



*Gergeti Trinity Church.*

# Kazbegi Georgia

**18-20 May 2012**

by Jens Thalund

Taking advantage of an extended weekend, I managed to do a quick trip to the Kazbegi area in the Caucasus Mountains of Georgia, where a number of much desired birds can be found, such as **Caucasian Snowcock**, **Caucasian Black Grouse**, **Güldenstädt's Redstart** and **Caucasian Great Rosefinch**. Depending on the snowcover at higher elevations, these high altitude birds can be found close to the village of Kazbegi, which is easily accessible from the capital of Tbilisi, which is served by several airlines.

Most birders go in late April to early May, when the road to Kazbegi is usually open, but there is still enough snowcover, to force the birds down into the valley. I was only able to go later in May, which meant, that the snowline had receded to around 3000 m asl., resulting in a good hike from the village at 1700 m asl. In 3 days I managed to see all the desired birds except **Güldenstädt's Redstart**, but with a migrating **Demoiselle Crane** for consolation.

## Getting there and around.

I flew with the Turkish low-cost airline Pegasus Airlines from Copenhagen via Istanbul to Tbilisi, at a price of 220 EUR, with the downside being a 5 hours lay-over in Istanbul. Arriving and departing Tbilisi in the middle of the night, it meant, that I was able to be birding at Kazbegi from late morning on the day of arrival, and until mid-afternoon on the day before the flight back, giving me almost 3 full days of birding.

From the airport in Tbilisi there are trains and busses running into town, but these only begin to operate at 8 and 7 am resp., so I took a taxi to the Didube Terminal as it got light at 5 am (30 GEL), where I then hired a shared taxi (*marshrutka*) to take me straight to Kazbegi (2-2½ hours/ 80 GEL). Going back from Kazbegi, I boarded one of the (hourly?) minibusses from the main square in the village (10 GEL), and after alighting at the Didube Terminal in Tbilisi, grabbed a taxi to the main train station (Voksal), from where airport busses were leaving in front of every 20-30 minutes (bus number 37, 0.5 GEL).

## General information.

At the airport there are 24H money exchangers and ATM's, and the exchange rate was 1 EUR ~ 2 Georgian Lari (GEL). Accomodation in Kazbegi (or *Stepantsminda* as it is known officially) is plentiful, ranging from a hotel on the main square to several guesthouses and homestays, and I chose to follow a taxidriver to a homestay, where a spacious room with full board cost me 40 GEL.

It was light enough for birding in the valley around 5 am, when the sun was already shining on the 5047 m summit of Mount Kazbek (*Mkinvartsveri* in Georgian) to the west, and the sun set around 9 pm, but I found the last few hours of the day to be rather unproductive around the village. The weather stayed dry during my stay, but it usually became increasingly clouded and windy during the day.

## Litterature and internet resources.

The **Collin's Bird Guide** covers all the species occurring in the Caucasus, and for general travel information I used the **Bradt Travel Guide to Georgia**, 4ed.

The most useful travelreports I found on the internet was by [Jos Stratford](#) and [Richard Bonser](#) . The [Caucasus-birding](#) website describes a number of other interesting sites all over Georgia.



*Mount Kazbek and the western slope above Gergeti.*

## Birding around Kazbegi.

The village of Kazbegi and its neighbour on the western side of the *Tergi* river, Gergeti, are situated in the middle of a narrow river valley at 1700 m asl, with steep slopes on both sides, and the 5047 m peak of Mount Kazbek looming to the west. The Georgian Military Highway running from Tbilisi, through Kazbegi to the border with Russia has only light traffic, as the border is closed, except for Armenian traffic.

In and around the villages there are a few orchards and small plantations with some **Green Warblers** and lush meadows with calling **Corncrakes**, but the most interesting habitat are the extensive areas of sea-buckthorn, which grows on the floodplain along the *Tergi* river. **Red-backed Shrike**, **Barred Warbler** and **Common Rosefinch** are all common breeders, and during heavy snowfall in the mountains, this is also a very good place to search for **Güldenstädt's Redstarts** and **Caucasian Great Rosefinch**. It's possible to do a loop along the river, by crossing the bridge to the Gergeti-side of the river and walk south along the western bank, and crossing back across the river on a metal foot-bridge 3 km downstream, and then follow the main Tbilisi-road back to Kazbegi.

