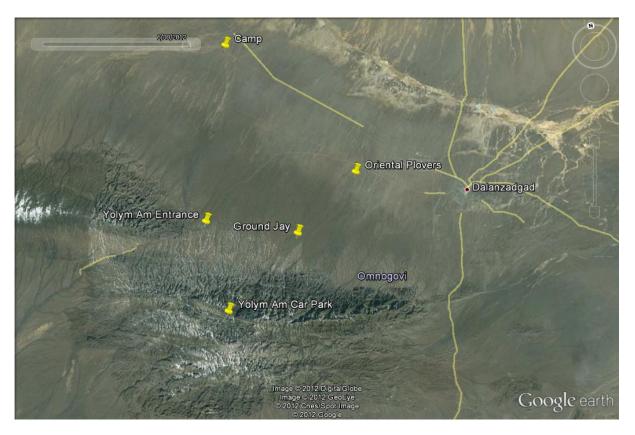
Tuul Fish Ponds

drive from the airport. The area consisted of low willows, some open country and many pools. Our time was limited to a late evening and an hour the following morning but even in this limited time we still managed to find the key birds Whiteheaded Penduline Tit and Long-tailed Rosefinch although we failed to find Azure Tit.



Gobi Desert and Yolyn Am

We found all the main target desert birds within about 35km of the airport. Pallas' Sandgrouse were seen in a number of places in the same general area.



Yolyn Am is accessed from the east, there is a museum and small shop at the entrance gate, from which it is another 9kms along a dirt road to a car park and then a 15 minute walk to the start of the gorge. We found Koslov's Accentor on the juniper covered slopes 300m before we reached the car park. As you walk towards the gorge, the path follows a small stream which was good for Rosefinches and Snowfinches. We climbed up to the peaks to the left of the road as you approach the car park and also the peaks to the right of the gorge which were reached by walking up the wide valley in front of you with the entrance to the gorge on

your left. At the head of the valley we found a trail to the left leading up to the highest peaks. We explored these peaks extensively and although we found Snowcock droppings and feathers we failed to locate the birds.





Yolyn Am juniper slopes

View from car park

Terelj

Terelj is located in the Gorkhi Terelj National Park which is only a two hour drive from Ulaan Baatar and hence the area has become a popular weekend retreat with ger camps and lodges springing up everywhere, but luckily the visitors don't tend to venture into the surrounding forest. We birded the valley to the west of the town walking up along the small stream through a new ger camp. The lower areas consisted of mixed birch and larch trees but as you get higher the forest is predominately larch. The lower areas were quite birdy and this is where we found Eye-browed and Red-throated Thrush with Dusky Warbler in the bushes along the stream. Chinese Bush-Warblers were found on the open slopes with small bushes on the western side of the valley. The best area for Capercaillie is the plateau area on the ridge which takes about an hour and a half to reach. There are no obvious trails up to or on the plateau and beware that it is easy to get lost up there so take a GPS.





Terelj Valley

Gun Galuut

The small reserve of Gun Galuut is located 120km east of Ulaan Baatar. It consists of two main areas, a large pool and a marshy river valley. The large pool held numerous ducks and cranes whilst the marshy area was better for breeding ducks and waders and was also where we saw White-naped Crane. We failed though to find any Siberian Cranes which have been regularly recorded in the area.



Itinerary

Thursday 28th June

We left Hong Kong at midday and just 4 hours later we were coming in to land at UB airport. We were quickly through immigration but the bags took a bit longer and we were met in the arrivals area by a representative from Nomadic Journeys. Very quickly we were on the road heading to the Tuul River only a few kms away. After crossing the river we turned left and drove along an embankment until we reached some gravel ponds with willows where we parked and explored the area and the adjacent river. It was rather windy and small birds were hard to find, however Shore Larks and Northern Wheatears where everywhere and two Demoiselle Cranes and an Amur Falcon flew over.





After two hours we slowly returned to the car and en route we heard a White-headed Penduline Tit calling from the willows. We headed in and very soon we found two birds. Whilst watching them we heard a distant Long-tailed Rosefinch calling so we headed in the general direction and a stunning male flew up and landed on a telegraph wire giving good but brief views before it flew off.





