

Waveney Bird Club trip to Georgia and Armenia 2016

Introduction

(Steve Piotrowski)

This was to be Waveney Bird Club's eighth foreign tour and undoubtedly our most adventurous yet, bearing in mind that we were charting unknown territory and visiting two former Soviet-bloc countries that no one in the party had been to before. An itinerary was drawn up and put to our ground agents Giorgi Rajebashvili ([Ecotours Georgia](#)) and Zhanna Galyan (Armenia) who subsequently organised our transport, accommodation and meals throughout the tour. Paul Harvey of Shetland Bird Club was recruited to help me lead the trip. Eric (D'Weasel) Patrick would take on the task of Tour Recorder, a role that he had completed admirably on WBC's previous seven tours. In true WBC tradition, names were put in the hat and those drawn would each be responsible for writing one day of this blog.



Monday 2nd May: Departure

(Steve Piotrowski)

After months of planning, we boarded our coach to Gatwick for our early-morning flight to Tbilisi, gathering in the team at pick-up points en route. There was an early hitch as our driver received news that the A12 was closed south of Colchester due to an accident, so we were forced to divert to Cambridge and then onto the M11. Nevertheless, we arrived at the airport in good time and were suitably refreshed, having consumed our packed breakfasts, which had been prepared by “mission control” or, in other words, Kathy Piotrowski! Our flight took off on time and we headed for Istanbul where we would transfer to a flight to Tbilisi.

We arrived in Istanbul late afternoon and searched for the first birds of our tour. We craned our necks to see out of the airport windows and were rewarded with squadrons of Alpine Swifts over the city, some Hooded Crows feeding in the airport gardens and a distinct northerly movement of Grey Herons.

On arrival at Tbilisi, we were greeted by our guides Nika and Jimi and were soon on our bus to the Hotel Eurolux in the city centre.



Tbilisi, Roger Walsh

Tuesday 3rd May: Tbilisi to Kazbegi

(Roger Walsh)

We woke early in downtown Tbilisi and most of us gathered outside the Hotel Eurolux to start our trip list. The best of the bunch was a male eastern Common Redstart of the race "Samamiscus"; with a startling white wing bar, although crumbling Russian factories and old army trucks also proved to be an interesting distraction.

After breakfast we were reunited with our two guides – Nika and Jimi, who would be looking after us for the next four days. They would prove to be a great asset to our trip with their local knowledge and birding skills.

The first stop was to look for Semi-collared Flycatcher on the broad-leaved, woodland slopes at Ananuki. We failed to hit our main target but picked up a flock of Bee-Eaters and added Great Spotted Woodpecker and Nuthatch to the trip list. The road rose steeply into the mountains thereafter and our next stop was to nip into the supermarket for a little lunch at the ski resort at Guardori. An impressive list of birds was gained here as 23 sets of eyes searched in all directions.

We noted the first of hundreds of Water Pipits, Black Redstart, two Steppe Buzzards, a White Wagtail and a Red-Backed Shrike. A passing kite caused quite a lot of discussion with some thinking it was a Black and others a Red Kite – the latter very rare in Georgia.

We made our next stop on the Jdavi Pass at an altitude of 2,300m.

There were stunning views down into the deep gorge below and up onto the snow-capped mountains. Paul Harvey found a very distant Caucasian Black Grouse on a scree-slope and we all managed views through the scope. Both Alpine and Red-billed Choughs, Golden Eagle, Crag Martins, Alpine Accentor, Rock Thrush, Ring Ouzel and two Griffon Vultures were also noted. We left the colourful stalls and Russian tourists behind to drive over the pass and make a further stop where we enjoyed a little raptor migration, which included: 16 Honey Buzzards, a Montagu's Harrier and a possible Levant Sparrowhawk. We also enjoyed some confiding Twite, a Horned Lark and a Northern Wheatear. The next stop was an impressive basalt cliff at Kobi, which yielded our first Red-fronted Serins of the trip and a stunning Wallcreeper. There was another display of raptors, both migrating and hunting on the nearby mountains: 50+ Honey Buzzards, Golden Eagle, Lesser Spotted Eagle, Griffon Vulture, Lammergeier and Peregrine. Amongst the incredible array of abandoned houses a few Black Redstarts flicked their tails and chased insects, Dunnocks sang from rubble heaps and Wheatears and Grey Wagtails frolicked on the floral meadows.

We moved on to Stepantsminda and endeavoured to find our hotel. Our guides were totally confused about its location, expecting us to be staying at the basic-quality hostelry in the centre of town. Eventually, they realised that we were staying in the up-market Kazbegi Hotel (or 'Rooms Hotel') halfway up the mountain!

This amazing hotel sat high above the main village and afforded stunning views of Mount Kazbeg (5,345m) and other snow-capped Caucasian peaks. A Mistle Thrush sitting on a nest was found before we headed off for showers in our luxurious rooms. Our first real taste of Georgian food and wine was much appreciated and the endless buffet spread was repeatedly visited by all.



Tbilisi trucks, *Roger Walsh*



Pass to Tbilisi, *Roger Walsh*



Stepantsminda, *Mark Riley*



Rooms Hotel (Kasbegi) - *Roger Walsh*

Wed 4th May: Kazbegi – the challenge for the “Caucasus Big 5”!

(Paddy Shaw)

We emerged from the palatial splendour of the imaginatively-named ‘Rooms Hotel’ in Stepantsminda into a dawn of potentially changeable weather (which all weather is in the mountains) and outstanding scenery of looming, snow-capped peaks and heights and distances impossible to scale.

This was the home of the ‘Caucasus Big 5’ consisting of Caucasian Black Grouse and Snowcock, Guldenstadt’s Redstart, Mountain Chiffchaff and Great Rosefinch (Caspian Snowcock would be a target for later in Armenia).

Leaving the gated, guarded entrance to the hotel reveals another world of rough tracks and tumbledown homesteads, with barking but timid dogs, all setting each other off as we moved uphill to the slopes below the peaks. The hotel was perfectly situated for scanning the snowline, and was around a 15 minute walk from a range of suitable habitat for all five species.

The Caucasian Black Grouse were found quite quickly, with good views of a male performing his ‘leaping’ display. However, the business of slope-scanning demonstrated the difficulty of computing distance/size of target – while the scope may suggest you are looking at a bunch of stones, these might be rocks the size of a Cadillac. Until you have sight of a bird, there is really little point of reference, and for us Suffolk folk, the notion of looking uphill is pretty alien anyway!

Other birders were about (one of the few times we ran into any others on the whole trip) as the weather deteriorated on the peaks and cloud descended. As if on cue, we heard the wild, eerie arpeggiated calls of snowcock, with the characteristic ‘roll-off’ at the end which differentiates Caucasian from Caspian, tonally rather like Curlew and equally as atmospheric and haunting. And then we had it/them: well-camouflaged against the boulder-strewn home, and – for a while – motionless. The context of distance suddenly becomes very obvious.

So, how long should you stare at such a range-restricted bird – one of the main targets of the whole adventure, and perhaps a once-in-a-lifetime view? As long as it takes to hear a report of a female Great Rosefinch, seen by the other party of birders, down the slope in the meadow below us, that’s how long.....

Recent trip reports had shown the rosefinch to be potentially the most difficult of the “big 5” to find; not for us though, as the female was feeding in an area of short grass close to us and was soon joined by others, including a splendid cock, looking like a large, dark-eyed, plump strawberry, and easily within binocular range.

