

Holiday Highlights  
Georgia and Armenia  
1–12 May 2017

**Guides:** Duncan Macdonald and Attila Steiner

**Guests:** Helen & Richard Maynard, Marilyn Davidson, Belinda & Steve Batt, John Duerden, Val & Wayne Colson, Jane Moore, Gordon Stuttard, Charlotte & Fred Otero and David Todd

**Day 1:** We all meet up at Heathrow Terminal 2 at the very reasonable time of 2:25pm to catch our flight to Tbilisi via Munich with Lufthansa. The flight is on time and before we know it we are touching down into a murky, wet Munich. Thankfully our connection is from the same terminal. Once some of us have found some food they eventually load us onto the plane. It is dark as we take off towards our adventure on the edge of Europe.

**Day 2:** Because of the three hour time difference with the UK we are still in the air as we enter Day 2! Crossing the Black Sea we see the lights of Batumi, the Georgian city on the Black Sea coast below us and before we know it we are touching down smoothly in Georgia. Attila and Istvan are waiting to meet us and we are loaded into three vehicles and introduced to our drivers, Sandro and Iago, the third vehicle being driven by Attila.

We arrive at our hotel in the early hours of the morning to catch some well-earned shut eye. We arrange to meet at 10:00am for some breakfast which turns out to be a very palatable buffet before loading the vans again to head out north. As guides, we are often the drivers as well, as Attila is doing on this trip. As a result we can experience some erratic, if not dangerous driving in other parts of the world, but Duncan has never experienced driving like this in Tbilisi - utterly bonkers! Well done to all three drivers for getting us out of the very pretty Tbilisi alive!

We head north on the Georgian Military Highway (engineered in the 19th Century during the Russian occupation of Georgia) that takes us through a steep-sided, wooded valley with small farmsteads at the base. We arrive at the reservoir of Zhinvali and stop at the ancient fortress of Ananuri, a beautiful example of old Georgian architecture. Inside the fortress there are two 17th Century churches with fantastic carved walls and painted frescos on the inside walls. There is a bit of a tourist market here and it is busy with visitors. We walk up to the main road bridge from where we can get a better view. A raptor appears above the ridge behind us and is a very dark Honey Buzzard. Blackcap is singing as are Chaffinch and Blackbird and we hear a Great Spotted Woodpecker briefly. As we start to walk towards the fortress we hear Willow Warbler and Mountain (Caucasian) Chiffchaff,

we walk down a steep track at the side of the fortress to look for these birds. Wayne finds a Greenfinch and a male Redstart is also spotted giving very nice views. Goldfinches tinkle over and eventually one pops onto a branch to be seen. A pair of Peregrines are flying around above the ridge behind us and one perches up on a pylon. The track leads us down to the shore of the lake and we skirt some ruined buildings when we hear a Wryneck calling – superb! So we go looking and low and behold there it is, perched out on a thin branch. We get great views of this difficult species. Whilst watching this bird Istvan finds a fabulous male Red-backed Shrike that offers us good views over a spell. Raptors are beginning to move up the valley as the weather improves and we find Steppe Buzzard, Honey Buzzard, Black Kite and unidentified harriers all soaring and moving north together - wow, always good to witness migration. We also hear Bee-eater overhead.

We spend a little time enjoying the interior of the church inside the fortress and trying to identify the carved beasties on the wall. Two Steppe Buzzards come quite close giving us great views as does a rather splendid Long-legged Buzzard. But time marches on and we head back to the vans to find somewhere to have lunch. Richard and Helen purchase some rather sour, rolled and hardened plum juice, which is actually rather thirst quenching.

We stop at the foot of the valley just north of the village of Pasaunuri to have lunch. There are plenty of the khachapuri to go round and the mountainous fairy cake/muffin things are beyond some in the group. Wayne finds us a Grey Wagtail here and Steppe Buzzards are seen very close. Istvan strikes gold when he shouts, "raptor!" and we look up to find a male Goshawk crossing the valley very close and heading up and over the ridge ahead.

The highway winds its way steadily upwards with snow-capped mountains rearing up on both sides. We travel some switchbacks that take us ever higher to the ski resort of Gudauri where we get views to the ridges on the other side of the valley that separate Georgia with the Russian enclave of South Ossetia. Iago finds us a smart, silvery Red Fox in the snow!

Just past the village we hit the majestic Jvari Pass where we stop to do some birding. At 2379m this is a fantastic, if cold, place to be. There are Water Pipits dashing amongst the snowfields when Attila finds us a Horned Lark! These smart pale birds are of the eastern form *penicillata* and we eventually get two side by side in the scope as Marilyn finds another winging in. Steve has gone on ahead to the quite amazing viewing structure perched above the gorge. It is circular with rough stone on the outside and the most startlingly vivid murals on the inside. Anyway he gets great views of Alpine Accentor within the circle at the feet of other tourists but by the time the rest of us get there it has gone!! We do find a rather smart Ring Ouzel singing from the top of the wall. No amount of searching gets us accentor but a pair of Black Redstart and a smart male Whinchat (what's it doing up here?) are

nice finds. There is a pair of Red-billed Chough kicking about the viewing mural. A Common Kestrel wings past as we start to walk back to the vans.

We descend the Tergi valley where the river at its foot is one of only two rivers in Georgia to flow north; this one flowing to the Caspian Sea. We are soon in the village of Kazbegi (Stepantsminda) and we pull up at the smart Rooms Hotel with stunning views to the mountains front and back. What a location for the next three nights and what a fabulous start to our adventure. The food isn't bad either!

**Day 3:** The rain belted down last night and so moisture is dripping from the trees and the cloud is hanging in the valley behind our hotel as we emerge from slumber, all very atmospheric. Breakfast is a fabulous buffet of hot dishes, including made-to-order omelette and khachapuri as well as a range of fruit, bread, cereals, ham and cheeses and so the list goes on. Yummy!.

Due to the weather we decide to head downhill rather than uphill and we park up at an area of Buckthorn near a small mountain river on the edge of town. There is a bit of a scramble to get a view over the bushes and into the river where Steve finds us a Dipper on the river but sadly only some see it. Sandro spots a red bird drop into some bushes but it doesn't re-emerge. Looking back over the valley we look towards where Mount Kazbek should be but it is obscured by the low cloud. On the hill in front stands Tsminda Sameba Church and above it soars a Griffon Vulture. There is also a huge flock of choughs. Attila then points out that the bird drifting in from the right is a Lammergeier, distant views but the shape is distinctive even from here.

We relocate, in the vans, to the opposite side of the river, parking where there is some work going on. Iago checks that they are OK with us parking and walking from here. All OK we walk up a muddy track to get closer to the bushes on this side. There are Water Pipits everywhere and we find our first Northern Wheatears. Caucasian Chiffchaff is singing and with some perseverance we get good views of this brown and buffy Chiffchaff. We keep searching as these bushes can hold both Gldenstdt's Redstart and Great Rosefinch at this time of year. There is more Chiffchaff action and Steve keeps looking for and eventually getting great shots of Dipper. Suddenly Attila points out to us the Gldenstdt's Redstart that has just flown on to the top of a bush. What an incredible bird! The white cap and wing patch are obvious and we all get onto it and forget the rain as we enjoy this superb target species. It flies downstream, so we follow, but we don't relocate it.

We drive through Kazbegi to the other side of the village to another area of Buckthorn and grazed meadow. The views up to the mountains around us are breath-taking. There is a male Red-backed Shrike in a bush that Istvan has found but Water Pipits seem to be the most numerous birds in the area. Wayne spots a Ring Ouzel on the ground where it is collecting food before it eventually flies off.

We walk through the pasture and bushes where we find a huge number of frogs, in the grass, in the puddles, small ones, big ones and all of various hues - exactly what species we don't know. A little further on we spot a Chiffchaff low in a bush and quite close, this one seems a bit brighter than the others we have seen and after some consideration we decide that it is actually a Common Chiffchaff.

As we walk back we find Rock Bunting on a Buckthorn Bush, it is pretty mobile but most see it with its "humbug" head. Whilst moving the scopes to follow it we come across a similar sized, greyer bird - a Barred Warbler. Again it is mobile but perches up, often giving good views and now there are two Rock Buntings! Ravens are a regular feature out over the valley, perched on the hillside or flying against the rocks. Istvan finds us a Marsh Harrier flying in low and then gaining height and soaring off. There is a nice collection of Griffon Vultures drying their wings on the opposite slope and we watch them eventually fly and start to soar. Very impressive!