By now it was 9pm and the sun was getting low and so returned to the car and drove to the centre of Ulaan Baatar to the Zaluuchuud Hotel. It was election night and the hotel was being used as a base for some political party and was full of TV crews. We walked a couple of blocks and had something to eat before retiring. It was a short noisy night due to the TV crews.

Friday 29th June

We left the hotel at 4am while it was still dark but by the time reached the Tuul River dawn was breaking. We parked at the same location as the previous day and explored the area where we had seen the Penduline Tits and Rosefinch. It was much calmer today but it took a long time to get light. Eventually we found a pair of Long-tailed Rosefinches which performed well for the camera, however time was not on our side to allow for further exploration of the area as we needed to be at the airport at 6am for our flight south to Dalanzadgad.



At the airport we had a good breakfast before boarding a small 30 seat plane for the one hour flight south. At the airport we were met by our guide and driver and we were very quickly heading north-west through the Gobi desert parallel to the Gobi Altai. Within ten minutes we found a family party of Oriental Plovers including one young bird. We came across two more birds as we headed to Jullin ger camp, our home for the night. We checked into our ger tent and watched Italy beat the Germans in Euro 2012 whilst having lunch. We then headed west towards the Gobi Altai mountains coming across a family party of Pallas' Sandgrouse with two chicks.





We entered the National Park at the museum and stopped at the first area of junipers but didn't find any Accentors. We made a couple more stops at other patches of juniper as we drove through the park but still no Accentors so we continued to the end of the road and parked in the car park which held a small flock of White-winged Snowfinchs. We continued

on foot following a small stream to the mouth of the gorge along which we found small flocks of Snowfinches a few Beautiful Rosefinches and a single Mongolian Finch.









Rock Sparrows were numerous and we also added a single Common Rosefinch. We explored the length of the gorge but didn't find the hoped for Wallcreeper. As we left the gorge we headed up a steep valley and climbed until we reached the rocky crags, coming across a number of Grey-necked Buntings at the higher elevations. Once at the top we scanned the rocky peaks for Snowcocks without any luck and after three hours of searching we decided to descend back to the car and spend some time checking out the juniper slopes for the Accentor. It wasn't long before we found a singing bird in the juniper around 300m from the car park. We slowly headed back to the ger camp stopping en route to watch small flocks of Pallas' Sandgrouse flying over as the sun set. It was gone nine before we arrived back and so it was straight to bed.

Saturday 30th June

We were up early and ready to leave at 4am but in the end we didn't get away for another 45mins for various reasons. We headed directly to the Yolyn Am valley and once there stopped a few kms before the car park to scan the highest peaks for Snowcocks but there was no sign, not even a call. We continued to the car park and had a quick breakfast before we walked towards the gorge and then instead of turning into the gorge we continued on and walked up a wide valley until we reached the head where we turn left and climbed up a steep trail to the surrounding peaks. We spent some time scanning the rocky crags and grassy

slopes without seeing any Snowcocks although we did come across a party of Ibex which lifted our spirits as the Snowcocks are supposed to follow them, but not today it seemed. We decided to explore the rocky crags and as we walked along the ridge we expected to come across a Snowcock at any second, but still not a sniff though we did find numerous fresh droppings and even a few feathers, they were there somewhere.





As the day progressed it got hotter and after many hours of searching we decided it just was not going to happen and so somewhat dejected we slowly made our way back to the car park where we had a very late lunch after which we again explored the juniper covered slopes just before the car park and very soon found two Koslov's Accentors.



Time was not on our side so we drove out of the park, headed south across the foothills and arrived at some wadies with small bushes which very quickly produced a small family party of Mongolian Ground Jays which was a bonus as we didn't think we had as chance of seeing this species without driving very much further into the desert.



We learnt that our flight had been delayed by two hours, so we drove across the steppe looking for Pallas' Sandgrouse and eventually came across a number of small flocks which posed nicely for the camera. We headed to the airport disappointed at not having seen the Snowcock as this was a key target, especially as we had done so well with the other birds. We arrived back in UB two hours late and were met by our driver and guide and right away headed out towards Terelj along poorly surfaced roads in our old Russian van with its almost non-existent suspension. Even at that time in the night the traffic was busy and we eventually arrived at our ger camp on the outskirts of the Terelj village gone midnight. It had been a long day and we were very tired.