So, with three of the five under our belts, we headed back for breakfast. It's a rare couple of species that can mean you haven't mentioned hearing Mountain Chiffchaff singing, or the Griffon Vulture, Peregrine, Rock Thrush, Common Rosefinch and the Tur (Caucasian mountain goat), of which there was a small herd high on the rocks. Again, a creature perfectly toned for the landscape and despite the size, still difficult to pick out.

After a quick cultural shift, in and out of luxury, we headed to the Chkheri Valley on the other side of the village. The gullies were rich in sea buckthorn and under the famous Gergeti Trinity Church and Mt Kazbegi. We searched for Guldenstadt's Redstart, which we didn't find. Spoilt brats that we are, we had to put up with Lammergeyer and rufous Black Kite as the notable species.

Cutting our losses, we returned to 'our side' on the east slopes, moving further along the track from the pre-breakfast spot, and slightly further uphill, where buckthorn cut into the lower gullies, around St Elias the Prophet Church.

Here, we struck gold again! As we approached, a stunning, huge, flat-winged Black Vulture sailed over our heads and up and over the peaks and we noted another Rock Thrush, further Caucasian Black Grouse and Water Pipit almost everywhere. Moving into the scrub, Ring Ouzel and Mountain Chiffchaff were joined by a pair of the target – Guldenstadt's Redstarts. The male is a real 'take your breath away' bird, and – while hardly 'confiding' – they hung around long enough for everyone to get a good look. A 'worldie' for me: but so many birds on this trip were, I must be in the running for 'Tart of the Caucasus.'

Pressure off! The “Georgian Big Five” clocked up, we took a trip back along the Georgian Military Road (which runs north-south from Vladikavkaz in Russia to Tbilisi) to the Jvadi Pass (2379 metres above sea level), to look for White-winged Snowfinch. Although we didn't find any, our position near the side of the road attracted plenty of attention. Cars slow down, honk their horns or even stop to see what you're up to, all in an atmosphere of friendly curiosity in a region where birding is definitely not the norm.

This was the site of a small spring, and cars and trucks stopped to fill water bottles, with more casual visitors taking photo opportunities on the limestone rock formations.

During this stop, we witnessed a huge migration of Honey Buzzard, taking their chances between swinging weather conditions to get a few miles under the wing, plus an overflight by a Booted Eagle. It can get a bit nippy up here, even in May, and where the road runs under steep slopes round bends, tunnels have been built into the mountainside, allowing this important trade route to at least attempt to stay open; the road diverts through the tunnels at times of high snowfall. Rain storms were now whipping through in a speedy and unpredictable manner, and we headed back towards Stepantsminda, stopping at the village of Kobi, where a sheer rock face held the promise of Wallcreeper.

Kobi is typical of the changing face of this area of Georgia. Small, stone houses, falling into ruin, the previous occupants driven out by the harshness of a mountain existence towards the streets paved with gold of Tblisi and other centres. While the poverty and hardship of rural life de-populates, ski hotels are being built in the more accessible towns along the Military Road, preparing for fat times catering for the Caucasian bourgeoisie and visitors from Russia and China. The Rooms Hotel had plenty of expensive 4-wheel drives with Russian plates outside. Both Georgia and Armenia, with their unparalleled history as the oldest Christian nations, attract attention from 'cultural tourists.'

While part of the group – successfully, apparently – went off in search of Wallcreeper, I searched the ruins for the ghosts of Kobi; some evidence suggested folks had left taking very little. Below the rock face was a small round table and two chairs, grown through with weeds – perhaps where a couple of former inhabitants planned their retreat to less harsh conditions. One house – and a rather grand one – was obviously well-cared for, if not permanently occupied, with two stone lions atop the gateway – proclaiming the occupants' prosperity to no-one in particular. Two Red-billed Choughs preened each other on a ledge above the village, perhaps as the patio table-owners had done below some years earlier.

Anyway, that's enough musing! A big fly-though of hirundines prompted our departure, to the riverside habitat just south of Stepantsminda. Rain was threatening big time now, and we had just enough time to grab a view of a Red Fox and spend 10 minutes being serenaded by Corncrakes (perhaps 3?) giving the old two-stroke call invisibly from the undergrowth.

And then the rain came – seriously. So, we blew up for full-time on what had been a very memorable day and headed back to the alpine splendour of the hotel, sitting up on the eastern slopes, with its huge wooden-decked veranda facing the ever-changing colours on the peaks of Mount Kazbeg.



Great Rosefinch, *Eddie Marsh*



Great Rosefinch *Eddie Marsh*



Guldenstadt's Redstart



Kobi

Thursday 5th May: Kazbegi and the military road back to Tbilisi

(Rob and Helen Gooderham)

We made another early start and set off on foot to the steep base of the mountains immediately east of our hotel. The sky was blue and a bitterly cold wind blew off the snow fields. There were fabulous views of snow-clad Mount Kazbegi to the west lit by the early morning sun, with pasque flowers and gentians on the meadows.

We were searching for further views of Caucasian Grouse and Caucasian Snowcock, which we could hear calling and eventually found after a lot of scanning. We located another brilliantly-coloured male Great Rosefinch and then a number of Red-throated Pipits, a Short-toed Lark, Ortolan Buntings and Whinchats. Clearly, last night's bad weather had forced down some passage migrants. Frozen, we returned to our hotel for a wonderful breakfast which set us up for the day and reflected on our two-hour pre-breakfast walk that had been far from disappointing. It was time to leave this fantastic building designed in the Scandi-modern style. Timber dominates inside and out with bespoke furniture and vast glass windows displaying fantastic views over the mighty Great Caucasus.

We returned to the Georgian Military Highway, which is the primary road link between the Russian Federation and Armenia and the Middle East to the south. Despite the importance of this route, the road often degenerates into an unsurfaced track. Vehicles weaved erratically to find a level route around the potholes. We headed north some 15 km along the Dariali Gorge to take a look at the Russian border. The road is narrow in places and follows the river Terek flowing north deep in the ravine, to the Caspian Sea. We stopped briefly at the border, but were careful not to brandish our cameras as the disputed area of Chechnya lies beyond. The whole area appears to be a vast chaotic building site populated by trucks. We noted luxury 4 x 4s sweeping past occupied by fashionably skinny Russians in designer clothing! No visas are required for Russians to enter Georgia, but this is not reciprocated! We turned the mini-buses round and headed south with a brief and unsuccessful stop for Rock Buntings. Nika, our guide, handed round small tumblers of red wine made by his father in celebration of the moment (again!). Along our route, immense anonymous trucks were parked up in line to be taken through the border in 'trains' controlled by the police. The road

south climbed through the Tergi Valley between impressive snow-covered mountains as we approached the bleak Jvari Pass (2,379m) where we stopped to search for White-winged Snowfinch. Although we were unsuccessful this was a wonderful position for the visible migration of raptors. Water Pipits were in profusion on the mountain sides and a dead Willow Warbler was found. There were indications of massive snowfall over the winter and eventually a cold rain stopped play. We continued south alongside the River Aragvi that flows south to the Black Sea.

We stopped at the Kvisheti viewpoint, but still no luck with Snowfinch, although Alpine and Red-billed Choughs provided great entertainment. Snowdrops carpeted the slopes. Another dead Willow Warbler was found and indicating that that a fall of passage migrants had occurred during the night. This is a popular tourist place where Chechnyan women sell vodka, honey and fluffy hats!