The eastern slope can be approached from behind the small pine plantation east of town. **Caucasian Snowcocks** are easily heard from the crags higher up, and could possibly be seen with some persistence and a good scope, but to see them well, it's necessary to climb up towards the snow-line. During my visit I had to climb to nearly 2600 m asl. (GPS N 42°39.035' E 044°40.179') to get satisfactory views, but as it sounded like birds were calling throughout the day, there is probably no need to rush uphill in the morning. The eastern slope is rather steep and mostly grass-covered making the descent along animal trails somewhat interesting, and I was glad that I had brought my walking stick. Besides the Snowcocks, other good stuff here were 2-3 ♂♂ **Rufous-tailed Rock Thrushes**, 2 singing **Alpine Accentors** near the Snowcocks, **Alpine Choughs** and **Red-fronted Serins**.

The western slope, above the village of Gergeti towards Mount Kazbek, is less steep than the eastern, and there are roads and trails to follow uphill. From Gergeti it is possible to either follow the road up to the Gergeti Trinity Church, visible on a plateau above the village, or take the more direct route via shortcuts up through the pine forest. The pine forest gives way to birch forest on the north slope and higher up, which is especially good for **Green Warbler** and **Caucasian Chiffchaff**.

The Trinity Church is a good place to scope the northfacing slopes to the west for **Caucasian Black Grouse**, which favor the extensive areas of Dwarf Rhododendron.

From the church a track heads west up towards Mount Kazbek, and in mid-May 2012 it was possible to walk up to 3000 m asl., before deep snowfields made further progress difficult. Here it was possible to view the distant eastern slope of Mount Kazbek and the head of the Gergeti Glacier, but despite hourlong scanning of the snowfree patches, neither **Güldenstädt's Redstart** nor **Caucasian Great Rosefinch** could be found here, though a few **Caucasian Snowcocks** were heard.

Luckily I managed to find a group of **Caucasian Great Rosefinches** just after I started my descent, in an area of bare ground in a snowfilled valley (GPS N 42°39.407' E 044°34.591').



*Eastern slope. Caucasian Snowcocks were seen at snowline above pineforest in the back to the left.*

### Other birding sites.

On the drive from Tbilisi to Kazbegi I stopped at a viewpoint just below the highest part of the road, at the Jvaris Pass, some 25 km before Kazbegi. The best birds here, were undoubtedly a pair of **Wallcreepers**, that were feeding on the walls of the circular concrete structure.

The Tbilisi Airport turned out to be very birdy, in the few hours before sunset, with **Eastern Black-eared Wheatear**, **Black-headed Bunting** and **Hoopoe** breeding behind the trainstation, and 371+ **Rose-coloured Starlings** flying to roost, somewhere to the east.

### Birdlist

**Caucasian Black Grouse** *Lyrurus mlokosiewiczi* - 2 males were seen strutting around on the dwarf rhododendron covered hillsides southwest of the Gergiti Trinity Church above Gergiti village, but distant scope views only.

**Caucasian Snowcock** *Tetraogallus caucasicus* - after climbing up the very steep eastern slope of the valley, to reach the snowline at around 2600 m asl., 3 birds were seen and another 3 heard. With a good telescope some of these birds could probably be seen from down in the village. One or two birds were also heard around 3000 m on the hike up to the Gergeti glacier.



*Caucasian Snowcock.*

**Corncrake** *Crex crex* - common around the village, with at least 12 different birds heard calling, and a single bird was also flushed from a muddy ditch. Several birds were calling from within small patches of sea-buckthorn..

**Griffon Vulture** *Gyps fulvus* - up to 10 birds were gathered at a carcass (dog ?) in the river.

**Steppe Buzzard** *Buteo (buteo) vulpinus* - 2 birds flying north on 19 May.

**Kestrel** *Falco tinnunculus* - a few birds seen daily.

**Lesser Kestrel** *Falco naumanni* - one female flew north on 19 May.

**Demoiselle Crane** *Grus virgo* - probably the most unexpected bird of the trip, was a single bird that flew north on 19 May. While watching Caucasian Great Rosefinches at 2900 m asl. I heard a calling crane a few times, but couldn't find it, despite frantic searching of the clear skies, until I realised, that it was still below me, but quickly gaining height on rising thermals.

The rather high pitched call had me suspecting, that the bird was a Demoiselle Crane, and as the bird soared higher and drifted northwards, I was able to see the long black 'tie' reaching down to the breast.