We cross the road to where there seems to be a burst water pipe, flat area and what looks like an outdoor pool! There is a low wall and lots more bushes so we decide to have lunch and what a lunch it is. There are delicious round, traditional Georgian flatbreads to share as well as a box each containing another variety of khachapuri, cucumber and some lovely pickled beetroot. There is soft and moist cake to go with it too. The rain is coming and going as we relax over lunch but that is broken when a male Gldenstdt's Redstart is spotted by Attila pretty close to the vans. They are striking birds and this one gives quite a display as it moves from perch to perch and then down onto the rocks on the ground. Shutter are firing off like the paparazzi and Steve, Istvan and Duncan go in search as it drops out of sight and they find that there is at least three males in the vicinity. Meanwhile the rest of the group are latching on to the Little Ringed Plovers that David has found on some flat grass below the pool. A dark Steppe Buzzard perches up in a low bush ahead of us giving superb views.

We go for a walk, working the bushes in the hope of Rosefinch. There are more chiffchaffs and plenty more Water Pipits. Frogs are not Jean and Belinda's favourite animal so we try to warn them both as we walk. We cross a little stream to work our way towards a rock face. Scanning from here Attila finds a Tree Pipit at the base of a bush but it is obscured and only a few of us see it. Black Redstarts are singing and flitting around the rocks along with Northern Wheatear and Attila finds another Rock Bunting. On our way back Istvan decides to try a more direct route back to the van but ends up calf-deep in mud, oops! Once we are back the redstart is also back and we watch again as this beauty of a bird flies down onto a low wall and is joined briefly by a female. They are a large redstart and they both drink from a puddle on the wall before flying off - a fitting finale to lunch.

We drive back towards Kazbegi and stop by the River Snotskali, there are rock faces rearing up on the opposite side of the river and this is a traditional site for

Wallcreeper, although the weather is not so great. We scan the rocks but with nothing obvious our attention is obviously drawn to the river. We hear Common Sandpiper and quickly locate a pair along the shingle edge. A Dipper is there also that flies across the river and starts to take to the water. There is a close pair of Grey Wagtails that show spectacularly well and another up where the Common Sandpipers are now displaying.

Our last location of the day is just on the outskirts of Kazbegi where a rough track leads us up through meadows to another area of willow and buckthorn scrub where cattle graze under the watchful eye of the looming mountains. We wander slowly up to the scrub listening and looking. Behind us Kazbek is beginning to show its glory as the clouds start to lift. Some Griffon Vultures grace the sky on the opposite side and again Mountain Chiffchaff is calling. It is quiet however and we are soon dotted around soaking in the atmosphere. We can hear Bullfinch and a Blue Tit makes an appearance. We reconvene and slowly work our way back down towards the vans. We spot a Griffon Vulture on the other side of the valley and there is another large raptor up there with it. It is a young Lammergeier! They soar around for a while and are joined by a falcon. The falcon is dwarfed by these two huge raptors but it is obvious from comparison that it is a large falcon. We manage to get it in the scopes and it is very pale underneath and brown on top. Much discussion is had between leaders but Saker is the only safe option. We think we have relocated it again but on inspection this turns out to be a soaring male Goshawk! Another raptor is cruising down the valley, another vulture but this doesn't look right for Griffon. As it passes in front of the opposite hillside we can see that it is all dark, it is a Black Vulture! What a mad time of raptors. We then locate a couple of mammals high on the ridge line above us and when we get the scopes on them they are what we hoped they would be - Caucasian Tur (East Caucasian Tur if you please). This Ibex-type animal is endemic to the high Caucasus and one we had hoped to see - a fitting way to end our adventure today.

**Day 4:** There has been a lot of rain overnight again but by the time the early risers have got outside it is dry. David even has time to walk to the church above the village. There are Siskins in the trees behind the hotel along with Coal Tit, Common Whitethroat, Mountain Chiffchaff, Common Chiffchaff and Green Warbler. The breakfast buffet is extraordinarily good with the highlight this morning being the very dark honeycomb, yum.

We meet up and load the vans and our drivers take us up the hill behind the hotel to the Church of St. Elias the Prophet. There is already another birding group here in a minivan but we are in 4x4's so we can go further! We park up much further uphill than the other group and instantly hear Cuckoo calling. David is sharp today and spies it on a rock down below us, so we get it in the scopes. We walk a little further to a vantage point looking into the great scar of a valley leading down from the mountains with snow and boulders. We can hear Rock Thrush singing and

locate it quickly down below our position on a lower meadow. It flies off across the river and lands on a boulder that has a Ring Ouzel on it and we get them both in the scope! The reason for driving up here is for the chance of seeing Caucasian Snowcock and Caucasian Grouse and we instantly start hearing the curlew-like wailing of Snowcock coming from the crags above, so we start to scan. Almost instantly Attila gets one in his scope and there is a frenzy as people try to get onto it and Attila tries to get other scopes onto them (there are now two) but they soon fly and land out of view, sadly, not everyone has seen them. A Black Vulture cruises overhead.

It is Duncan's turn now and gets everyone onto what he is convinced is another Snowcock. He gets all the other scopes onto it before the realisation dawns that it is just a well marked rock - Oh well! Suddenly two are flying across the valley in front of us and we can see clearly the large, white wing panels on the birds and hear the strange warbling flight calls. They land opposite us and we get stunning scope views of this truly iconic bird of the high mountains. There is a male and female together with the male interspersing bouts of feeding with getting onto a rock and calling. Another Black Vulture cruises over.

David scores again when he announces that he has found a Caucasian Grouse! We follow his directions and sure enough, there, high on the far hillside is a male Black Grouse. His long tail is obvious but the cloud thickens and he vanishes for a while in the murk but when the clouds lift he is still there. What a bird and another of the specialities of the area. We decide to walk higher still, although some are not keen to do so, so we leave them in charge of the wolf poo that is nearby! We relocate the Snowcock from our new position and the views are better from here, closer and clearer, stunning in fact. There are now two Black Grouse according to David, so we have a look and the air has cleared sufficiently to allow us views of their red wattles above the eye!

A raptor appears coming towards us, it is a Lammergeier and is quite low. We shout down to the others and enjoy this master of the skies as it effortlessly cruises above us showing clearly that it is an adult by its orangey underparts, parallel wings and long tail - what a view. Meanwhile the Snowcocks decide to fly across the valley ahead of us giving us great flight views again and landing even closer this time. Close enough for Steve, Richard and Wayne to get fabulous photos of them. All good things must come to an end though and we start to retrace our steps, grinning like Cheshire cats, back to the others. A Black Vulture is close and seems to drop down towards the river. We wander over for a better look and find a Griffon coming in followed by another Black Vulture. They all drop down into the river gorge where there is obviously something tasty for them. A Ring Ouzel is taking offence to the existence of a Cuckoo on the same rock, this being the same rock where it had been joined previously by the Rock Thrush.

We drive down to the edge of the pines where some Red-fronted Serins are spotted by the lead vehicle. We all get out for a look but they have moved on, we can hear Goldcrest so we try for that and with a bit of tape, we get superb views of this smart little bird. We decide to walk down the road a little to see if we can catch up with the Serins. We do and we can hear them twittering and soon pick up on a couple in a lone pine. They show well briefly before moving across top taller trees. Others come and go over the next half an hour and we get magical views of this stunning little finch. We drive back to the hotel to pick up Val and to allow a rest stop for others before retracing our steps up to the pines for lunch. In a clearing in the trees we tuck into superb Khachapuri (with cabbage inside), potato salad and a very tasty cake. David has gone off during lunch and shouts back that he has found a squirrel. We all eventually join him to be enthralled by the antics of at least five Persian Squirrels. Pairs are chasing each other around the trunks of trees, looking for buried food on the forest floor and generally looking super cute on the branches. Camera shutters are firing away like it is Oscar night.