Sunday 1st July

Our quide woke us at 5am after only four hours sleep but Chris was not feeling very good, he was sick and very lethargic, the lack of sleep was catching up with him. Around the camp there were singing Pine Buntings and Eurasian Cuckoos calling and also a party of Durian Jackdaws and a few Choughs. Whilst Chris tried to get his act together we had coffee and eventually set off at about 6am, driving the short distance to the valley just west of Terelj. The area had changed compared to past trip reports, with a new ger camp under construction. We parked and slowly headed up the valley but Chris was finding it very hard going and not long after entering the forest decided to rest for a while. I continued on and came across a singing Chinese Bush Warbler on open slopes on the western side of the valley. As I climbed higher the bird activity dropped to almost nothing so I decided to descend to the lower slopes and explore the birch and larch forest near the stream as I was very keen to see Red-throated Thrush. I spent the next five hours exploring the lower slopes finding a number of species including Eye-browed Thrush, Red-throated Flycatcher, Dusky Warbler but no Red-Throated. Eventually the last couple of days caught up with me as well and I had an early afternoon snooze in the forest. I awoke and headed back to the van to see if Chris had surfaced but there had been no sign of him. I rested for a while before heading up the eastern ridge, it was steep at first but soon levelled off and I walked along the ridge towards the plateau finding a singing Red-flanked Bluetail and Chestnut Bunting. By now it was getting a bit late, the sun had started to go down and I decided to retrace my steps. On my way back I received a delayed text from Chris saying was going up to the plateau and then another one saving he was on his way back down so I walked up the valley towards where I had left him many hours earlier frustratingly flushing a Red-Throated Thrush from the top of a tree but UTV's. I met a very tired but happy Chris coming down the valley as after a few hours sleep he had eventually managed to muster enough energy to climb up to the plateau seeing a pair of Capercaillies and a single Siberian Jay there.



We made our way to the grassy slopes at the edge of the forest and very quickly pulled out a Chinese Bush Warbler for Chris before returning to the car and driving the short distance back to the ger camp where dinner was waiting, followed by a hot shower and bed. It was going to be another early start.

Monday 2nd July

We were woken in the night by the rain on the roof of the ger tent however when we got up at 4.30am the rain had stopped but the sky was overcast. Bird activity was much lower around the camp than the previous day with no singing Pine Buntings. We left the camp 30 minutes later and headed back to the valley walking through the new ger camp to the start of the forest. We heard a thrush calling which we thought was a Red-Throated, we spent some time trying to relocate it and after a while we both managed get decent views



We spent another hour checking the small bushes around the river but in the overcast conditions very little was singing and bird activity was low. We returned to the ger camp where breakfast was waiting and by 8.30am we were on the road to Gun Galuut. Even though the roads were paved it was a bumpy ride in the Russian van as we travelled through a landscape of rolling hills and steppe. We past a massive statue of Ghengis Khan and after two hours arrived at Gun Gulaat. As we arrived at the first pools, a large flock of Demoiselle Cranes were feeding along the water's edge and amongst them we found a pair of Common Cranes.





The large lake held a very good selection of ducks, most of which were starting to enter eclipse plumage. There were numerous Goldeneye, Pochard and Tufted Duck plus a couple of Red-crested Pochard. In the surrounding fields we came across our first of many Mongolian Larks.





We continued on across the steppe and after about twenty minutes arrived at a very large marshy valley with many small pools. Scanning the valley we found a few Demoiselle Cranes and a pair of White-naped with two young chicks. Three species of crane in an hour, not bad. We explored the edge of the marsh on foot putting up a Long-toed Stint before returning to the deep lake were we again spent some time scanning the numerous birds racking up the trip list. It was now 2pm and we had a good three drive back to the airport. It was a long bumpy ride and we were stuck in traffic in UB for a good forty minutes, but we eventually arrived at the airport and checked in, our half full flight left on time.

It was a good but tiring trip with sleep at a premium and we were somewhat disappointed to have missed the Snowcock as we'd put in a lot of effort for it.