We left the mountains and descended towards Tbilisi. Frequent monasteries and stone defensive towers appeared on distant outcrops overlooking the ravine. North of the vast reservoir of Zhinali, we stopped again at the steeply-sloping beech and birch forest at Ananuki and after some persistence were rewarded with Spotted Flycatcher and a pair of Semi-collared Flycatchers that were attending their nest.

We stopped again south of the reservoir at a meadow area with spectacular sandstone rock formations. The meadows were rich in wild flowers, orchids and butterflies and Crag Martins patrolled the rock faces. This was a known site for Green Warbler but unfortunately not today.

We arrived at central Tbilisi and checked into our hotel, six floors directly above the rail station! From our balcony we enjoyed extensive views of the city with screeching swifts overhead. Our guide and driver joined us for a meal in the city centre and took us via the Tbilisi metro. The railway network was extremely deep as are most Soviet metros and was opened in 1966. It had been designed in the Stalinist style with impressive marble facings to walls, but had clearly seen better days!

We ate in a restaurant decorated with lovely trompe l'oeil street scenes in the old town and as usual the Georgian food was very good: salads, BBQ meat, cheese, breads and good Georgian beer and wine.

Tomorrow Armenia!



Semicollared Fly, *Eddie Marsh*

Friday 6th May: Tbilisi to Vayk

(Granty)

Our guides Jovanas and Arra and two drivers met us outside our hotel and we were soon on the road to the Armenian border crossing where we were greeted by stern-faced border guards who wore bottle-green military uniforms, faintly ridiculous “dinner-plate” hats and expressions befitting of a funeral. They hardly exuded a welcome to Armenia, but

here we were nevertheless. What was far more welcoming was the super-charged Nightingale blasting out his staccato song near the border crossing – the first of a truly wondrous array of Armenian delights that were to captivate us for the next few days.

A squadron of about 20 Honey Buzzards soared overhead, freely crossing the border. No passports, no solemn document stamping and no fuss – a poignant reminder that birds know no international boundaries, their travel is unrestricted save for the impediments we put in their way.

We had left traffic-choked Tbilisi a few hours before, mercifully emerging into a zone of rather featureless flatness, but cultivated at nothing like the intensity of our own Suffolk prairielands. The city we had left behind was something of a curiosity. The drab, down-at-heel and decades-old housing and office blocks was a stark reminder of Georgia's Soviet links. In vivid contrast, bizarre, ultra-modern and often garish, glitzy architecture shocked as it came into view. It was as if the architects were casting off their Soviet shackles and letting their imagination run riot. Perhaps it was a metaphor for the way the country felt, a symbol of Georgia standing on its own feet at last and assuming its own identity. We were fast heading towards the idyllic village of Dilijan for a much-anticipated lunchtime meet-up with our Armenian agent, the ultra-efficient Zhanna. But it was a pleasure we had to wait for as one of our buses stopped us in our tracks. A puncture was quickly sorted, but we all took the chance to stretch our legs for a while and scan some rather dramatic crags that rose up high above the road.

Sure enough, raptors featured strongly – two Lesser Spotted Eagles and an Egyptian Vulture being the highlights – with a supporting cast of European Bee-eaters overheard and overhead and an exquisite Aescalaphid, a dragonfly-like insect that had the cameras clicking in overdrive.

Lunch was a sumptuous spread in a peaceful backwater of a restaurant, with the always helpful Zhanna holding court. A Booted Eagle drifted over and several of us enjoyed the trip's first Green Warbler.

On the road again, we had a first, tantalizing taste of what birding was to be like amid the upland lakes. A brief stop at an ephemeral wetland produced Ruddy Shelducks, Wood Sandpiper and a Mountain Chiffchaff. Further on we skirted the vast Lake Sevan, to which we would return a few days hence, and were beguiled by dazzling White-winged Terns and the first of many smart Armenian Gulls among many other delights. The taster gave way to a full-on feast further on as we

viewed a body of water set amid grassland and with a backdrop of snow-topped mountains. Against such a background the lone Black-winged Stilt and Gull-billed Tern looked somehow incongruous, as did the scores of White-winged Terns, but the stars of the show here were a lone Baltic Gull, a Garganey, two dazzling and confiding White-winged Snowfinches and a small number of slightly less dazzling Rock Sparrows. The snowfinches were soon joined by a group of Rock Sparrows and, whilst the attention of most of us was focussed on this rather confiding flock of birds, a splinter group from our party had wandered off and located a Siberian Stonechat further down the road. An immature Steppe Eagle was spotted at our next stop, but this magnificent bird wasn't on show for long as it glided gracefully over the hillside before disappearing into a gully and out of sight.

The culture vultures among us were not to be disappointed either. Further towards our destination of Vayk we encountered a fascinating Silk Road "hotel" – the Orbelyan Caravanserai. This remarkably well-preserved trading post and rest stop for Silk Road travellers was built in 1332. Once bustling and filled with traders and their livestock, now it was empty, dark and strangely atmospheric.

In the rather cold light of day outside, birding, of course, continued apace, with the highlights being a fine male Rock Thrush and several Ortolan Buntings, one of which mesmerised its admirers by shuffling around at their feet.

At last we ascended the winding road to the Hotel Amrots, perched high up, fortress-like, above the pleasant little town of Vayk. European Scops Owls were to lure us with their odd, monotonous calls after a hearty meal in a nearby restaurant and as we trudged wearily through the darkness back up the slope to our hotel some of us could not resist the comparison between the warm welcome we received at the charming Amrots establishment and the cold, surly attitude of those border men in their "dinner-plate" hats who stared at us with steely gaze a few hours previously.



Ortolan Bunting Armenia - R Weale

Saturday 7th May: Vayk to Agarak

(Eddie Marsh)

Some of the group were up early and birded from around the hotel. Birding was brilliant as the hotel was situated high above the town of Vayk, overlooking mountain slopes and gardens. From our superb vantage point, we managed to locate a good selection of birds before breakfast which included: European Bee-eaters, Syrian Woodpeckers, Black-eared Wheatear, Western Rock Nuthatch, White Stork, Lesser Grey Shrike, Rock Thrush, Hoopoe and Rock Bunting to name a few. After breakfast, we left the Hotel Amorots (Castle Hotel – there were false turrets on the walls around the hotel to give the building a castle effect) and got rolling by 9am. After a short distance, we were birdwatching along the minor road to Zedea. The two mini-buses parked up and we ventured into an area of rocky scrub, with a fast-running river under a road bridge and rolling hills, habitat that was teeming with birds. The group split up to explore different areas along this quiet dirt road. We spent nearly two hours here with some good species seen. Highlights included: Eastern Rock Nuthatch, White-throated Robin, Eastern Orphean Warbler, Mountain Chiffchaff, Barred Warbler, Black-eared Wheatear, Woodchat Shrike, Black-headed Bunting, Woodlark,

Crag Martins, Rock Bunting, Rosy Starlings, Alpine Swift and Long-legged Buzzard to name but a few.

We left this site around 11am and headed for Agarak with stops on the way and some of the journey following the famous Silk Road. The next stop was at Spandarian at 12.15pm, an area with rolling hills one topped by a communications establishment. This was a known Lesser Kestrel breeding site where they nest on the buildings. Highlights included: Lesser Kestrels, Lesser Spotted Eagle, Long-legged Buzzard, Short-toed Eagle, Montagu's Harrier, Twite and Tree Pipit, an enjoyable stop with plenty of action going on.

