

# Oriental Plover, Franklin's Gull, Syrian Woodpecker and Masked Shrike new to Kazakhstan

Arend Wassink, Ross Ahmed, Simon Busuttill & Albert Salemgareev

After the publication of *The birds of Kazakhstan* (Wassink & Oreel 2007), seven new taxa have been described for the country: Indian Pond Heron *Ardeola grayii* (Kovalenko & Dyakin 2009), Black-legged Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla* (Mischenko 2009, Wassink 2010), Baltic Gull *Larus fuscus fuscus* (Wassink 2010), Long-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus scolopaceus* (Wassink 2009), Large-billed Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus orinus* (Svensson et al 2009, Wassink 2009), Western Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros gibraltariensis* (Gistsov 2007) and White-capped Redstart *Chaimarrornis leucocephalus* (Dyakin 2008, 2009, Wassink 2009). Recently, four species were added to the Kazakh bird list which are documented here. Three of these, Franklin's Gull, Syrian Woodpecker and Masked Shrike, are also new to Central Asia.

## Oriental Plover

As part of the Altyn Dala project to find locations where Saiga *Saiga tatarica* drop their young, Albert Salemgareev and Klaus Nigge visited the Atanbaschik semi-desert (48°15' N, 63°43' E), Aqtöbe province. On 9 May 2009, they found an adult male Oriental Plover *Charadrius veredus* (Salemgareev 2010). The bird was vigorously attacked by a male Caspian Plover *C. asiaticus*, defending its territory and female.

In plumage, the only wader reminiscent of Oriental Plover is Caspian Plover. However, the almost completely white head, gradually merging into the orange-brown breast bordered by a broad black band below, ruled out the latter. In addition, the dark underwing and larger size (plate 293) also excluded Caspian.

292 Oriental Plover / Steppeplover *Charadrius veredus*, adult male, Atanbaschik semi-desert, Aqtöbe province, Kazakhstan, 9 May 2009 (Klaus Nigge)





293 Oriental Plover / Steppeplover *Charadrius veredus*, adult male, with Caspian Plover *C asiaticus*, adult male, Atanbaschik semi-desert, Aqtöbe province, Kazakhstan, 9 May 2009 (Klaus Nigge)

The relatively fresh primaries in combination with the well-developed breast pattern indicated that the bird was an adult. First-summer males show very worn primaries and usually attain a dull breast band (Prater et al 1977).

There are two previous (unreviewed) records of Oriental Plover from Central Asia, at Samarkand and Tashkent, Uzbekistan (Mitropolskiy et al 1990). A report of a bird collected at Shushkakol lake (43°00' N, 68°33' E), South Kazakhstan province, on 16 September 1910 has been omitted from the national list. The skin is lost (Dolgushin 1962) and hence the identification cannot be verified (Wassink & Orel 2007).

Oriental Plover breeds from southern Siberia, Russia (Tuva and Transbaikal regions), through western, northern and eastern Mongolia to extreme north-eastern China, and winters from the Greater Sundas to mainly northern parts of Australia. Migration mainly takes place much further east of Central Asia, through eastern China, with small numbers occurring east to Korea, Japan and the Philippines and in South-east Asia (del Hoyo et al 1996).

### Franklin's Gull

As part of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) search for Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris*, Ross Ahmed, Simon Busuttill

and Albert Salemgareev set out on an expedition to Kazakhstan in July-August 2010. They arrived at Kushmurun lake, Qostanay province (52°30' N, 64°34' E), in the early evening of 14 July. At 20:30, whilst scanning through waders on the partially wet saline mud, SB picked up an unusual gull amongst the Black-headed Gulls *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*. The observers' first reaction was 'adult Laughing Gull *Larus atricilla*' but they soon began to favour adult Franklin's Gull *L pipixcan*.

