

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Comments on a recently published checklist of the birds of Kazakhstan

In the first issue of *Ornithological news of Kazakhstan and Central Asia*, a new checklist of the birds of Kazakhstan (Kovshar 2012) was published. When scrutinizing the text and comparing it with available literature, all mentioned in Wassink (2012), a large number of omissions, mistakes and some curious suggestions and conclusions were found. A summary of my comments follows.

Kovshar regards **Northern Hawk Owl** *Surnia ulula*, **Eurasian Pygmy Owl** *Glaucidium passerinum*, **Ural Owl** *Strix uralensis*, **Boreal Owl** *Aegolius funereus*, **Grey-headed Woodpecker** *Picus canus*, **Eurasian Wren** *Troglodytes troglodytes*, **Black-throated Accentor** *Prunella atrogularis*, **Eurasian Nuthatch** *Sitta europaea* and **Spotted Nutcracker** *Nucifraga caryocatactes* as residents only, though birds from outside Kazakhstan (occasionally) winter in Kazakhstan.

He also states that **Ruff** *Philomachus pugnax*, **Blackcap** *Sylvia atricapilla* and **Black-headed Bunting** *Emberiza melanocephala* are occasional breeding migrants, though their breeding has never been proved. **Velvet Scoter** *Melanitta fusca*, **Western Cattle Egret** *Bubulcus ibis* and **Willow Warbler** *Phylloscopus trochilus* are still considered to be breeding migrants, though no recent breeding evidence is known.

Semicollared Flycatcher *Ficedula semitorquata* and **Collared Flycatcher** *Ficedula albicollis* are regarded as being extremely rare vagrants, though they are regular passage migrants in very small numbers. According to Kovshar, **Snow Goose** *Anser caerulescens*, **Gyr Falcon** *Falco rusticolus*, **Red-necked Stint** *Calidris ruficollis*, **Dusky Thrush** *Turdus eunomus* and **Arctic Redpoll** *Carduelis hornemanni exlipes* (Coues's Redpoll) are occasional or rare during migration and/or winter, though there are only one or a few documented records each and, therefore, these species should be regarded as vagrants.

Garganey *Anas querquedula*, **Velvet Scoter** *Melanitta fusca*, **Pallid Harrier** *Circus macrourus*, **Dunlin** *Calidris alpina*, **Pied Avocet** *Recurvirostra avosetta*, **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse**

Pterocles alchata and **Meadow Pipit** *Anthus pratensis* are considered to be breeding and passage migrants only, though there are documented winter records. According to Kovshar, **Great White Pelican** *Pelecanus crispus*, **Wood Sandpiper** *Tringa glareola*, **Spotted Redshank** *Tringa erythropus* and **Buff-bellied Pipit** *Anthus rubescens japonicus* have occasionally been recorded in winter. However, no documented winter records are known. **Red-throated Thrush** *Turdus ruficollis* and **Little Bunting** *Emberiza pusilla* are mentioned as winter visitors. In fact, of the former only three documented records (two in winter) are known, of the latter there are only 12 documented records (only one in winter). Both species should therefore be regarded as vagrants.

Kovshar states that the following species are only accidentally or occasionally recorded in winter, though actually they are annually recorded in winter, some of them in considerable numbers: **Pygmy Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax pygmeus*, **Great Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax carbo*, **Western Great Egret** *Casmerodius albus*, **Grey Heron** *Ardea cinerea*, **Little Grebe** *Tachybaptus ruficollis*, **Great Crested Grebe** *Podiceps cristatus*, **Western Marsh Harrier** *Circus aeruginosus*, **Eastern Imperial Eagle** *Aquila heliaca*, **Eurasian Coot** *Fulica atra*, **Common Snipe** *Gallinago gallinago*, **Pallas's Gull** *Larus ichthyæetus*, **Common Woodpigeon** *Columba palumbus*, **Mew Gull** *Larus canus*, **Common Starling** *Sturnus vulgaris*, **Western Jackdaw** *Corvus monedula* and **European Greenfinch** *Chloris chloris*.

Kovshar allows **Common Scoter** *Melanitta nigra*, **Western Spot-billed Duck** *Anas poecilorhyncha*, **Snow Pigeon** *Columba leuconota*, **Asian House Martin** *Delichon dasypus*, **Lanceolated Warbler** *Locustella lanceolata* and **Pechora Pipit** *Anthus gustavi* on the Kazakh birdlist, though all records are not or insufficiently documented. On the other hand, he omits or does not even mention species of which good documentation is known: **Eastern Marsh Harrier** *Circus spilonotus*, **Pectoral Sandpiper** *Calidris melanotos*, **Red Knot** *Calidris canutus*, **Long-**

billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus scolopaceus* and **Naumann's Thrush** *Turdus naumanni*. In the case of three more omitted species I want to make the following remarks.

Franklin's Gull *Larus pipixcan*: Kovshar omits the (only) record because it is unlikely that it could occur in Kazakhstan and it is very difficult to identify. The observers (Ross Ahmed, Simon Busuttill and Albert Salemgareev) were well aware that the record—at Kushmurun lake, Qostanay province, 14–15 July 2010, probably an adult (Wassink *et al* 2011)—seems hard to explain, although recently the species has been found in Israel (2003), Egypt (2011) and the United Arab Emirates (2011). The latter record was at c56° 21' E, almost as far east as the Kazakhstan record (Wassink *et al* 2011). Franklin's Gull is not difficult to identify in this plumage—the description fits and the photographs show a Franklin's Gull.