We were back on the road again at 12.40pm and stopped again at 1.10pm at a historical site called Zorats Qarar (Mighty Stones) a Stonehenge look-alike! We searched in vain here for Bimaculated Lark but the highlights were: Lesser Kestrels, Corn Buntings and Skylarks with very little else seen, so we were on the move again at 2.10pm.

We travelled for an hour and twenty minutes before stopping for lunch in a hotel in Goris. This was a superb lunch stop with the tables laid out banquet-style although it did consume another hour of birding time. Griffon Vultures and Ravens were spotted on the next stage of our journey and we were treated to a huge thunderstorm.

It was now 16.30pm and still some distance to travel to our final destination of Agarak. Back on the buses and on the move again, "Steve P" was on good form telling few interesting stories from his travelling experiences, it was very entertaining with plenty of banter for good measure. It was a very scenic journey as we travelled through three stunning wooded gorges. A brief comfort stop produced little on the bird front, but did produce two stunning Man Orchids.

We had to traverse the highest mountain pass in the old Soviet bloc at 2,535m (8,316 feet) to reach our next destination – Meghri, which runs through the Arevik National Park. It was stunning. Adrian was feeling the strain as he was rather fearful of the sheer drops below unguarded mountain roads.

We arrived in Meghri at 8.30 pm when it was almost dark! We had a brief stop so the guides could buy wine and beer for our evening meal and, whilst we waited, Ali declared that it was far too late to eat as, when he is at home at this time of night, his wife Pam would be bringing him his cup of cocoa and taking his slippers off ready for bedtime! The rest of the group were intrigued and enquired as to what time he got up in the morning! He said 6.30 a.m., so when challenged about his Rip Van

Winkle type (ten hours per night) sleep pattern; he said that he did have to get up in the night several times!

The final leg of our journey to Agarak took us past the fenced border with Iran. The group then split into two as we had to stay in two hotels to accommodate us all, the Marishok and the LM. Luckily, the hotels were just a short walk across the town square from each other.

Dinner had been arranged in the Marishok for 9 pm and it was a special day for Dick Walden as he was celebrating his birthday. He had been trying to keep this event secret, but “mission control” had been tipped off by Dick’s wife Mandy, so tonight became a big celebratory dinner.

Granty opened proceedings by announcing that it was Dick’s birthday followed by a rather tasteful (by his standards) speech. Dick was then presented with a card that had been secretly signed by everyone else on the trip, and a very large birthday cake with “Happy Birthday Dick” inscribed on top. Our drivers and guides also gave him a presentation case of a cigarette box, a lighter and a hip flask. We all sang “Happy birthday” and, thankfully, Ali stayed awake throughout the proceedings despite consuming huge quantities of wine including the dregs from the tables throughout the restaurant!

It had been a long day, but with some fantastic birds, a good meal, Birthday Celebrations and all washed down with a few beers and wine – what a great day.



Western Rock Nuthatch juv - *Eddie Marsh*



Long-legged Buzzard - *Eddie Marsh*



Sunday 8th May: Valley and mountains east of Vank near Meghri

(John Garbutt and Carol Elliott)

We had spent the night in Agarak's Hotel ML and it was time for breakfast, so we made our way through the hotel's reception area to find that some of our group had already been out birdwatching just a short walk away. Among other birds, they had found a target species in this area: Ménétries's Warbler named after a Frenchman, Édouard Ménétries, who first described it in 1832 – thus the bird's name should be pronounced "May-nay- trees-es". We would have a look ourselves the following morning.

After breakfast, including tea with no milk (surely a flavour improvement?) and while waiting for the day's transport to arrive, we saw Laughing Dove and House and Tree Sparrows sitting on and around the adjacent buildings. We were met by three 4x4 vehicles that would enable us to achieve the day's excursion by driving up into the mountains. Which vehicle should we choose: the one with the broken side window or the one with the cracked windscreen? We chose the third one and were joined by Rob and Helen Gooderham. The other half of our party soon arrived from the Hotel Marishok with three more 4x4s. Our drivers (park rangers) were dressed in smart military fatigues that seemed to be connected with the Armenian army. Indeed, our driver (who we nicknamed "Jensen" for reasons that will become apparent) had the word "Armenia" velcroed onto his shoulder band and saluted another man when he arrived. As three of the drivers looked like grandfather, father and son, we suspected some nepotism in the Armenian forces.

The convoy of 4x4s set off from Agarak dodging numerous potholes towards a "T" junction where we joined the M2 road, marked by the kind of blue signs that would denote motorways in the UK. However, this M2 had just one lane each way, its condition was rather poor and there was no hard shoulder. We turned left alongside a high barbed wire fence that protects the border with Iran.

Over the fence is some no-mans'- land then the River Aras which forms the boundary at this point between Armenia and Iran. On the other side we could see a road with lorries driving on it and an Iranian town.

Although the Armenian people in Agarak and Meghri live alongside the border with Iran, there was no sign of tension. Indeed, there is clearly some regular interchange between the two countries because we saw lorries with Iranian registration plates driving to and from the border. At another “T” junction, the road sign told us that straight ahead would take us into Iran and it did cross our minds that we could easily have been kidnapped by our drivers. However, we turned left on the M2 towards the large Armenian town of Meghri with the river of the same name on our right.

Armenia is a very mountainous country so there is usually just one main road between the larger towns and the topography demands that the roads run beside the fast flowing rivers at the bottom of the gorges. Because there is only one road, open-sided tunnels have been constructed at vulnerable points so that the roads can be kept open when snowfall and avalanches would make them impassable. These open-sided tunnels only seem to be used when the roads would otherwise be closed and on this particular road, they were sited on an old road surface close to the hillside. On another day, we did drive through one of these tunnels – it had no metalled road surface and two large vehicles could not pass one another so we had to reverse out to let an oncoming lorry pass.

After driving several kilometres along the M2, we turned left over a small bridge and then onto a single track road that would take us up these particular mountains that are situated within a “Natural Park”. The road surface started off as deplorable but then deteriorated. And, of course, you can’t drive directly up a mountain but need to navigate numerous “hairpin” bends and short “straights”. We were re-assured that someone would have carried out a full Risk Assessment and expected that this could be found alongside the Accident Book.

Jensen had failed to take “pole position” on the starting grid and clearly wanted to move to the front. Once in the lead (yes, Jensen did manage to overtake on this mountain track), it was clear that he did not want his turbo-charged 4x4 to be overtaken until we crossed the finishing line. Some unavoidable deep potholes were taken slowly and we avoided numerous rock falls, including one very large rock that caused Jensen to utter what we assumed to be an Armenian expletive. With just one metre of road surface to the side of our vehicles wheels and certain death if we slipped over the adjacent precipice, even Jensen thought it necessary to reduce his speed.

Along the road, we passed a building that was used as a base for the Natural Park. Jensen proudly told us that it was his office and that he was the Director. We were relieved that he would be familiar with the road. A few minutes later, we passed through a small village high up in the mountains and wondered whether the occupants lived there all year or just in the less cold months.

Most people will never encounter a road surface as bad as this but eventually it was deep snow, rather than the road's poor condition, that made it impossible to proceed further. So we exited the 4x4s, bruised mentally and physically, but WHAT A FANTASTIC PLACE TO BE. Our elevation was close to the mountains' summits and we could enjoy distant views towards the valleys below.