We drive back to town and out north to the river Tergi where Iago negotiates access for us down a rough track that takes us over a dam and to an area of scrub and meadow at the foot of the mountains. There is a good vantage point here looking over the scrub. Within minutes we have located various Gldenstdt's Redstarts, both male and female, as well as Ring Ouzel and Dunnock. We can hear Song Thrush and Blackbirds are everywhere. We decide to walk lower into the scrub to get out of the wind and allow us to hear the birds better. Iago takes the non-walkers down in a van. We hear Lesser Whitethroat and get brief views and Long-tailed Tits and Bullfinches make brief appearances but no Rosefinches! We see a number of raptors cruising high up the valley, heading for Russia. There are Honey Buzzards, Black Kites and an unidentified eagle. Charlotte finds us a wonderful flower by the track, Pale Grape Hyacinth, an endemic to the area and absolutely beautiful. We return to the vehicles and drive the short distance to one of our locations from yesterday. Where are the Rosefinches? We get out and Val finds us a nice, low Griffon Vulture. We walk up along the riverside scrub but we only find Chiffchaffs and Blackbirds, Linnets fly over and we get brief views of a flock of Twite as they cross the river. As we decide to return, a pair of Hawfinch flit past but we lose where they went and so cannot relocate them. Attila finds us a soaring Eurasian Sparrowhawk to add to our raptor list.

Back in Kazbegi we finish our day with a visit to the play park!! It sits above the river and is nicely wooded so we are in looking for small passerines. It seems quiet but we soon pick up on Coal Tit, Blue Tit and Chaffinch. There are some warblers in trees at the end of the park that turns out to be Willow Warblers and Chiffchaff. Attila hears a Red-breasted Flycatcher but it is not showing. Four of the group appear having seen Green Warbler! David locates the flycatcher and then a game of cat and mouse ensues. Marilyn is looking at a bird that she daren't take her eyes off and it is the Red-breasted Flycatcher. It is a female and she is flighty but with

determination we all get views of this stunning little migrant and a fitting way to end a day of superlatives. Dinner is not bad either, the pomegranate sauce on the chicken being particularly fine.

**Day 5:** There has been more rain overnight and this has brought in a mighty fall of migrants. Out of the hotel before breakfast, the sound from the trees is the ticking of Red-breasted Flycatchers, they are everywhere; every tree has at least one bird. Only David and Duncan are out and only David is out early enough to walk up to Elias's Church and witness Caucasian Grouse displaying. Tree Pipits are also in and singing but Wayne and Val don't have to leave the comfort of their room to pick up new birds, they have three Golden Orioles from their balcony!

We will miss the buffet breakfast when we leave here, so we make the most of our last one. We then pack up the vans as we are leaving Kazbegi to return to Tbilisi today, once packed we drive uphill into the pines again where we had the squirrel action previously, park up and have a small walk. The number of Red-breasted Flycatchers is quite extraordinary. An obliging Red-backed Shrike poses superbly, Water Pipits are everywhere as usual and we get fantastic views of Red-fronted Serin.

Driving on, we stop not far from Kazbegi at the Snotskali River again to scan the rock face for Wallcreeper. There are Common Sandpipers calling from the river and we get good views of these waders whilst we scan for the gem. David says, "I've got one!" and we follow his instructions and wow, there it is, the crimson-winged mountain gem - Wallcreeper! It is a female and we get the most thrilling views as she flickers her wings as she moves up and down the rocks looking for food, truly stunning and all with the most breath-taking scenery around us.

Iago and Sandro want to take us to a side valley that they know and think we will like so off we go. We drive through the village of Sno where the patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox church has an enormous, palatial home. Iago takes us down to a meadow area surrounded by trees and Buckthorn bushes with the mountains looming over us. Scenically it is stunning and the birds perform admirably too as we find Common Redstart and Long-tailed Tits around a channel that is like a frog soup, there are so many of them. Michael and Charlotte, whilst trying to track down the Long-tailed Tits, find a fabulous Roller, it is so obliging that we nearly burn out our shutters on the cameras. On the other side of the clearing, in the thorn bushes, we see a steady stream of Red-breasted Flycatchers as well as Common and Lesser Whitethroats, Mountain Chiffchaffs and Willow Warblers. A small, pleasant faced, buffy warbler appears briefly - Booted Warbler! Wow! Belinda finds a Banded Warbler hopping around on the ground so we get stunning views in fact most of the migrants we see here are on the ground at some point. We hear Thrush Nightingale singing and Common Nightingale, which we see on the ground. David shouts, "Black-headed Bunting!" We all head over to where he is and are treated to just superb views of three males perched up then poking around on the ground. Add



to this mix a female Marsh Harrier, Purple Heron (thanks Steve), two Golden Eagles showing beautifully, a Lammergeier, migrating Honey Buzzards and a Steppe Buzzard and we soon realise that this place is quite special. We also have it all to ourselves, it is ours! We have lunch here, the khachapuri and cauliflower salad is excellent but the cake is even better and all produced by Sandro's mother. We get further stonking views of the Black-headed Buntings; Steve gets photos of a very obliging Cuckoo; Golden Eagle sightings keep on coming and Duncan manages to see the Thrush Nightingale whilst finding a secluded bush! All of this action happens to the continual background of ticking and flitting of Red-breasted Flycatchers from every bush, every tree - quite extraordinary!

We have to drag ourselves away as we still have to get to Tbilisi. We stop in Sno for photos of one of the many beacon towers that line these through-ways of the Caucasus before heading on to the Jvari Pass where we stop to try for Snowfinch, but no luck. We stop again at the circular viewing platform with the murals and here we get some migrating Swallows and Sand Martins as well as an Alpine (Yellow-billed) Chough.

It is a long drive for our drivers as they battle the torrential rain, roads with more pot-holes than road and, once around Tbilisi, the absolutely manic driving of the locals. Two of the vans get a Little Egret flying along the river and also two Laughing Doves on the road by the hotel.

We have some time to freshen up before being driven to the nearby village of Mtskheta where we find the Old Piano restaurant where we are treated to a Georgian feast. Dish after dish is presented to us accompanied by lashings of brown and green fizzy juice made from local fruit. The restaurant is remarkable for its collection of old Soviet memorabilia ranging from kitchen implements to military paraphernalia and old musical instruments that a chap plays for us. It is a remarkable place and a wonderful experience, then the lights are dimmed, a screen lowers from the ceiling and we are treated to a Charlie Chaplin short movie followed by a seventies pop video featuring Suzie Quattro then "The hippy, hippy shake" as performed by the Georgia Satellites. With the floor cleared it is obvious that dancing is required, Helen and Richard have the floor to themselves. What a night.

**Day 6:** After breakfast we meet up at the foyer of the hotel and pop our noses outside. Laughing Doves are obvious on the other side of the road from the hotel. Iago and Sandro arrive with the vehicles, Istvan arrives and we head off in a southerly direction, heading for the monasteries at Davit Gareja. The traffic out of Tbilisi is as chaotic as ever but soon we are out on a smoother, quieter road. A raptor is soaring quite low to our left so we pull over to have a look; it is a male Levant Sparrowhawk! He is close but gaining height and soon beginning to drift away but not before we see the shape of the wings and the dark wing tip that is so diagnostic. Wayne

picks up on another raptor flying low, this is a Long-legged Buzzard and we get great views before it lands. There is a Crested Lark singing here also - what a start.

Just south, at the town of Sagarejo, there is a large raptor soaring. It is an eagle with drooped wings and heavily in moult, as it banks around we can see that there is a pale band through the middle of the under-wing, it is a sub-adult Steppe Eagle. The views we get of this fabulous eagle are superb. This is a great spot, the weather is warm and birds appear from everywhere. Attila picks up on another Levant Sparrowhawk, there are Bee-eaters on the wires, David finds a Red-backed Shrike and the sound of Corn Buntings and Swallows is a joy. A Golden Oriole can be heard, but not located.

As we head south the habitat changes to a steppe-like landscape, rolling with ridges of low hills. We stop at another location where Skylarks are singing and the sound of Corn Bunting is deafening when Marilyn spots a raptor that is drifting towards us. It is a pale Booted Eagle and we watch as it drifts away. A falcon is spotted by Attila; it is moving fast at eye level with us and is a Hobby. David finds a Hoopoe and there is a Long-legged Buzzard. A distant raptor on the ground, on closer inspection, turns out to be a Lesser-spotted Eagle which eventually runs out of sight. The soundscape of larks is incredible.