They were able to approach the bird to within c 300 m. Although skeptical and fully aware that the bird was nearly as far from the normal range of Franklin's Gull as it could possibly be, they struggled to find any other explanation for the bird's appearance. At 20:50, the bird took flight and was lost amongst the Black-headed Gull flock. It was still present the following early morning, when different light conditions allowed, for example, the presence of white eye-crescents to be noted. It again took flight fairly soon after having been found and was not seen again.

The following description is based on field observations, photographs and field notes.

**SIZE & STRUCTURE** Size relative to Black-headed Gulls difficult to ascertain both in field and from photographs. At times, posture appearing quite upright, with deep-

breasted feel. Head proportionately small relative to body. Bill short looking and fairly stout, not slender or droopy.

**PLUMAGE** Head clearly darker than that of nearby Black-headed Gulls, being jet-black as opposed to brown. Loral area showing much white flecking. White crescents above and below eye. Upperparts at least as dark as in Common Gull *L. canus heinei*, if not darker (although no nearby Common Gulls for comparison). Prominent broad white trailing edge to wing. Relatively small amount of black in primary tips (see moult). Pink flush noted on breast.

**BARE PARTS** Bill black, or at least dark. Leg dark red (exact coloration thought to be affected by covering of mud – red in legs of many neighbouring Black-headed Gulls not apparent).

**FLIGHT & BEHAVIOUR** Not noted as being different from Black-headed Gulls.

**MOULT** In active moult, with at least two primaries still growing (seemingly p7 and p8). Therefore, amount of black in wing-tips reduced. At least one secondary dropped. Some old feathers very worn, particularly rectrices.

It was when the photographs were checked, particularly those of the bird in flight, that some doubts were raised. The flight photographs suggested that it was slightly larger than Black-headed Gull (5-10%), which we felt may have refuted the identification as Franklin's Gull. However, size illusion may be creating a false impression of the bird's size in relation to the accompanying Black-headed. Indeed, in photographs of the bird on the ground, it appeared typically smaller than nearby Black-headed. If the bird was actually larger than Black-headed, one explanation is that many Franklin's are, in fact, larger than Black-headed (Killian Mullarney in litt).

Two other features that raised concerns were the apparently all-white tail (lacking any grey) and the less familiar wing-tip pattern. However, both of these features can be explained by moult and feather wear; the bird was missing at least two pri-

**294-295** Franklin's Gull / Franklins Meeuw *Larus pipixcan* (left), with Black-headed Gull / Kokmeeuw *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*, Kushmurun lake, Qostanay province, Kazakhstan, 14 July 2010 (Ross Ahmed) **296-297** Franklin's Gull / Franklins Meeuw *Larus pipixcan*, Kushmurun lake, Qostanay province, Kazakhstan, 14 July 2010 (Ross Ahmed)



maries and the rectrices were heavily worn, meaning grey coloration would have been lost. Laughing Gull can be ruled out by the wing-tip pattern (too little black and too much white in the primaries, even when compensating for the missing primaries) and bill length (too short). The bird did not match any known hybrids either (cf Pullan & Martin 2004).

Other species that were taken in consideration were Saunders's Gull *L saundersi* and Relict Gull *L relictus*. Saunders's would show paler wings/upperparts, little or no white trailing edge to the primaries (a pattern more like Black-headed Gull) and a smaller size than the adjacent Black-headed. Relict would show paler wings/upperparts and a noticeably larger size than adjacent Black-headed, as well as a narrower white trailing edge to the primaries.

The bird appeared adult-like in all respects, and indeed there was little to suggest that the bird was of a younger age. However, as the full primary pattern was not visible due to moult and as the black hood appeared to be in a transitional state, ageing the bird with certainty was not possible.