A target bird was the Caspian Snowcock that frequents this lofty habitat and, as its name suggests, survives on the snow line. One was soon found close to a mountain peak but eventually there were perhaps three, silhouetted against the sky. We also found Whinchats and, perhaps surprisingly at this high level, Common Cuckoo. Wolf tracks were found in the snow and we believe that one of our guides actually saw one disappearing out of view. Next we walked part way down the mountain and were collected by the vehicles that drove us to our lunch point beside a fast-running stream and waterfall. It would have been a picturesque spot apart from various iron objects that had been placed across the stream to enable the other bank to be reached. There were also plastic bottles placed on branches as some crude form of decoration.

Packed lunches (including vegetarian) arrived somehow and we seemed unaffected by the thousands of insects that swarmed exactly over the water itself. Over a leisurely lunch, we saw a Golden Eagle above, Mountain Chiffchaff singing in the scrub around us and had perfect views of a target bird: Green Warbler.

After lunch, we set off down the mountain and were perhaps relieved when Jensen reached the "less bad" road surface of the M2 that took us back alongside the border with Iran. At a "T" junction we could either turn right towards our hotel town of Agarak, but we turned left towards Iran. Soon afterwards, Jensen uttered another Armenian expletive then, in English, "problem". His much-abused, turbo-charged 4x4 had stuttered to a halt. The other drivers soon arrived, the vehicle's bonnet was opened, there was much disconnection of parts but the engine would only splutter and backfire through the turbocharger. Soon another car arrived with a young driver who we called "Lewis" because he had

clearly been taught to drive by the same instructor as Jensen, who we left forlornly looking at his injured pride and joy. We started in the direction of the Iranian border but immediately turned left onto a dirt road that took us about one kilometre into a narrow gorge.

Almost immediately a target species appeared: both male and female Persian Wheatears, now a separate species having been split with the Kurdish Wheatear from the Red-rumped Wheatear in recent years. Eastern Orphean Warblers were nesting in the gorge's scrub where Black-headed Buntings were also visible, a Blue Rock Thrush appeared on the horizon, a Griffon Vulture soared lazily overhead, two Chukars announced their appearance, and some further Ménétries's Warblers were easy to locate.

Other birds noted included: Grey Partridge, Egyptian Vulture, Long-legged Buzzard, Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Feral Pigeon or Rock Dove, Eurasian Collared Dove, Common Swift, European Bee-eater, Common Skylark, Eurasian Crag Martin, Water Pipit, White Wagtail, Common Nightingale, Northern Wheatear, Western Black-eared Wheatear, Common Blackbird, Ring Ouzel, Upcher's Warbler, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, Eastern Rock Nuthatch, Lesser Grey Shrike, Red-backed Shrike, Eurasian Magpie, Red-billed Chough, Hooded Crow, and Common Linnet.

We then headed back to our hotels which gave Lewis the opportunity to drive very fast with his radio at full volume. Fortunately the drive was fairly short!

Back at the hotel, and after a shower, I was sitting in the reception area when I was approached by Susie – a slim and very attractive girl who had served us with breakfast many hours before. Her English was only slightly better than my Armenian, but I was able to understand that at school she had learned only two foreign languages – German and Russian. She needed to learn English and therefore just wanted to talk. Next, those of us in the Hotel ML were driven the short distance across Agarak's main square for dinner at the hotel occupied by the other half of our party. We were tired but happy and slept soundly in anticipation of tomorrow's early start to find the local Ménétries's Warblers.



Menetries Warbler, *Eddie Marsh*



Monday 9th May: Agarak – Vayk

(Will Brame)

The day dawned fine and sunny around the town of Agarak, and the early birders amongst us had a pre-breakfast wander, finding Menetries Warblers, Hoopoe and Syrian Woodpeckers. This was followed by a short drive to Meghri – along the fortified wire border fencing that separated us from Iran – where we were to be shown a special place for birds. Along the route, three Rollers showed on tree tops whilst those that cared to registered themselves a few Iranian “ticks”. Arriving at our destination we duly alighted from our minibuses and split into small groups to give the area a good grilling. Soon news of a male Levant Sparrowhawk perched in a tree crackled over the radios and thus we discovered the reason for the “special” tag given to our visit – breeding Levant Sparrowhawks! As everyone enjoyed good views of the male and female, a nest was found delighting one and all still further! A few Common Rosefinches also showed themselves in the rather allotment-like surroundings and indeed we were invited into one such smallholding by a very friendly Armenian. As we passed through the gardens, we noted a plethora of insect life at every level of vegetation, something sorely missing back home.

Back then to Agarak for breakfast with a few Rosy Starlings and Crag Martins being viewed as we again passed the border with Iran before starting our journey back to Vayk.

Leaving Agarak, we travelled along winding roads that snaked up and down following Armenia’s ancient Silk Road, roads that at times were lined with familiar species of trees such as Oak, Elm, Maple, Beech and Sorbus. As this was going to be a long day’s drive for our Armenian hosts’ frequent pit stops/nicotine breaks were needed for all: it was during one such break near Karajan overlooking a deep valley that a close encounter with an adult Lammergeyer gave us one of best views that we had of this species all trip. Passing a medieval fortress (13th Century), built high up on the steep cliff sides, was a statue of a bear holding a ring of keys in its mouth. Checking with the guide book we learned that this is the symbol of the region of Syunik. Stopping alongside for a photo opportunity, birds noted were both Grey and White Wagtails with a smart male Blue Rock Thrush all alongside a torrent of a river – very picturesque! As we travelled towards Voroyan, a superb adult Egyptian Vulture hung over one of the numerous deep valleys.

Stopping to look over another such valley, keen eyes picked out a well camouflaged Praying Mantis, Queen of Spain Fritillary, Green-winged Orchid, Lady and Man type Orchids with Blue-cheeked Bee-eater and a Short-toed Eagle seen in the area. On to Goris and we were surprised to find the town full of people, not to welcome our party but in celebration of the victory over Nazi Germany during the Second World War on the 9th May 1945 – an event which is still maintained to this day.

After another exceedingly fine lunch that was exceedingly large as well, Ara (our guide) was keen for us to visit the Volatan River Gorge at the Wings of Tatev. This site has gained an entry in the Guinness Book of Records as it has the longest reversible cable car in the world, an impressive feat of engineering to say the least. This area was where Ara had seen four Eagles stacked atop one another. It was not for us today although we did note Rock Thrush, Red-backed Shrike, Long-legged Buzzard and an unexpected Striped Hawkmoth.

We travelled higher along our route and as a consequence colder, stonier fields, near Sarnakunk, looked good for Bimaculated Lark, so searches were made either side of the road. No Bimacs were found, but if only fields back home held such avian numbers as these four fields. There were hundreds of Skylarks, Water Pipits, five Lesser Grey Shrikes a few Whinchats and, amazingly, over a hundred Common Rosefinches in just one field. As we descended once more towards Vayk a herd of cattle, known simply in Armenian as "Kov" (no breed name), was being driven off the roadside hills.

It was one silly "Kov" that decided to put our minibus brakes to the test. The brakes performed admirably and we stopped with a few millimetres to spare, affording no injuries in or out of the vehicle. The rest of our journey remained uneventful and we arrived at the excellent Amrots (Castle)

Hotel in Vayk once again.