A little further on the last bus spots an Isabelline Wheatear, very close, so the other buses reverse for a look. There is another just behind so the buses angle themselves for a better look when Sandro calls out, "What is this, here?" A Weasel is working the vole holes not yards from us. We get out and watch as this feisty little predator disappears and then pops up with prey in its mouth. Wow! It eventually vanishes and the prey remains unidentified. The Isabelline Wheatears show very well before flying off and Istvan finds a Tawny Pipit. There are distant raptors soaring that are mainly Griffon Vultures but a couple of Black Vultures are among them. Helen spots a raptor heading towards us, this is another Black Vulture and it cruises straight overhead. Istvan finds a fine Short-toed Eagle and it again cruises right past us. What views we are getting and the eagle count for the day is four species! Sandro wanders up the hill here towards the shepherd when three huge wolf dogs come charging the slope, barking. Thankfully he makes it back!

We stop for lunch at a spot where there are handy bushes! The lunch, prepared by Sandro's mother, is a wonderful salad with khachapuri and the biggest muffins we have ever seen. A Siberian Stonechat is the first bird we see as we get out, what a striking colour, mainly black and white with just a small amount of buff on the breast. A Honey Buzzard flies past quite close and our butterfly list improves to the tune of, Small Heath, Common Blue, Brown Argus, Large White and Small Copper.

We are still nowhere near our destination so we plough on. Istvan, at the front spots a Fox and we watch as this beautiful animal trots down onto the road and

starts to take a drink from a puddle. A car coming up the road spooks it and it trots off across the landscape. As we get nearer the ridges become more numerous and the rocks become more interestingly striped, different layers of sediment being laid down and then twisted and the landscape buckled. There is movement on the hillside down below us so we stop and see a Tortoise lumbering along. Before we know what is happening Iago is running off down the hill, picking it up and running back! What a specimen - it is a Hermann's Tortoise and is quite determined to get back down to where it was.

The rear van stops the convoy again a little further on as a Chukar is spotted to the left. The land drops away where the bird is standing and before anyone else can see it, it wanders over the edge and out of view. We scramble out and go for a look, where the hill steepens (and where the bird vanished) is thick with scrub, but Iago has a plan. He picks up a rock and lobs it into the bushes, pretty quickly two disgruntled Chukar burst from the bushes, glide off down hill and around the edge of the next ridge, shouting as they went.

We finally make it to Davit Gareja! This astonishing monastic site dates back to the 6th Century. The cells are carved into the rock wall and some are still lived in, there are wooden doors on some of the caves and curtains at windows. The tower of the surrounding wall has a Blue Rock Thrush on it. The bushes just to the right have a Lesser Grey Shrike on them and then a Pied Wheatear joins the Blue Rock Thrush on the tower. We spend some time enjoying the dramatic location of this important historical site that is right on the border with Azerbaijan. Wayne and Val go looking for and find a singing Nightingale and Wayne even gets a shot of it.

We can't believe the time so we head off towards Jandari Lake. On route we get close to a couple of Hoopoes and then we spot a single Rosy Starling on a wire where it is singing and we get lovely views but we are not prepared for what is next. In a couple of trees just a little further on must be a couple of hundred! Some come down to bathe in a puddle and they really are just delightful birds with their shaggy beards. They fly off in bursts - what a wonderful experience.

At the lake it is quite obvious that we will be into some birds here, there are Little Egrets and an Armenian Gull obvious with a Grey Heron standing nearby and Wayne calls a Cattle Egret, which is a nice find. There are Great Crested Grebes and Coots in the water, a couple of Mallard fly past and we spot a multitude of Whiskered Terns working the channels in front of the reeds. Attila spots a White Stork flying out to the right of us and more Grey Herons and Purple Herons appear in the sky. There are Common Terns perched and a Marsh Harrier is patrolling the area in front, when a Roller flies past. David is looking behind us and finds a very nice Woodchat Shrike and then promptly finds another two! A large flock of Ruff fly low over the water and then there seems to be a lot of birds in the sky over the water. It is a large flock of Black-headed Gulls then Wayne finds the reason for all these

birds being in the air as a large eagle is up there. It is a young White-tailed Eagle!! - our fifth species today, amazing. It cruises above the lake with a constant squadron of other birds on its tail. Behind us there is a steady stream of Rosy Starling flocks whizzing by. What a place but if we want to eat then we must head back.

Our route takes us to the industrial city of Rustavi. There are pylons everywhere, lines of them going in all directions and towers spewing smoke, some of which is yellow! Sandro says it is like entering Mordor and it certainly smells like it but there is a pool and marshy area adjacent to the road here and it has four Black-winged Stilts in it. As we enjoy them two Wood Sandpipers fly in, one of them pitching down in the water and further out a Lapwing is wheeling around. As the front two buses pull away there are two raptors up high. The large one is a Honey Buzzard but the other is a falcon. It is broad winged and large, a Saker! It rapidly flies over and away before many others see it.

As we drive into Tbilisi and follow the river Mtkvari, a Night Heron flies alongside us, also following the river - how nice. Back at our hotel we say our fond farewells to Iago and Sandro as we are heading to Armenia tomorrow but what a stunning time we have had in beautiful Georgia.

**Day 7:** The morning is beautiful when we step outside and there are even a couple of Laughing Doves to see us off. Lilit is here with the driver, Lilit works for the Armenian Tourist Board and will be our guide and interpreter for the duration of our Armenian adventure. Once the bags are loaded we settle down and say goodbye to Tbilisi, for the time being.

There is not much to see on our way to the Armenian border and we arrive to disembark and get stamped by the Georgian authorities out into no-mans land and then out with our luggage to go through security into Armenia. We are here!

Through the border we are soon following the river Debed that goes through an increasingly steep-sided valley, heavily wooded to begin with. We carry on as the river valley starts to resemble more of a canyon which is what the Debed is famous for. Lilit takes us to the stunning monastery of Haghpat, whose name translates as "huge wall", this fortified monastery dates back to the 10th Century and was founded by Queen Khosrvanuch. It really is a thing of splendour and Lilit gives us a running commentary about the architecture and the cross slabs. Whilst outside there are Agama Lizards on the walls, Swifts and Swallows flying around and the views into the gorge are a feast for the eyes. On the way back down the road from the monastery we see a large raptor out to the right of the bus. It is big with drooped wings and certainly an eagle. It banks around and we see pale patches at the base of the upper primaries and when it banks again we get the pale mid-wing line. It is another Steppe Eagle and it's a cracker.

We climb up a switchback road to gain the plateau above the Debed canyon and it is like arriving in another country. All of a sudden there are views of pasture and mountains with the canyon forming a huge scar on the landscape. We arrive at the village of Odzun and find the guesthouse where we will have lunch. We are dining al fresco at tables under cover. There is some salad, cheese and bread on the table that we start to thankfully tuck into and then the pork arrives, great chunks of barbecued brilliance, as well as fried potatoes. We get to wash this down with fresh apricot juice and we think that this is the best meal of the trip so far!

We take the road towards Stepanavan but quickly stop as a Lammergeier is low ahead with a Booted Eagle. We all jump out as the Lammergeier is more or less right overhead; it is an adult and, wow, what a bird and as we cruise around the next hairpin Attila confirms that there are actually two up there. A little further on there is an Egyptian Vulture ahead, so we all bail out and again this bird comes close. We start to scan around from here. David spots a Weasel down on a bridge below us and there is a Whinchat and a Booted Eagle is being mobbed by a Long-legged Buzzard. Raven, Swallow, Tree Pipit and Corn Bunting complete the haul but we must press on. We pass through the mountain range of Bazumi via a long tunnel and drop down to the town of Spitak where, in 1988 the last big earthquake to hit Armenia struck, annihilating the town and killing 25,000 people – sobering! Carrying on south we start to get views of Mt. Aragats, where we will be going on one of our days.

After a pit stop at Aparan we carry on through darkening skies to the capital of this small country, Yerevan, where, before too long we are parking in front of the Royal Plaza Hotel and unloading (in the rain) and finding our rooms, or not in Jane's case, who appears to be sharing with two other people!! Proper rooms finally sorted we get some down time before meeting the bus again with Lilit to head out for dinner. Welcome to Armenia.