Systematic List

Black-billed Capercaillie *Tetrao parvirostris*A male a female flushed in the larch wood plateau 1st July

Common Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus* One heard Terelj

Whooper Swan *Cygnus Cygnus*Two pairs, one with four cygnets Gun Galuut 2nd July

Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna* Four Gun Galuut 2nd July

Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea* Two Tuul River 28th and 29th June and two Terelj 1st July. 150 Gun Galuut 2nd July

Gadwall *Anas strepera* Two Gun Galuut 2nd July

Falcated Teal *Anas falcate* One male and three females Gun Galuut 2nd July

Eurasian Wigeon *Anas Penelope* Ten Gun Galuut 2nd July

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* Four Tuul River 28th and six 29th June. Three Gun Galuut 2nd July

Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata* Two Gun Galuut 2nd July

Common Teal *Anas crecca* Thirty Gun Galuut 2nd July

Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina* Two Gun Galuut 2nd July

Common Pochard *Aythya farina* Up to 100 Gun Galuut 2nd July

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula* Up to ten daily 28 and 29th June Tuul River. Fifty Gun Galuut 2nd July

Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula* Ten Gun Galuut 2nd July

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* Two Gun Galuut 2nd July

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* Four Gun Galuut 2nd July

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* Two daily Yolyn Am 29th and 30th June

Amur Falcon *Falco amurensis* One Tuul River 28th June

Saker Falcon *Falco cherrug* One daily Yolyn Am 29th and 30th June

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* Two Yolyn Am 30th June

Black Kite *Milvus migrans* Singles seen daily

Himalayan Griffon *Gyps himalayensis* Two Yolyn Am 29th and twenty there 30th June. One Terelj 1st July

Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis* One Terelj 1st July

Eurasian Buzzard *Buteo buteo* One Terelj 1st July

Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis* One Tuul river 28th June. A pair on a nest Yolyn Am 29th and 30th June

Demoiselle Crane *Anthropoides virgo* Two Tuul River 28th June. Up to 250 Gun Galuut 2nd July

White-naped Crane *Grus vipio*Two adults and two chicks Gun Galuut 2nd July

Common Crane *Grus grus* Two Gun Galuut 2nd July

Pied Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta* Two Gun Galuut 2nd July

Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* A total of fifty Gun Galuut 2nd July

Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius* Seen almost daily with a maximum of ten Tuul River 28th June Oriental Plover *Charadrius veredus*



Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa* Thirty Gun Galuut 2nd July

Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata* Two Gun Galuut 2nd July

Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus* A total of 75 at Gun Galuut 2nd July

Common Redshank *Tringa tetanus* A single bird at Gun Galuut 2nd July

Marsh Sandpiper *Tringa stagnatilis* A single bird at Gun Galuut 2nd July

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* A single bird at Gun Galuut 2nd July

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*Up to thirty seen daily Tuul River. A single bird seen on a small pool in the Gobi desert 30th
June

Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*A total of 150 at Gun Galuut 2nd July

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos* One Tuul River 28th July Long-toed Stint *Calidris subminuta*One Gun Galuut 2nd July
Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*Two Gun Galuut 2nd July

Mew Gull *Larus canus* Three Gun Galuut 2nd July

Mongolian Gull *Larus cachinnans* Twenty Gun Galuut 2nd July

Common Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus* A single bird at Gun Galuut 2nd July

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*Up to twenty seen daily Tuul River

White-winged Black Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus* Twenty Gun Galuut 2nd July

Pallas's Sandgrouse *Syrrhaptes paradoxus* A total of fifty including one pair with two chicks Gobi Desert 29th July, with up to 75 the following day

Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus* Heard daily and seen on three days

Himalayan Cuckoo *Cuculus saturatus* A pair heard and seen briefly Terelj 1st July

Common Swift *Apus apus* Two UB town and airport 28 and 29th July

Pacific Swift *Apus pacificus* Up to twenty daily at Yolyn Am 29 and 30th July

Common Hoopoe *Upupa epops* Two 28th and one 29th July Tuul River

White-backed Woodpecker *Dendrocopos leucotos* One Terelj 1st July and one heard at the same location 2nd July

Three-toed Woodpecker *Picoides tridactylus* One on the ridge Terelj 1st July

Isabelline Shrike *Lanius isabellinus* A total of six Gobi Desert 30th July

Eurasian Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus* One Terelj 1st July Siberian Jay *Perisoreus infaustus* One on the plateau Terelj 1st July Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius* Two Terelj 1st July