Menetries's Warbler - *Eddie Marsh xxx*



Striped Hawkmoth - *Will Brame*

Tuesday 10th May: The amazing Armash Fish Ponds

(Ernie Lucking)

Most of us were up again for pre-breakfast birding at the Castle Hotel. The birds seemed quite comparable to when we were overnighted here three days earlier with our only highlight being two young White Storks, their heads just peeping above the nest, whilst their parent stood guard. By 7.40 a.m., we were all packed up and in the minibuses, heading towards Surevan, losing height with every metre travelled. D'Weasel led the way by shouting the names of the birds seen from the bus. We arrived at the Armash Fish Ponds at 9 05 a.m. and whilst waiting for the gates to open, we noted Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters on the wires, plus Pygmy Cormorants and Night Herons flying over.

The Armash Fish Ponds are one of the Caucasus' richest ornithological hot spots, boasting the largest concentration of bird life in Armenia, with an impressive species list of 220.

It is overlooked on the western side by the Twin Mountains of Mount Ararat and on the southern side it runs up to the Turkish border. Mount Ararat is currently in the Republic of Turkey, but was formerly part of Armenia's historic homeland until the 1915 Armenian genocide, when the Ottoman Government systematically exterminated around 1.5 million of its minority Armenian subjects. The Bible says that Mount Ararat was the final resting place of Noah's Ark after 150 days, but so far this has not been proven.

We walked around the first pond with Great Reed, Paddyfield, Eastern Olivaceous, Reed and Menetries Warblers plus Rufus Bushchats and Bearded Tits. On the ponds, two Red-necked Phalaropes, 150 Little Stints, 100 Ruff, two Kentish Plovers, 70 Ringed Plover, a Little Ringed Plover, 20 Curlew Sandpiper, six Spotted Redshanks, a Greenshank, a Green Sandpiper, three Common Sandpipers, 150 Wood Sandpipers, two Greater Sand Plovers, single Temminck's Stint, Terek and Marsh Sandpipers, five Broad-billed Sandpipers, two Turnstone, seven Grey Plover, three Dunlin, 30 Black-winged Stilts, four Avocets and four Oystercatchers. A scan through the gull flock revealed 2 Pallas', 60 Slender-billed, one Mediterranean and 100 Armenian Gulls and the terns included three Little, ten Gull-billed, ten Whiskered, 1,000 White-winged and three Common Terns. A total of 12 White-tailed Lapwings were holding territory and other species of note included: six Lapwings, 40 Collared Pratincoles, 12 Grey Herons, 20 Purple Herons, 100 Glossy Ibis, 80 Black-crowned Night Heron, three Squacco Herons, 20 Little Egrets and 30 Marsh Harriers. A migrating flock of 35 White Pelicans and 13 Dalmatian Pelicans was certainly worthy of note.

Watching around the first pool had taken us well into lunch time, but our "Meals on Wheels Lady" surprised us with a superb lunch of Spaghetti Bolognese plus the usual goodies.

After lunch, we scanned a few pools that contained 13 White-headed Ducks, 100 Red-crested Pochard, 40 Pochard, 40 Ferruginous Ducks, five Tufted Ducks, 12 Gadwall, ten Teal and two Mallard. Two Savi's Warblers were reeling from deep in the reedbed and six Lesser Short-toed Larks were seen on the tracks.

This day had been by far the hottest of the trip, and by the time we got to the transits at 5.40pm, I just felt about done in, but everyone agreed that this had been the best day's birding they had ever had anywhere.

As I looked around the minibus on the way back to Yerevan, all I could see were happy souls sleeping. We arrived at the Capitol Hotel, Yerevan, at 7pm and all went to find a cashpoint and get some snacks at a supermarket. We finished off our once-in-a-lifetime day with drinks and snacks at the Silk Road Hotel.



Armash Fish Ponds - *Eddie Marsh*



Desert

Wednesday 11th May: Mount Aragats

(John and Becky Bedwell)

We drove up the rounded slopes of Mt Aragats on a paved road and, on reaching an area of juniper, we found our target species, Radde's Accentor, with little difficulty. Superb views were had of several birds. Unfortunately, no Bluethroats were found, but White-throated Robin, Ring Ouzel and Ortolan Bunting were some compensation.

[Insert image 21] We continued to the 10 th -13 th Century Amberd Castle and a nearby track yielded Red-backed Shrike, Woodlark, three Lammergeyers, Short-toed Eagle, three Cuckoos together with further White-throated Robin, Ring Ouzel and Ortolan Bunting. A few moments of controversy came with distant view of a large lark which was thought by some to be a Bimaculated Lark! The bird was clearly singing, but was far too distant for any notes to be heard. A small party clambered up the hillside in the hope of obtaining better but to no avail. [Insert image 10]

[Insert image 22] A superb lunch was delivered by 4-wheel drive before we continued higher up the mountain in an effort to locate Crimson-winged Finch. We reached the snow-line and could go no further and spread out in our search – but to no avail. However, there was compensation in the form of Skylarks, Horned Larks, Water Pipits, Twite and a magnificent display of pink crocus carpeting the mountainside. It felt like you were on top of the world with the mountains all around you. Stunning!

Rain stopped play for the rest of the day so we returned to our hotel to get ready for the evening entertainment at the Silk Road Hotel.



Bedwells



Dinner that night was a feast held at the adjacent Silk Road Hotel accompanied by a local band and preceded by a demonstration of traditional lavash bread- making. Two women made an efficient

production line, one woman rolling out pieces of dough on a floured baking board and a second skilfully stretching the dough into thin sheets by throwing it to and fro in the air and laying it on a special padded implement, a batat. The dough was swiftly and firmly applied by means of the batat to the wall of the sunken oven or tonir to cook. This only took a brief time and was removed with a hook and added to a pile of lavash that we promptly consumed together with numerous delicious nibbles and local red wine.

Over dinner, our band played traditional Armenian musical instruments: duduk (a flute-like instrument), kanon (a plucked instrument similar to a Zither), dhol (a big drum), oud (type of flute), tar (a long-necked, Persian, stringed instrument) and vocal. The young musicians were all members of the conservatoire in Yerevan, their music amazing and thoroughly enjoyed by us all.

It was another great day of the tour and, to cap it all, we went to bed with the news that Norwich City had been relegated from the Premier League. Icing on the cake or what!



Radde's Accentor, *Eddie Marsh*



Aragats, Bedwells



Local Band in Yerevan SteveP

Thursday 12th May: Vedi

(Ivan Levett)

As the haunting melodies of the Armenian musicians faded and the lullabies of Brahms and List took hold a new performance by the

Yerevan Canine Choir started with renditions of Bach and Wolfgang Mozart. These too faded as the dawn turned into a pink hue and the first birds awoke to sing.

Blackbird was first, joined shortly by many other songsters. Swifts, in their countless legions, were screaming past balconies and windows in pursuit of food. Going upstairs to breakfast was different but the view was great. Boarding the mini-buses at 0800 the journey to Vedi was hampered by major road works and the diversion of traffic through small tracks and unsuitable roads. The "rush hour" did not help. Clearing the traffic, a stop for water was next. This provided an interesting observation of armed military personnel getting out of private cars and shopping in the "supermarket".