**Day 8:** None of us feel much like eating after such a huge food day yesterday but we have some breakfast anyway. Today we are heading south from Yerevan to the area of the Vedi Hills. Lilit gives us a superb running commentary on the way about various aspects of Armenian history and Armenian stories and legends; she really has a thorough knowledge of and passion for her country.

As we leave the city and go through some of the smaller villages we encounter Bee-eaters on wires along with Lesser Grey Shrikes and our first White Storks, with nests on poles. The road into the hills becomes a rough track quite quickly as we follow the car of Hovhannes (Director of the Armenian Tourist Board) upwards. A couple of raptors are spotted out to the left so we all pile out for a look, there is a small movement of Honey Buzzards that is always nice to see and in fact as we scan around there are a few more in the air in different directions. The air is full of the

sound of Bee-eater and then Attila finds a Finsch's Wheatear and we get brief, good views but it doesn't hang around. We climb aboard and move on.

We get out further up where the valley is starting to be more canyon-like, we will walk from here. There are Isabelline Wheatears everywhere all singing their crazy song and Finsch's Wheatears are perched on the top of bushes, song fighting and chasing one another. The noise from the Isabellines is quite extraordinary and the sun is warm and the sky is clear as we walk up the track. There is a constant movement of Bee-eaters, Swifts and hirundines above us. A couple of Common Kestrels make an appearance and there are more Honey Buzzards, Steppe and Long-legged Buzzard. Attila finds us a Rock Nuthatch and we scope it, this one is small billed and less strongly marked around the head so Western Rock Nuthatch. We hear Grey-necked Bunting, one of the targets here and we stop to try and track it down. After some scanning we find it behind some piles of earth on the base of the hillside, it is quite mobile but we all manage scope views especially when it perches up on a bush, a very smart bird even from this distance. David finds another one behind us on the bushy, rocky slope so we turn around as this one is closer. It is again quite mobile but then decides to fly off the slope and land on the ground beside us. Wow!!

There is a Raven's nest under an overhang with well grown birds on it and the parents are a constant presence overhead and along the valley walls. Attila finds a harrier moving through and it gives us pretty good views so we can check the underwing pattern, it is a ring-tailed Pallid Harrier. The raptor list keeps growing. David has found a Rock Nuthatch so we try to follow his directions and we get on a bird that is much more heavily marked with massive bill and broad, black supercilium - Eastern Rock Nuthatch. They are obviously nesting up there as there are now two but there are older nests that are now being used by Rock Sparrows, we can see them poking their heads out of the old nests. A bush ahead is holding a couple of migrants, namely Common Whitethroat and Spotted Flycatcher. There is a smart male Black-headed Bunting singing from a bush up on the crags and there is also male and female Red-backed Shrike. There are also small numbers of butterflies on the wing and we identify Common Blue, Brown Argus and Queen of Spain Fritillary. Another two Pallid Harriers move through above the slopes to the left and Attila points out two high Griffon Vultures crossing over the valley.

Hovhannes drives Val and Gordon up to join us as we are now in a flat area of the valley with the canyon snaking away in front with crags above us. Wayne finds us another Eastern Rock Nuthatch, in fact it is another pair and we watch them coming and going from their perch with Finsch's Wheatears perched up and singing above them whilst a beautifully coloured Long-legged Buzzard cruises over.

Spotted and striped lizards keep us occupied as well as tracking down another fritillary that turns out to be Lesser Spotted Fritillary. The constant sound of Bee-

eaters is truly magical as we stand and watch and listen. There is a thin, buzzy call coming from high ahead of us and this is Pale Rock Sparrow so we walk a little further to see if we can track it down. Unfortunately not but we also hear Woodlark.

We walk down to the bus to have lunch, with Hovhannes taking the non-walkers in his car. The Isabelline Wheatears are singing their lovely, varied songs as we tuck into our ham and cheese rolls. There is a large, white flower stalk on the bank of hill on the other side of the valley that has caught John's eye and he and Duncan go to investigate, they are impressive specimens but we have no idea as to their identity. As we walk back Duncan turns over a large stone to find a brown and yellow Scorpion underneath, what a stunner so he calls out for others to come and see. As the others arrive the beastie decides to crawl back underneath the stone and Duncan makes the wrong decision to turn the rock over again with his hand and, Pow!, the scorpion stings him in the finger. Ouch!! It is decided to get him to VEDI clinic for an injection. That we do and after a little while we are back on the road to Armash to investigate the fish ponds there.

Armash ponds are a massive network of fish ponds more or less on the border with Turkey and Mt. Ararat and little Ararat loom over the whole landscape. It is very warm down in the lowlands here. Hovhannes has some entrance paperwork to complete to allow us into the reserve and we are scanning around while he is doing so. There are Bee-eaters on the wires here but they are all Blue-cheeked Bee-eater! They are wonderful, smaller than European and green with blue cheeks. Attila finds a couple of White-tailed Lapwings that are out on a flooded bit of grass, so we get these very smart plovers in the scopes, there are Glossy Ibis out there also.

We get back in the bus and travel on to where we can look into the first area of water. There are waders out on the mud and we all get out to have a look, the sheer number of hirundines hawking over the water and just filling the air is breath-taking. There must be hundreds of thousands of Sand Martins, Swallows and House Martins, not to mention the Swifts and White-winged Terns.

Out on the mud there are a lot of waders with the nearest being large numbers of Little Stint and Ruff. Birds start to get called from all directions, this is what we want - Pygmy Cormorants are darting everywhere we look and there is a single Spoonbill standing with a bunch of Grey Herons. This pleases Jane no end and it is a very smart, alert Spoonbill. Purple Herons fly by as do Little Egrets then a Squacco Heron flies past with a Gull-billed Tern giving us tail-end views. There are a good number of summer plumaged Black-tailed Godwits and a couple of smart Spotted Redshank. Istvan finds a nice group of Avocet and Attila then continues with his salvo of finds with Curlew Sandpiper and Red-necked Phalarope. David spots a couple of Slender-billed Gulls amongst the more numerous Black-headed and Armenian Gulls. Marsh Harriers are rarely out of view, a Cetti's Warbler bursts into

song adjacent to us and a couple of Night Herons fly past. This is wonderful, frantic birding.

We get back on the bus and drive, there are roadworks on one of the tracks we want to take so we have to try elsewhere. There are many Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters on the wires, the occasional Roller and David spots a Bearded Tit from the bus, also Great Reed Warblers are evident, clinging to reed stems.

At the last pond we look at, there is a Cetti's Warbler singing along with a Reed Warbler that we get fleeting glimpses of. It is difficult to see the water here for the weight of hirundines and White-winged Terns, truly staggering. Michael alerts us to a small warbler at the base of the reeds where it pops out onto a dead stem and reveals itself to be a Moustached Warbler. We all try to get on it but it is illusive and there is also a Sedge Warbler out there to confuse matters. Great Crested Grebes, Little Grebes, Gadwall and Red-crested Pochard complete the picture. What a place but time is now against us and we must head back to the hotel as we have a dinner date in Yerevan

**Day 9:** After breakfast we meet Lilit and our driver, load up and head east from Yerevan to Lake Sevan, the largest lake in Armenia. Once we are through the mountains we drop down towards the lake and it is huge, once being called the Armenian Sea. It is very windy outside and we stop briefly at a bay where we can get a view from the bus. There are large numbers of Great-crested Grebes and Great Cormorants along with Coots. There are some Armenian Gulls lying on the grass but one adult is standing showing off its bright yellow legs. A little further on we direct our driver to take a track on the left that will take us down towards the water. There are areas of Buckthorn to look through here. There is a Woodchat Shrike on the front of a Buckthorn that is nice in the scope. There are Gadwall and a Ferruginous Duck floating into view on the water and we then find Spotted Flycatcher and Chiffchaff in the Buckthorn. We don't, however, track down the bird that is making the unknown call.