Syrian Woodpecker *Dendrocopos syriacus*: Kovshar omits the (only) record—16 July 2010, Naurzum nature reserve, Qostanay province (Wassink *et al* 2011) because it could refer to a location in the Turkmenistan part of the Caspian region. This is a curious remark, given that the observers gave the record's exact location and coordinates, 1300 km north of the location suggested by Kovshar.

Masked Shrike *Lanius nubicus*: Kovshar omits the (only) record—Kenderli resort at Fetisovo, Mangghystau province, 30 August–8 September 2010 (Wassink *et al* 2011)—because it could refer to a location in the Turkmenistan part of the Caspian region. Again a strange remark, given that the observers (Patrick Palmen and Arend Wassink) clearly indicated that they stayed at Fetisovo during their trip and gave both the record's exact location and coordinates, 110 km north of the Kazakhstan/Turkmenistan border.

Furthermore, Kovshar regards **Griffon Vulture** *Gyps fulvus* to be a resident. However, Central Asian birds (presumably also Kazakh birds) winter in India (Katzner *et al* 2004). There are only two documented winter records. Griffon Vulture is better regarded as a breeding migrant and accidental resident.

Kovshar listed **Slender-billed Curlew** *Numenius tenuirostris* as very rare during

migration or in summer, though seemed to ignore that there have been no documented records in Kazakhstan since 1979 and that recent expeditions did not result in a single record in Kazakhstan or elsewhere. Slender-billed Curlew should probably be regarded as extinct.

Kovshar regards **Tawny Owl** *Strix aluco* as a breeding migrant and winter visitor. However, there are only two documented records of the subspecies *siberiae* and there is no indication that other than local breeding birds of the subspecies *harmsi* winter in Kazakhstan. Therefore, Tawny Owl should be regarded as a resident and accidental winter visitor.

Eastern Black-eared Wheatear *Oenanthe melanoleuca* (treated as *O. hispanica* by Kovshar): the coast of Mangghystau peninsula east to the western edge of the Ustyurt plateau, is inhabited by a polymorphic population of hybrid origin of Pied *O. pleschanka* × Eastern Black-eared Wheatear. Currently, the only gene flow into this population originates from the local pure Pied Wheatear population.

Olive-backed Pipit *Anthus hodgsoni*: Kovshar fails to mention that in 2001 a pair bred at Berel in the southern Altai and probable breeding took place at the nearby Rachmanovski springs in 2002. Apart from these, there are only five other documented records. Olive-backed Pipit should be regarded as an accidental breeding and passage migrant.

Additionally, Kovshar failed to mention that many species breeding and/or wintering in Kazakhstan are also passage migrants. There are also some taxonomic remarks to be made. Kovshar allows *Calandrella leucophaea* specific status while, at the same time, he suggests that new research is needed to unravel the *Calandrella* complex in Central/Middle Asia. Why not leave this 'taxon' under Lesser Short-toed Lark *C. rufescens* pending further research? It is also contradictory that Yellow-headed *Motacilla lutea* and Black-headed Wagtail *M. feldegg* are given specific status whereas Grey-headed *M. thunbergi*, Eastern Yellow *M. tschutsensis* and White-headed *M. leucocephala* are apparently left under Blue-headed Wagtail *M. flava*.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Geert Groot Koerkamp, Gerald Oreel and Justin Jansen for the various ways in which they contributed to this letter.

References

- Katzner, T, A Gavashelishvili, SL Sklyarenko, M McGrady, J Shergalin & K Bildstein. 2004. Population and Conservation Status of Griffon Vulture in the former Soviet Union. *In: Chancellor, RD & B-U Meyburg (eds). Raptors worldwide*. Berlin, pp235–240.
- Kovshar, AF. 2012. Ornithofauna revision and modern list of birds of Kazakhstan. *Ornithological news of Kazakhstan and Central Asia* 1: 51–70. [In Russian]
- Wassink, A. 2012. *The Birds of Kazakhstan*. www.birdsofkazakhstan.com.
- Wassink, A, R Ahmed, S Busuttill & A Salemgareev. 2011. Oriental Plover, Franklin's Gull, Syrian Woodpecker and Masked Shrike new to Kazakhstan. *Dutch Birding* 33: 239–244.

Arend Wassink
Netherlands
a.wassink@texel.com

The OSME region

Lies between Europe, China and the Horn of Africa on two major migration flyways crossing Central Asia's wind-swept steppes, the Caucasus' towering mountains, Arabia's wide arid deserts and the tropical seas of the Indian Ocean.

An awesome place for birds and birdwatchers.



ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF THE MIDDLE EAST
THE CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA

OSME OSME brings together those curious and knowledgeable about the region's birds

Encourages
conservation and research
through a fund
for small-scale projects.

Publishes SANDGROUSE
an internationally respected journal with papers on
the birds of the OSME region written by local and
visiting scientists and enthusiasts.

OSME c/o The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire SG19 2DL, UK **To join OSME** visit www.osme.org

UK registered charity no. 282938