The only previous record of any Nearctic *Larus* in the Middle East and Central Asia region concerned another Franklin's Gull in Israel on 3-6 June 2003 (Smith 2004, Blair et al 2009). In Egypt, an adult summer was photographed at Luxor, Egypt, on 12 March 2011 (Birding World 24: 152, 2011, van den Berg & Haas 2011a). Possibly the same individual at Fujairah, United Arab Emirates, from 17 May 2011 onwards was the first for the Arabian peninsula and at c 56°21' E almost as far east as the preceding Kazakhstan record (van den Berg & Haas 2011b, Birding World 24: 198, 2011). There are very few other species with a predominantly North American breeding range which have occurred in the Middle East and Central Asia. These species do however include Snow Goose *Anser caerulescens* and eight species of wader (Blair et al 2009).

That a Franklin's Gull should occur in Central Asia seems largely inexplicable. The species breeds an enormous distance away from Kazakhstan, on inland prairies in Canada and the USA, and migrates through central USA to winter along the western coasts of South America (Olsen & Larsson 2004). Furthermore, populations declined by up to 90% between 1960 and 2000 (Olsen & Larsson 2004).

### **Syrian Woodpecker**

During the same aforementioned expedition in search of Slender-billed Curlew, SB, RA and AS were counting waterbirds, in particular waders, in

the early afternoon of 16 July 2010 at Naurzum nature reserve, Qostanay province (c 51°28' N, 64°26' E), when a medium to large woodpecker *Dendrocopos* flew in and landed on a nearby pine tree – just some 20 m away. They were able to approach to within 10 m, but soon the bird flew off. The views obtained were therefore very short (c 1 min) but very close and clear – both perched and in flight.

The following description is based on field observations and field notes.

**SIZE & STRUCTURE** Initial impression of Great Spotted Woodpecker *D major*, therefore medium to large *Dendrocopos*, too large for Lesser Spotted Woodpecker *D minor* or Middle Spotted Woodpecker *D medius*, and lacking bulkiness of White-backed Woodpecker *D leucotos*.

**PLUMAGE** Main coloration black and white. Fairly fine streaking detected on lower flanks, clearly not dense or prominent enough nor extending far enough on underparts for White-backed Woodpecker. White patch on side of neck extending unbroken to cheek and eye, not divided by black, as in Great Spotted Woodpecker. White scapular patch as in Great Spotted. Pale reddish undertail-coverts.

**VOCALIZATIONS** Noted once in flight, gentle *chup*, archetypal of *Dendrocopos*.

SB, RA and AS did not know which species of *Dendrocopos* were present in the area. Between them, they had experience with all relevant possible alternatives. The smaller species – Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and Middle Spotted Woodpecker – were ruled out on size and structure as well as the pattern of black and white. It was also immediately obvious that the bird was not a White-backed Woodpecker, lacking the bulk and heaviness of that species. Although essentially similar to a Great Spotted Woodpecker, it was clear that it was not that species. Based on the distribution of black and white, and particularly the unbroken white neck-to-cheek patch, SB concluded that the bird was indeed a Syrian Woodpecker. RA quickly picked up on streaking on the flanks which, in hindsight, ruled out all ages of Great Spotted.

Although there was no doubt that the bird was a Syrian Woodpecker, Svensson et al (2009) was checked upon return to the vehicle. White-backed Woodpecker and White-winged Woodpecker *D leucopterus* were considered, the latter being a species SB had seen on previous trips to Uzbekistan and eastern Kazakhstan. White-backed could be ruled out by the head pattern and white scapular patches which were thought to be about the same size as in Great Spotted Woodpecker. White-



**298** Masked Shrike / Maskerklauwier *Lanius nubicus*, adult female, Fetisovo, Mangghystau province, Kazakhstan, 31 August 2010 (Arend Wassink)

winged could be excluded by the presence of streaked flanks and the pattern of black and white on the face and neck. At this point SB, RA and AS were still not aware of the status of Syrian Woodpecker in Kazakhstan, and presumed it was a resident breeder at Naurzum nature reserve. It was only after checking Wassink & Oreel (2007), almost two days after the sighting, that it was realized that the species would be an addition to the national list. This caused the observers to further investigate the identification of the bird once back at home. After more research there, the bird was firmly identified as a Syrian Woodpecker.