Driving on we take a left at a fork and this leads us to some pools. Here Attila spots a couple of Ruddy Shelduck and David spots a Moorhen at the base of some reeds, amongst the Coots. We park up again and walk down a track between the pines that give us some shelter from the wind. There are plenty of Spotted Flycatchers and Chiffchaffs here as well as a Mountain Chiffchaff. The track opens out and we get views out over this impressive lake. Pygmy and Great Cormorants fly over and there are huge numbers of Armenian Gulls. The colonies here are the largest anywhere in the world. The water is stuffed with Coots, Great Crested Grebes and Little Egrets with White-winged Terns hawking over the water. Gordon finds a pair of Ruddy Shelduck in the grass and these are great in the scopes. We find Little and Slender-billed Gulls out on the water and a Nightingale sings from the bushes and we find a male Red-backed Shrike perched up. We wander back to the van as it seems to be getting windier and there is a bit of rain now.



We drive on and find a bay where we can park by a large house. There are some Yellow Wagtails down on the water's edge, one of which is showing a smart black head, Attila then spots a couple of pipits on the grass. Getting onto them we see that they are Red-throated Pipit so we disembark and set the scopes up. Gorgeous birds, one has a wonderful reddish flush to the head and breast but a rain squall sends us running back to the bus.

A little further on there is a small river running through meadow and a large group of Armenian Gulls are loafing here. Behind them is a large group of Glossy Ibis feeding, something spooks them and the whole lot get up so we get good flight views as well.

We stop for lunch along the roadside where there is a rocky bluff with Jackdaws winging around it. There is a Hoopoe on the top and we get great views of this as the lunches are handed out. Steve heads off to try and get a photo of it and manages to do so, some stay in the bus to eat and some pull up rocks to perch on but just as we are tucking in a shepherd brings his flock down towards us so we have to find larger boulders to perch on. There are Rock Sparrows also breeding on the rocks.

From the village of Martuni we head back up hill, away from the lake, our road takes us up to 2400m at the Selim Pass, where there are meadows under snowy summits. There are small seasonal villages up here as these pastures are where the flocks of sheep and cattle come during the summer but it is completely snowed in during the winter. There are lots of people out today and Lilit informs us that they are out collecting herbs and that it is also Victory Day so it is an Armenian holiday. There is a small lake at the top and a couple of large raptors standing on the ground quite close. We get onto them and they look like Lesser-spotted Eagles, then one moved and we see the underwing and realise that they are Long-legged Buzzards. There are Ruddy Shelduck, Armenian Gull, Redshank and Lapwing down near the water and Northern Wheatear and Whinchat up near the bus.

We drive down a valley green in leaf and take a side canyon where we ascend to the superbly sited Noravank Monastery which dates to the 12th Century and is quite simply beautiful, partly the architecture but that combined with the setting is wonderful. The sandstone crags that surround it are multi-coloured and with the afternoon sun on them the rocks seem to glow. Lilit gives us a wonderful potted history of the buildings, all under clear blue skies and with a female Black-eared Wheatear standing on one of the many khachkars (carved cross stones). This wheatear chases a male Black Redstart and comes very close; we can hear Eastern Rock Nuthatch and so some go in search. We find them and they are a nesting pair and there is a close male Black-eared Wheatear just below us over the wall.

A commotion behind one of the buildings draws our attention and there is a lot of gesticulating and pointing at the ground. Duncan is convinced someone has found

a snake and so tries to get there before any damage is done to the animal. One man quickly reaches down and picks up a snake-like thing, it is a European Glass Lizard and it is quite a specimen - this is Europe's largest legless lizard. There is lots of bravado once they are told it is not a snake and we encourage them to give us the animal to release it and thankfully they do. The man that hands it over tells Attila that he has a hedgehog in his car, so Attila persuades him to let that go too. It is a large animal and out here in Armenia it is White-bellied Hedgehog. Attila finds us a soaring Golden Eagle on the other side of the valley. It flies in front of the crags, swoops up and lands, but none of us have a scope to have a closer look.

It takes us so long to get back into Yerevan that we decide that it is prudent to go straight to the restaurant before going to the hotel.

**Day 10:** The day dawns bright and we are heading north out of Yerevan today to the slopes of Mt. Aragats, the highest mountain in modern Armenia. We can see Little Ararat and Mt. Ararat is almost clear of cloud; our thoughts must be kinder today.

Our road starts to wind its way steadily upward through little villages and past an observatory, where there are rooms to stay. Once past the built up stuff, we stop where the landscape is more rock and small bushes, mainly rose. There are fabulous flowers here that keep us occupied and busy with cameras. A little way further uphill we stop again and get out, it is slightly windier here and cooler. There is an obliging male Rock Thrush posing nicely below us and Skylarks are song-fighting when we hear another bird. Attila draws our attention when a White-throated Robin pops up very close but before we can all get on it though it is off. In fact there are two and they fly off down the road but one perches up on a rose and we get the scopes on it; what a bird! They don't respond to any tape and are soon lost from view but what is that call? Something is calling very close - just two metres from Duncan is an Ortolan Bunting in a rose – wow! We don't even need binoculars; he is just sat there posing for us!

We stop again further towards the top as a raptor appears in front of the bus. Duncan has just finished asking if Lammergeier is encountered up here and Attila had replied, only if they are wandering birds and what do you know, there is one out in front and we get great views of yet another adult bird. The bus is struggling to cope with the constant hill starts and then we are stopped by a mini-van that is coming back down. The conversation is easy to understand - the road is blocked ahead with snow so we carry on to an area of plateau that is a blaze of pink. The whole area is ablaze with flowering crocus and with the snowy backdrop this is quite a staggering scene and one that a lot of us had given up on seeing. They are low to the ground of course but what a colour. We are all out and snapping away whilst our driver turns the bus around so that we can work our way downhill. There are Horned Larks up here and our old friend, the Water Pipit.

We drive back down the road to an area where there are more Junipers amongst the rocks and the habitat is looking better for another target species - Radde's Accentor. We disembark and walk downhill with the bus coming after, the wind is gusty and cold making it hard to hear bird song properly and anyway they won't be singing as much in this wind. We can hear the song of Skylark, Tree Pipit (in a landscape without trees) and Northern Wheatear but what is that other song? Yes, it is Radde's Accentor but coming from where? All of a sudden a bird pops up onto a rock right in front of us, yards away but it is brief and then it flies off across the gully in front of us! Attila tries to lure it back but to no avail so we decide to have lunch here and see if it will reappear. Lunch is fabulous with some nice spicy meat wraps and a fabulous lhatoush stuffed with various herbs. Not everyone's bag though.

We cruise down the road, stopping at other locations that look good and walking a section but there are no Radde's Accentors. There are plenty of Rock Thrushes, Skylarks, Northern Wheatears and Tree Pipits and Rock Buntings beginning to make a show. Down at a crossroads we pile out again and make our way to the bank that is sheltered and covered in Juniper scrub. Almost immediately we hear Radde's singing! Attila plays some back and we get a bird perched up on a Juniper, it is brief before it flies up onto the skyline where it is joined by another. The second skulks into the undergrowth while the first flies over the road towards the bus where we relocate the bird in a Juniper singing, not far from the bus! What a smart bird and we all breathe a sigh of relief.

From this crossroads we take the road to Amberd Fortress. This drops downhill past a stunning little rocky valley with mountain stream where there is a 13th Century monastery beneath the ruins of the 7th Century fortress. The setting is stunning with views down the mountain to the plains far below and was a summer royal residence. There is an Alpine Swift wheeling around the ruins with Common Swift and Crag Martin. Some decide to part with their Armenian money at the little souvenir boutique (tent) and once we are done with that we drive back to the little river valley for a look. Not much other than House and Crag Martins but Belinda, on the bus, sees a Dipper on the river. The thunder is rolling when a huge hailstorm sends us running to the bus.

We stop at another site with a few taller bushes that White-throated Robin like to see if we can get more views. There is a fine male Rock Thrush showing well across the road on the far side of a little gully and we decide to drop into the gully to get out of the wind. Attila tries some tape of White-throated Robin and it instantly works a treat! There is a male perched up in a Juniper and over the next 20 minutes we get absurdly close to this absolutely stunning denizen of these Juniper-clad mountains on the edge of Europe. Most of us even manage cripplingly good photos as well.

Our route back down is using a rougher road with plenty of pot holes but we take it easy and stop to look for Bimaculated Lark. When we get out the air is alive with the sound of Skylarks but then there is the "wet my lips" call of Common Quail. Belinda, who has remained in the bus, sees one fly and they are calling from everywhere. There is a considerable electrical storm down over where Yerevan is and the lighting intermittently splits the cloud. Wayne spots a perched raptor that is a nice, pale Steppe Buzzard, no Bimaculated Larks though.