Common Magpie *Pica pica*Seen almost daily, commonest in the Tuul River area where up to ten seen daily

Mongolian Ground Jay *Podoces hendersoni*A family party of one adult and two young in a bushy wadi in the Gobi Desert 30th July

Eurasian Nutcracker *Nucifraga caryocatactes* One Terelj 1st July

Red-billed Chough *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax* Up to 20 seen daily

Daurian Jackdaw *Corvus dauuricus*Up to fifteen daily around the ger Camp at Terelj

Carrion Crow *Corvus corone* Two at the ger camp Terelj 2nd July

Common Raven *Corvus corax* One 29th and four 30th July Yolyn Am

Willow Tit *Parus montanus*At Terelj, the commonest bird in the forest with up to fifty seen or heard daily

White-headed Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinus* Two Tuul River 28th June

Eurasian Crag Martin *Ptyonoprogne rupestris* Two 29 and 30th July Yolyn Am

Northern House Martin *Delichon urbicum* One Gobi Desert 30th July

Mongolian Lark *Melanocorypha mongolica* Up to fifty Gun Gulaat 2nd July



Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis* Two Gun Galuut 2nd July

Shore Lark *Eremophila alpestris*Seen daily being common in the Gobi Desert

Chinese Bush Warbler *Bradypterus tacsanowskius* One on the bushy slopes Terelj 1st July

Dusky Warbler *Phylloscopus fuscatus* One seen and two heard Terelj 1st and 2nd July

Sulphur-bellied Warbler *Phylloscopus griseolus* Two Yolyn Am 30th June

Yellow-browed Warbler *Phylloscopus inornatus* Up to ten daily Terelj 1st and 2nd July

Barred Warbler *Sylvia nisoria* One Yolyn Am 29th June

Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca* One Terelj 2nd July

Eurasian Nuthatch *Sitta europaea* Up to six daily Terelj

Eye-browed Thrush *Turdus obscurus* Two in the beech forest Terelj 1st July

Red-throated Thrush *Turdus ruficollis* Two in along the stream Terelj 2nd July Red-flanked Bluetail *Luscinia cyanura* One seen and 4 heard Terelj 1st July

Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros* Up to ten daily Yolyn Am



Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus* Up to twenty daily Terelj 1st and 2nd July

Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina* Seen daily in good numbers

Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe* Seen daily being commonest at the Tuul River

Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti* Up to three daily in the Gobi Desert



Red-breasted Flycatcher *Ficedula parva* A pair Terelj 1st July

Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus* Up to thirty seen daily

Rock Sparrow *Petronia petronia*Up to thirty seen daily at Yolyn Am

White-winged Snowfinch *Montifringilla nivalis* Up to 15 daily at Yolyn Am

Père David's Snowfinch *Pyrgilauda davidiana* One Yolyn Am 29th July

Brown Accentor *Prunella fulvescens*One Yolyn Am 29th July with six there the following day

Mongolian Accentor *Prunella koslowi*One Yolyn Am 1st July and two at the same location 2nd July



Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola* One Tuul River 28th June and two Gun Galuut 2nd July

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea* Two Terelj 1st July

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba* Small number seen daily

Olive-backed Pipit *Anthus hodgsoni* Up to ten daily Terelj

Twite *Carduelis flavirostris* Up to six daily Yolyn Am



Mongolian Finch *Bucanetes mongolicus* One 29th and two 30th June Yolyn Am

Long-tailed Rosefinch *Uragus sibiricus* One male Tuul River 28th June. A pair at the same location 30th June.

Common Rosefinch *Carpodacus erythrinus*One Yolyn Am 29th June and one Terelj 1st and 2nd July

Beautiful Rosefinch *Carpodacus pulcherrimus* Up to ten daily Yolyn Am

Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes* One Terelj 2nd July

Pine Bunting *Emberiza leucocephalos* Up to twenty daily Terelj

Grey-necked Bunting *Emberiza buchanani* Up to ten at higher altitudes Terelj



Chestnut Bunting *Emberiza rutila*One in the forest on the way to the ridge Terelj 1st July