Passing through the town of Vedi and heading North a rubbish tip was negotiated to get to the birding site, or so we thought. We bounced over very rough arid ground, which all the trip reports state is only suitable for four wheel drives. Our mini-buses coped very well (must have been all the weight in them!). A swimming pool was found, minus water and bikini-clad clientele in the middle of nowhere; it did have a couple of wrecked cars and a lot of rubbish around it though. There was no sign of any buildings – very strange. As we piled out of the vans, a penetrating, high-pitched song alerted us to the presence of Pale Rock Sparrow, then a male Finsch's and a pair of Isabelline Wheatears feeding young. A Red Fox was seen watching us from a ridge above where Long-legged Buzzards were soaring. We continued walking along the dry wadi for some way, but there was no sign of any Grey-necked Buntings, one of our target birds. However, a couple of birds in some scrub demanded attention. These turned out to be Desert Finches, outside of their normal range so quite a find. Nika rushed past and informed us that we were in the wrong wadi, there should have been a water source crossing the track. Back to the vehicles and transferring to the correct wadi, a trek up this one soon produced another Isabelline Wheatear pair and an Eastern Rock Nuthatch all within sight of the buses. Continuing on we came across the water that we had been looking for. A call came back from further up the wadi that a singing Grey-necked Bunting had been located. Whilst watching this bird a large bird of prey was found close behind us. This Long-legged Buzzard was displaying and calling and was soon joined by its mate. Very good views were had by all. Returning to the water source several birds were coming down to drink: Goldfinches were in evidence, mainly by their calls but several Trumpeter Finches were drinking and bathing. Walking back towards the

vehicles a Lammergeyer was seen soaring over the ridges of the surrounding mountains with distant views of Stock Dove on a rock pinnacle a bonus. We were back into the vehicles for a short ride to a rendezvous point for lunch. Yet again the mobile caterers had packed up a hot meal for us all and transported it to the middle of nowhere. There was a shelter which seated a number of people with a table and a roof to keep off the sun. These seem to be all over the place in Armenia. We had been using them for the last couple of days for shelter as we ate our food. The meal was delicious, as usual, and consumed with bread and hot drinks. Whilst eating, a flock of 22 Rose-coloured Starling flew over, among the many we had seen on the trip. Tree Sparrow was present around the picnic site as was a Little Ringed Plover.

During the afternoon the group split to allow most to return to the fish ponds and a small group (John and Rebecca Bedwell and Rob and Helen Gooderham) to attend a cultural tour of Yerevan.

Aras acted as the guide and he was very happy to show us some of the places of interest with the help of our expert driver. It turned out that we were in good company as Aras's grandfather, Alexander Tamanyan was an Armenian architect living and working in Moscow and in 1924 was commissioned to plan the design and development of the city of Yerevan. Alexander incorporated national traditions into the building designs, took account of siting industrial parts downwind of the city, exploiting views of Mount Ararat and creating grand squares and boulevards with extensive tree planting to moderate the summer temperatures.

Our first stop is a book shop with a glass floor with a two-storey drop below. There is an exhibition of maps that feature Armenia. We are given a helpful and interesting tour of the exhibits in a variety of languages. The second stop was the Museum of Alexander Tamanyan, which is directed by Aras's brother. We are given a most hospitable welcome and an exhaustive guide to the works of Alexander by an enthusiastic female curator. Aras later took us to the central square and buildings that were built as designed by his grandfather.

Third stop was the Mother of Armenia Monument. This is a stature and pedestal over 50m high installed in 1962 representing 'peace through strength' which replaced a stature of Stalin.

Fourth stop was the Genocide Memorial to the genocide around 1915 of Armenians by the Ottoman Empire, now the Turkish Republic – an impressive contemporary spiked monument with an underground eternal flame. These are located above the city with panoramic views. Many

tributes in the form of planted trees from nation states and individuals are located around the monument.

For the birders, the journey continued onto the Ardashir Fishponds. No booking had been made so much talking was done by the guides to get permission to enter. Finally in, the plan was to walk the pool where two days ago there had been so many waders and gulls. A clockwise circuit was taken in very hot, sunny conditions. Having been ill a few days previously I walked up to the meeting point and sat under a shady tree. I passed the time watching a pair of Kingfisher in a bank side nest going about their chores feeding young. I also had the company of several Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters and a couple of Eurasian Bee-eaters. Many Purple and Night Heron were flying about whilst in the distance, towards the river that marks the boundary with Turkey, flew myriads of Sand Martins.

These were being harassed by the Marsh Harriers and a couple of Hobbies. Another good selection of waders was noted around the fishponds including: 20 Black-winged Stilts, 37 Wood Sandpipers, another Little Ringed Plover, 18 Grey, 30 Ringed and 15 Kentish Plovers, 58 Black-tailed Godwits, 14 Broad-billed Sandpipers, 150 Curlew Sandpipers, five Terek Sandpipers, three Red-necked Phalaropes, a Snipe and with two Temminck's Stints amongst 200 Little Stints. The roosting gull flock was slightly larger than it was two days ago with 100 Armenian, 80 Slender-billed, six Caspian and a single Pallas's Gull. There was another good showing of White-winged Black Terns plus seven Little and a single Black Tern.

At the allotted time to meet, the sky was looking very ominous. Rain could be seen falling in the distance from very black clouds. These were heading in our direction. Back into the bus and moving to the crossroads where we had lunch two days ago it was decided to split into four groups and take a path per group. A Paddyfield Warbler had been heard close to the cross-roads so this was sought, with reasonable views. The rain started but was fairly light. Many of the photographers were attempting to take pictures of the Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters. The clouds were building over Mount Ararat and light was getting bad by now. Eventually the groups returned having had varied success.

We left the fish ponds and had an easier return to Yerevan. The speed of the traffic in the city, even when it is nose-to-tail is amazing and there appears to be a free-for-all and no speed limits on roundabouts.

However, everything keeps moving and cars in Armenia and Georgia seem to last a forever with numerous mechanics' lock-ups along every

street, even in the smallest of hamlets. When vehicles finally “die” they are left in the countryside or used as fences for livestock. Arriving back at the Hotel we were greeted by roadworks outside the Hotel with the ensuing chaos.

Going into the hotel to get ready for the evening meal, which was again in the Silk Road Hotel, next door, was accomplished with care. On coming back out to go to dinner the road works had turned into a long trench with the tarmac taken off and no warning signs at all. Cyclists beware, although we saw very few in the city. I wonder why?

The meal was again superb, the wine and beer flowed freely and everyone was content until The Log! This was done in customary fashion with much banter and to the bemusement of the Hotel staff, who kept appearing to try to clear the tables of the dishes. Retiring to bed with thoughts of the days past and the few days left of the trip any choir was forgotten.



Vedi-Hills, / Levett



Desert Finch, *R. Weale*



Grey-necked Bunting, *R. Weale*



Slender-billed Gulls, *R. Weale*

Friday 13th May: Gedi Gorge and Sevan Lake

(Adrian Richards)

After an early breakfast we left the Hotel Capital in Yerevan at 9.15am. As we drove out of the city our guides pointed out a large imposing statue on top of a hill which seemed to dominate the skyline. The figure we were told was Mesrop Mashtots who created the original Armenian alphabet of 36 characters.

After leaving the city we drove north to our first stop of the day the Geghand Monastery. To reach it we drove into a deep-sided valley. The car park by the monastery entrance was lined with several stalls all manned by elderly ladies dressed in black and all selling the same wares: – “Gata” an almond flavoured sponge/pastry pie. These appeared to be the size of manhole covers and could be purchased by the slice and “Sujukh” a salami-sized confection of nuts and fruit juices. Rebecca and Helen bought some of these and allowed us all to try them later. The surrounding cliffs contained a Crag Martin colony and above it several Alpine Swifts were spotted as was a displaying Goshawk, with a few other raptors also seen.