We head back towards Yerevan and hit the storm, with the intense wind whipping the rain across the road but thankfully it clears by the time we hit the rush hour traffic through Yerevan.

We have dinner at the wonderful Ararat Hall, where the culinary traditions of Armenia are taken very seriously and where the chef is fundamental to keeping the old recipes and traditions alive. We are treated to a masterclass by the head chef of a dish comprising thin beef, rice, walnuts and dried fruit with a rich saffron sauce. This is supposed to represent the landscape of Sis and Masis (Little Ararat and Ararat), all wonderfully translated by our own advocate of Armenia, Lilit. Whilst dining we are serenaded by an old fella on the piano with a broad repertoire. The meal is the best we have had on the holiday and a fitting way to finish our experience of Hayastan (Armenia).

**Day 11:** Our bus is waiting for us after breakfast but Lilit is not with it! She has phoned in sick and so Hovhannes has stepped in to carry on with us to Tbilisi. It is a shame we have not been able to say thank you our Armenian companion but we all agree that she has done her country proud.

We head out north of the city and pass Aragats on the left but we stop as Attila has seen a pale raptor. We get out and scan around - no pale raptors unfortunately but there is a Black Kite up with a Steppe Buzzard. We are heading to the village and guest house in Odzun where we stopped on our journey into Armenia. We have a brief stop in Aparan where the superb bakery is before getting our heads down to Odzun.

Our host is waiting for us with a salute and a broad smile and we are shown inside this time to enjoy yet another superb Armenian meal. It is spitting with rain and the thunder is rolling again when we finish up and head back out on the road.

We detour to the village and monastery complex of Sanahin where we meet Susana, our guide, who takes us on a whistle-stop tour of this incredible monastery. It was famous for its school of illumination and calligraphy as well as at the forefront of medical furtherment. As we enter Attila points out an adult Golden Eagle soaring above with a Steppe Buzzard, one small church is dedicated to St. Gregory the Illuminator (or eliminator as Lilit called him).

We have a way to go but we are not long to the border, where we pass through easily and then hit torrential rain all the way to Tbilisi. We have dinner out again, although not all of us go out as we have a very early start in the morning. The food is absolutely delicious and we are treated to some traditional Georgian music and dance that really is a wonderfully fitting end to what has been a truly eye-opening experience of this far flung corner of Europe. Or is it the Middle East? Wherever - what a trip.

We decide to split the traditional species/place/magic moment because we have had adventures in two countries. So, here we go.

## ARMENIA

**Place of the trip:** The monastery of Noravank comes out on top just ahead of Mt. Aragats.

**Species:** White-throated Robin just pips it from Blue-cheeked Bee-eater and Radde's Accentor.

**Magic Moment:** very personal but votes for the crocus fields gets the most votes with Noravank a close second and votes for Lammergeier, Vedi Hills and Selim Pass as well as Hoopoe, Osprey and the abundance of Swifts.

## GEORGIA

**Place of the Trip:** Very close! Split between the Kazbegi experience and the Sno valley. The road to Davit Gareja and the woods and meadows behind our hotel in Kazbegi were a close second.

**Species:** This was a two species split with Gldenstdt's Redstart just pipping Caucasian Snowcock.

**Magic Moment:** there were four votes for the Snowcock experience, three votes for the Rosy Starling bath time, two for Jvari Pass and singles for Davit Gareja, Weasel, Squirrels, the Georgian Military Highway and the band on the last night.

This was the first time Speyside Wildlife has run a trip to these two fabulous countries. Thank you all for being our adventurous pioneers and being such good fun to travel with. We had some great wildlife (some more intimately than others), lost some pencils and gained friends in both countries. Until we meet again, happy travelling.

## BIRDS

Ruddy Shelduck  
Gadwall  
Mallard  
Northern Pintail  
Red-crested Pochard  
Common Pochard  
Ferruginous Duck  
Common Quail  
Chukar  
Caucasian Snowcock  
Caucasian Grouse  
Little Grebe  
Great Crested Grebe  
White Stork  
Pygmy Cormorant  
Great Cormorant  
Grey Heron  
Purple Heron  
Great Egret  
Little Egret  
Cattle Egret  
Squacco Heron  
Black-crowned Night Heron  
Glossy Ibis  
Eurasian Spoonbill  
Osprey  
Lammergeier  
Egyptian Vulture  
European Honey Buzzard  
Black Vulture  
Eurasian Griffon Vulture  
Short-toed Snake Eagle  
Lesser Spotted Eagle  
Booted Eagle  
Steppe Eagle  
Golden Eagle  
Eurasian Marsh Harrier  
Pallid Harrier  
Montagu's Harrier  
Levant Sparrowhawk  
Eurasian Sparrowhawk  
Northern Goshawk  
Black Kite  
White-tailed Eagle  
Common "Steppe" Buzzard  
Long-legged Buzzard  
Eurasian Moorhen  
Eurasian Coot  
Black-winged Stilt

Avocet  
Lapwing  
White-tailed Lapwing  
Grey Plover  
Common Ringed Plover  
Little Ringed Plover  
Black-tailed Godwit  
Ruff  
Curlew Sandpiper  
Dunlin  
Little Stint  
Common Sandpiper  
Spotted Redshank  
Common Greenshank  
Marsh Sandpiper  
Wood Sandpiper  
Common Redshank  
Red-necked Phalarope  
Little Gull  
Slender-billed Gull  
Black-headed Gull  
Armenian Gull  
Little Tern  
Gull-billed Tern  
White-winged Tern  
Whiskered Tern  
Common Tern  
Rock Pigeon  
Common Woodpigeon  
Eurasian Collared Dove  
Laughing Dove  
Common Cuckoo  
Alpine Swift  
Common Swift  
Eurasian Hoopoe  
Common Kingfisher  
Blue-cheeked Bee-eater  
European Bee-eater  
European Roller  
Eurasian Wryneck  
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker  
Middle Spotted Woodpecker (h)  
Syrian Woodpecker  
Eurasian Kestrel  
Eurasian Hobby  
Saker Falcon  
Peregrine Falcon  
Red-backed Shrike  
Lesser Grey Shrike  
Woodchat Shrike

Eurasian Golden Oriole  
Eurasian Jay  
Eurasian Magpie  
Red-billed Chough  
Yellow-billed Chough  
Eurasian Jackdaw  
Rook  
Hooded Crow  
Common Raven  
Bearded Reedling  
Horned Lark  
Greater Short-toed Lark  
Calandra Lark  
Wood Lark  
Eurasian Skylark  
Crested Lark  
Sand Martin  
Crag Martin  
Barn Swallow  
Common House Martin  
Coal Tit  
Blue Tit  
Great Tit  
Long-tailed Tit  
Rock Nuthatch  
Eastern Rock Nuthatch  
Wallcreeper  
Eurasian Wren  
White-throated Dipper  
Cetti's Warbler  
Willow Warbler  
Common Chiffchaff  
Mountain Chiffchaff  
Green Warbler  
Goldcrest  
Booted Warbler  
Moustached Warbler  
Sedge Warbler  
Eurasian Reed Warbler  
Great Reed Warbler  
Eurasian Blackcap  
Garden Warbler  
Barred Warbler  
Lesser Whitethroat  
Common Whitethroat  
Spotted Flycatcher  
European Robin  
White-throated Robin  
Common Nightingale  
Thrush Nightingale

Red-breasted Flycatcher  
Common Redstart  
Güldenstädt's Redstart  
Black Redstart  
Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush  
Blue Rock Thrush  
Whinchat  
European Stonechat  
Siberian Stonechat  
Northern Wheatear  
Finsch's Wheatear  
Pied Wheatear  
Black-eared Wheatear  
Isabelline Wheatear  
Ring Ouzel  
Eurasian Blackbird  
Song Thrush  
Mistle Thrush  
European Starling  
Rosy Starling  
Alpine Accentor  
Radde's Accentor  
Dunnock  
Western Yellow Wagtail  
Grey Wagtail  
White Wagtail  
Tawny Pipit  
Meadow Pipit  
Red-throated Pipit  
Water Pipit