Zavialov et al (2008) detailed an expansion of Syrian Woodpecker eastwards from its primary breeding range of Turkey, European Russia and Ukraine. They showed that by the late 1990s, the species was breeding in Russia very close to the Kazakh border in, for example, the Volgograd region. They commented that 'it seems only a matter of time before the species turns up in neighbouring parts of Kazakhstan'. Zavialov et al (2008) did not conclude with certainty why the species has undergone a range expansion. They did, however, offer several suggestions, including the disappearance of ecological barriers due to anthropogenic changes of the environment and colonisation of a postglacial vacuum.

#### **Masked Shrike**

From 21 August to 8 September 2010, Patrick Palmen and Arend Wassink were conducting a survey of migrating birds at Kenderli resort, situated at Fetisovo, Mangghystau province, along the Caspian coast (42°47' N, 52°37' E). The resort is a small oasis amidst a desert environment, with green gardens and lawns being watered daily, attracting large numbers of birds, mainly passerines.

In the early evening of 30 August, AW heard a shrike *Lanius*-like call coming from a row of *Acacia* trees. The call initially did not sound familiar to him, at least not from shrike species known to occur in Kazakhstan. It was not until he found the bird uttering its characteristic rattling alarm call and repeatedly turning its tail, that he realized that it was a Masked Shrike *Lanius nubicus*, a species he had become familiar with in the Middle East. Realising the importance of the record, being a first for Kazakhstan and even Central Asia, AW alerted PP immediately, and record shots were taken in the quickly diminishing light. Early in the following morning, the bird was still present in the same row of trees, enabling much better photographs to be taken. It was not seen again after the morning of 31 August but, to their great surprise, they relocated the bird again on 8 September, at another site within the resort. The fact that the small resort was searched daily for a

week without glimpsing the bird or hearing a single call, affirms the species' often shown behaviour of remaining silent within cover.

Identification was straightforward. The combination of an extensive white forehead, dark upperparts, long tail, and orangey breast-sides and flanks ruled out any other shrike species. The pale lores, dark grey crown, grey-brown neck, mantle, back and rump, as well as the pale orangey breast-sides and flanks indicated that it was a female. The wing showed two generations of feathers: new, blackish primaries, most secondaries, tertials and greater coverts and some old, brown secondaries and median coverts. This, together with the unbarred plumage and orangey breast-sides and flanks, indicated that the bird was an adult.

Masked Shrike has a rather small breeding range, mainly centered in the eastern Mediterranean, from the Balkans to Israel. Some populations occur further east, as far as Iran, breeding at least from the Zagros mountains to Fars, possibly also north of Tehran along the Caspian Sea coast. The species winters in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in the eastern part and rarely south of 10°N. Although post-breeding dispersal begins as early as the second half of July, autumn migration does not start before the second week of August (Lefranc & Worfolk 1997). The date of the record coincides with the known migration period.

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#### Samenvatting

STEPPELEUVIER, FRANKLINS MEEUW, SYRISCHE BONTE SPECHT EN MASKERKLAUWIER NIEUW VOOR KAZAKHSTAN In dit artikel worden de waarnemingen van vier nieuwe soorten voor Kazachstan gepresenteerd, Steppeleuvier *Charadrius veredus* (Atanbaschik-halfwoestijn, provincie Aqtöbe, 9 mei 2009), Franklins Meeuw *Larus pipixcan* (Kushmurun-meer, provincie Qostanay, 14-15 juli 2010), Syrische Bonte Specht *Dendrocopos syriacus* (Naurzum-reservaat, provincie Qostanay, 16 juli 2010) en Maskerklauwier *Lanius nubicus* (Kenderli, Fetisovo, provincie Mangghystau, 30 augustus tot 8 september 2010). De drie laatstgenoemde soorten zijn tevens nieuw voor Centraal-Azië.

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