After 15 minutes we left the tourist spot only to arrive at another – the Gedi Gorge. The car park here was also lined with the same stalls and

the same wares. We quickly walked passed these and entered the gorge. Several Syrian Woodpeckers were seen well by the edge. Most of the party walked down into the Gorge. Those of us that stayed behind were treated to a Western Rock Nuthatch which posed close by several times. A male Levant Sparrowhawk also showed well below us. It was hoped that the Bimaculated Lark might be present here, but sadly none were found. We left at 12.30 and our drivers then took us north to Lake Sevan, arriving at 1.45pm. After a short drive along the lake edge we arrived at our lunch stop at the Bashinjaghian Tea House and Restaurant. As we drove in an enormous tea pot on a pole marked the entrance. It was coloured crimson with white spots like a fly-agaric toadstool. The restaurant décor was extremely rustic but the windows allowed us to view the lake, which had very clear blue water, but most importantly we were able to see the numerous Armenian Gulls well. The lunch consisted of fresh breads and salads; we were also served Sig – a fish that was caught in the lake.

After lunch we were driven further along the lake until we stopped at an open grassy area a short distance from the shore. There were also a few belts of planted pine. It was quite sunny but a brisk breeze was blowing. We spotted a Clouded Yellow which Steve managed tried to catch. It was a very bright pristine individual, but we still couldn't identify it with certainty. To the right up a path several Yellow Wagtails were spotted and it soon became apparent that a large number of several different races were present. A stunning yellow-headed (*lutea*) was a real star, along with grey-headed (*thunbergi*), Sykes (*beema*) and the now familiar black-headed (*feldegg*).

A Red-Throated Pipit with a rusty read throat and three Short-toed Larks were also among this flock and a Woodchat Shrike put in a late appearance. The Shrike was of the race *niloticus* and it flew to some nearby bushes. Leaving Eddie behind to photograph the Shrike, we walked towards the lake.

At the shore, several hundred White-winged Black Terns were in the air – a magnificent sight.

Skulking in a strip of reeds in the open water were several ducks. Shoveler, Garganey, Gadwall and 2 Ferruginous Ducks were all present. Some of our party had explored the nearby pine belt and had seen several Green Warblers and Redstarts.

We left Lake Sevan at 5.30pm and headed for the Dilijan National Park. The park was thickly forested and verdant compared to most of Armenia. Our hotel, the Villarest, was situated on a steep slope

overlooking the valley. The hotel was faced with grey stones and had exposed beams a number of chalets at the rear were in the same style. We had arrived at 6.30pm and in the hour before dinner several diehards were out exploring the hotel grounds. The surrounding trees soon gave up Semi-collared Flycatcher, Lesser-Spotted Woodpecker and several Middle-Spotted Woodpeckers.

Dinner was at 7.30pm in a large downstairs hall: a splendid buffet was laid out and the wine flowed freely. Everybody reflected on what had been another memorable day and then it was time for bed!



Red-throated Pipit, *Eddie Marsh*



Middle-spotted Woodpecker, *R. Weale*

Saturday 14th May: Back to Tbilisi

(Robin Law)

Primarily a travelling day, but we were up before breakfast birdwatching individually in the woods and trees around Villa Rest, Dilijan. Notable species observed included Wryneck, Semi-collared and Red-breasted Flycatchers and Black and Middle-spotted Woodpeckers. We were away by 11am heading for the Georgian border and Tbilisi.

En route, a short pause by the roadside yielded Long-legged Buzzard, Stonechat, Lammergeyer and Lesser Grey Shrike, as well as a number of butterflies, which included a Green-underside Blue. A subsequent pre-lunch stop by a monastery gave Honey Buzzard and Griffon Vulture.

Some of the party followed a narrow mountain path up towards the monastery which wandered through gardens of houses. As we plodded up the narrow trail, a Dahl's Whip Snake was accidentally trodden on and killed. It was taken back to D'Weasel for formal identification! A family in one of the houses was selling honey and invited Helen, Rob and me in for some cake – Helen bought some honey. The rest of the party stayed close to the bus and looked for insects. A Spotted Sulphur moth and several Orange Tips were noted, but the butterfly of the trip was a Hungarian Glider, which gave an amazing display as it glided up and down a railway track. The heavens then opened and most took refuge in

the bus whilst those up high scampered down the hill. The rain soon passed and the sun was out again but there was no sign of the glider, which was much to Steve's disgust and D'Weasel's amusement – Hungarian glider would have been new to Steve's list and D'Weasel had now got it on his! An Armenian Rock Lizard was photographed as it rested beside an old hut.

We had a superb lunch at the Aqefilyan hotel in Haghpat and then we looked for further butterflies on the slopes. We watched Caucasian Agamas sunbathing on the rocks, Scarce Swallowtail butterflies flitting around the hillside and another Redstart of the race *Samamisticus*. A breeding colony of Griffon Vultures on the opposite side of the gorge was scanned and a large chick could be seen in one of the nests.

The border crossing didn't go without incident as Ernie (lucky) Lucking decided to break from the crowd and sneak over the border on his own leaving his fellow travellers to take his cases full of contraband through customs! He was gone for some time and we began to wonder whether he had been picked up by the espionage authorities having attempted his single-man crossing incognito!

We eventually found him on the Georgian side of the border when he nonchalantly asked what had kept us!

At the border crossing we saw House Sparrows, Swallows, Goldfinches and a second Hungarian Glider butterfly (Steve missed this one too!).

Later, from the bus in Georgia, we saw a flock of around 20 Rose-coloured Starlings.



Red-breasted Flycatcher, *R. Weale*



Hungarian Glider, *Will Brame*

Sunday 15th May: Homeward Bound

(Roger Buxton)

Not too much to report for final day other than commenting that all twenty two who left returned home safe and sound.

As we waited for our transport we listened to the sound of two nightingales making their presence felt in the heart of Tbilisi centre. Maybe they did sing in Barclay Square all those years ago! At 4.30 a.m. our 22- seat maximum minibuss arrived but there was no internal storage space! This was confirmed when, much to everyone's amazement, our luggage was piled onto vehicle roof rack. With no bungees or rope available, it was tied down and secured with flimsy makeshift nylon string. Once the luggage was loaded our bus looked like an overburdened and uncared for Donkey. On our way to the airport, all eyes were glued to the road behind to make sure no baggage was left in our wake. Some of us made space for others by hiring a couple of taxis. Ten minutes into journey and after going through numerous red traffic lights and down one way streets the wrong direction, the driver assistant turned to our translator D'Weasel and in Georgian uttered a few words that only D'Weasel would understand. It was believed that he asking whether we were heading in the right direction for the airport! Thankfully, we arrived at airport with no lost luggage.

Postscript

Our overall perception of Armenia is of the mountainous terrain and the profusion of birds and species. This is largely due to the low population density of three million, so that much of the country seems unaffected by human intervention. In the UK, the two primary environmental statistics are that 60% of our native wildlife species are in decline and 70% of our land is farmland. On our way home to Rumburgh we saw that the hedge-free yellow prairies of oilseed rape were being sprayed. Is there a connection with the fact that this year, our small House Martin colony seems to be just three birds whereas ten left last year and 16 the year before? We hope Armenia's wildlife will never suffer similar adversity – John Garbutt.

The distinct difference between birding in Georgia and Armenia, where flocks of thousands of birds were to be seen, was apparent on the journey from Gatwick home, where on close scrutiny the odd Crow was to be observed! – Roger Buxton.