Rock Bunting  
Grey-necked Bunting  
Ortolan Bunting  
Black-headed Bunting  
Corn Bunting  
Common Chaffinch  
Eurasian Bullfinch  
European Goldfinch  
Siskin  
European Greenfinch  
Twite  
Eurasian Linnet  
Red-fronted Serin  
Hawfinch  
House Sparrow  
Spanish Sparrow  
Eurasian Tree Sparrow  
Rock Sparrow  
Pale Rock Sparrow (heard)

#### **MAMMALS**

Red Fox  
Caucasian (Persian) Squirrel  
Caucasian Snow Vole  
Social Vole  
Caucasian Pine Vole  
Altai Vole  
Weasel  
White-bellied Hedgehog  
East Caucasian Tur

#### **REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS**

Spur-thigh Tortoise  
European Pond Terrapin  
Caucasian Agama  
European Glass Lizard  
Marsh Frog  
Pond Frog  
Green Toad

#### **BUTTERFLIES & OTHER INVERTEBRATES**

Scarce Swallowtail  
Green-veined White  
Small Tortoiseshell  
Common Blue  
Idas Blue  
Small heath  
Small Copper  
Brown Argus  
Brimstone  
Large White  
Queen of Spain Fritillary  
Lesser Spotted Fritillary  
Small White  
Common Blue-tail (Damselfly)  
Mesobuthus eupeus (Scorpion,  
sub-species unknown)

PLANTS – Many thanks to John Duerden for this list.

<u>Common Name</u>	<u>Botanical Name</u>	<u>Remarks</u>
London Plane	Platanus x hispanica	Tbilisi
Pellitory of the wall (Catchfly)	Parietara judaica	Haghpat
Marsh Marigold (Marsh Marigold)	Silene conoidea	David Garji
Creeping Buttercup (Celandine)	Caltha palustris	Our species
Goldilocks Buttercup	Caltha polypetala	Aragats
Celery-leaved Buttercup (Alpine Buttercup)	Ranunculus repens	
Pheasant's Eye	Ficaria ficariodes	
Georgian Pasque Flower	Ranunculus auricomus	
Violet Pasque Flower (Poppy)	Ranunculus sceleratus	Aragats
Common Fumitory (Large flowered Corydalis) (White Corydalis)	Ranunculus polyanthemus	David Garji
Caucasian Treacle Mustard	Adonis annua	Kazbegi (endemic)
Common Wintercress	Pulsatilla georgica	Kazbegi (endemic)
Shepherd's Purse	Pulsatilla violacea	
Nordmann's Rockcress	Papaver pseudorientale	
Marsh Bittercress	Fumaria officinalis	
Bristly Whitlow-grass	Corydalis nariniana	Aragats
Brown-leaved Whitlow-grass	Corydalis angustifolia	Aragats
Wild Mignonette (Currant)	Erysimum caucasicum	Lake Sevan (endemic)
Wild Strawberry	Barbarea vulgaris	
Alpine Cinquefoil	Capsella bursa-pastoris	Very widespread species
Common Lady's-mantle	Arabis nordmanniana	Sno Valley
Blackthorn	Cardamine uliginosa	
Kemular's Milkvetch	Draba hispida	
Scarlet Pea	Draba bruniifolia	Aragats
Rock Sainfoin	Reseda lutea	
Sticky Medick	Grossularia reclinata	
Common Storksbill	Fragaria vesca	
Common Flax	Potentilla crantzii	
Hairy Spurge	Alchemilla vulgaris	Kazbegi
Boissier's Spurge (Spurge)	Prunus spinosa	Kazbegi
Yellow Nonea (Nonea)	Astragalus kemulariae	
Alpine Forget-me-not	Lathyrus miniatus	Aragats
Oriental Bugle	Onobrychis petraea	David Garji
Geneva Bugle	Medicago glutinosa	
Whorled Clary	Erodium cicutarium	
	Linum usitatissimum	David Garji
	Euphorbia villosa	
	Euphorbia boissieriana	Jandari Lake (endemic)
	Euphorbia macroceras	Noravank
	Nonea lutea	David Garji
	Nonea polychroma	Vedi Hills
	Myosotis alpestris	Aragats
	Ajuga orientalis	Aragats
	Ajuga genevensis	
	Salvia verticillata	David Garji



Mountain Skullcap	<i>Scutellaria oreophila</i>	Vedi Hills (endemic)
White Dead-nettle	<i>Lamium album</i>	
(Dragonhead)	<i>Dracocephalum multicaule</i>	Vedi Hills
Sweet Violet	<i>Viola odorata</i>	
Common Dog Violet	<i>Viola canina</i>	
Field Pansy	<i>Viola arvensis</i>	
Branched Tamarisk	<i>Tamarix ramosissima</i>	
Stemless Chamaesciadum	<i>Chamaesciadum acaule</i>	Kazbegi (endemic)
Cow Parsley	<i>Anthriscus sylvestris</i>	
Common Thyme	<i>Thymus polytrichus</i>	
(Coriander Scented Leaves)	<i>Cymbocarpum anethoides</i>	Aragats (used in salads)
Cowslip	<i>Primula veris</i>	
Chilly Primula	<i>Primula algida</i>	Kazbegi
Shining Primrose	<i>Primula amoena</i>	Kazbegi (endemic)
Ruprecht's Primrose	<i>Primula ruprechtii</i>	Sno Valley (endemic)
Hairy Rock-jasmine	<i>Androsace villosa</i>	Kazbegi
Pyrenian Gentian	<i>Gentiana pyrenaica</i>	Kazbegi
Blue Woodruff	<i>Asperula multifolia</i>	Vedi Hills
Lady's Bedstraw	<i>Galium verum</i>	
Crosswort	<i>Cruciata laevipes</i>	
Great Bindweed	<i>Calystegia silvatica</i>	
Vipers Bugloss	<i>Echium vulgare</i>	
Rough Comfrey	<i>Symphytum asperum</i>	Haghpat
Green Alkanet	<i>Pentaglottis sempervirens</i>	
(Horehound)	<i>Marrubium persicum</i>	Aragats
(Solenanthus)	<i>Solenanthus stamineus</i>	Aragats
Black Henbane	<i>Hyosciamus niger</i>	
Many-lobed Speedwell	<i>Veronica multifida</i>	
Germander Speedwell	<i>Veronica chamaedrys</i>	
Gentian-like Speedwell	<i>Veronica gentianoides</i>	
Handsome Mullein	<i>Verbascum formosum</i>	(endemic)
Great Mullein	<i>Verbascum thapsus</i>	Vedi Hills (our species)
Purple Mullein	<i>Verbascum phoenicum</i>	David Garji
Armenian Lousewort	<i>Pedicularis armena</i>	Aragats (lower slopes)
Common Elder	<i>Sambucus nigra</i>	
Ribwort Plantain	<i>Plantago lanceolata</i>	
Spear Thistle	<i>Cirsium vulgare</i>	
Daisy	<i>Bellis perennis</i>	
Yarrow	<i>Achillea millefolium</i>	
Small-flowered Milfoil	<i>Achillea micrantha</i>	Jandari Lake
Coltsfoot	<i>Tusilago farfara</i>	
(Goat's Beard)	<i>Tragopogon coloratus</i>	Aragats
Dandelion	<i>Taraxacum ruderalia</i>	
(Hyacinth)	<i>Bellevialia pycnantha</i>	Aragats
(Grape Hyacinth)	<i>Muscari neglectum</i>	Aragats (lower slopes)
Pale Grape Hyacinth	<i>Muscari pallens</i>	Kazbegi (endemic)
(Gagea)	<i>Gagea bulbifera</i>	Lake Sevan
Sulphur Gagea	<i>Gagea sulfurea</i>	

Glacier Gagea  
Imeretic Star-of-Bethlehem  
(Puschkinia)  
(Scilla)  
Mischtschenko's Squill  
  
Adam's Crocus

*Gagea glacialis*  
*Ornithogalum imereticum*  
*Puschkinia scilloides*  
*Scilla armena*  
*Scilla mischtschenkoana*  
*Ixiolirion tataricum*  
*Crocus adamii*

Aragats  
Aragats (endemic)  
Aragats  
Aragats  
Selim Pass  
Aragats  
Aragats