**Little Ringed Plover** *Charadrius dubius* - a fairly common breeder along the river.

**Common Sandpiper** *Actitis hypoleucos* - common along the river.

**Rock Dove** *Columba livia* - two genuine-looking birds were found in the meadows below the eastern slope.

**Collared Dove** *Streptopelia decaocto* - one bird noted in Tbilisi.

**Cuckoo** *Cuculus canorus* - a few around Kazbegi.

**Common Swift** *Apus apus* - common around Tbilisi, with 75+ feeding at the airport.

**Alpine Swift** *Apus melba* - 6 birds at Kazbegi, and one amongst Common Swifts at Tbilisi Airport.

**Hoopoe** *Upupa epops* - a single bird at Tbilisi Airport was apparently feeding young in an abandoned building.

**Bee-eater** *Merops apiaster* - at Kazbei a few migrating birds were heard on 18 May, but the following day 25+ high flying flocks were heard, during the first half of the day, with only one flock of 12 birds actually seen. Even at 3000 m birds were flying so high, that it was almost impossible to find them, against a clear blue sky. 100's of Bee-eaters must have passed through this day.  
Also heard at Tbilisi Airport.

**Crested Lark** *Galerida cristata* - two birds in the carpark at Tbilisi Airport.

**Horned Lark** *Eremophila alpestris* - only one bird, of the local ssp. *penicillata*, seen at the roadside in Jvaris Pass.

**Crag Martin** *Ptyonoprogne rupestris* - up to 4 birds seen feeding around Kazbegi.

**Barn Swallow** *Hirundo rustica* - a few seen.

**House Martin** *Delichon urbicum* - migrating flocks of up to 35 seen around Kazbegi.

**Water Pipit** *Anthus spinoletta* - birds of the subspecies *coutelli* were common breeders around Kazbegi, with some birds holding territories in the meadows just east of town, but most abundant on the higher, grassy slopes.

**Tree Pipit** *Anthus trivialis* - fairly common breeder around Kazbegi, with several singing birds recorded.

**White Wagtail** *Motacilla alba* - fairly common around Kazbegi, especially along the river.

**Yellow Wagtail** *Motacilla flava* - only one bird seen, a male ssp. *feldegg* in a meadow near Kazbegi.

**Grey Wagtail** *Motacilla cinerea* - a few along the river in Kazbegi.

**White-throated Dipper** *Cinclus cinclus* - a single, feeding bird was seen at the bridge across the Snostskali river, just south of Kazbegi.

**Dunnock** *Prunella modularis* - fairly common around Kazbegi, but one (migrant ?) bird was seen in dwarf rhododendron at 2700 m.

**Alpine Accentor** *Prunella collaris* - two singing birds in the same area as the Snowcocks on the slope east of town.

**Redstart** *Phoenicurus phoenicurus* - a few pairs in gardens and orchards around Kazbegi, were of ssp. *samamisticus*.

**Black Redstart** *Phoenicurus ochruros* - singing birds and pairs, of ssp. *ochruros*, were found around the village, as well as all the way up to the snowline.

**Northern Wheatear** *Oenanthe oenanthe* - fairly common on the higher slopes around Kazbegi.

**Eastern Black-eared Wheatear** *Oenanthe melanoleuca* - a single female at Tbilisi Airport.

**Mistle Thrush** *Turdus viscivorus* - a few breeding birds in the plantations around Kazbegi.

**Blackbird** *Turdus merula* - fairly common breeder around Kazbegi.



*Ring Ouzel - male ssp. amicornum.*

**Ring Ouzel** *Turdus torquatus* - a common breeder around Kazbegi, found in pine plantations, patches of sea-buckthorn and on rocky slopes higher up. Some pairs near the village had already fledged the first young. The local birds of the ssp. *amicorum* are quite distinctive, with much more white in the wings, compared to birds seen in northern Europe.

**Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush** *Monticola saxatilis* - 2-3 ♂♂ were found on the slope east of the village.

**Barred Warbler** *Sylvia nisoria* - common breeding bird in areas with sea-buckthorn near the river, with up to 13 birds recorded in one morning. The song can be very like that of Garden Warbler, but the hard, dry call of Barred Warbler usually gave them away.

**Garden Warbler** *Sylvia borin* - just one singing bird seen. A few heard-only birds were left unidentified, as Barred Warbler and Garden Warbler can sound very alike.

**Common Whitethroat** *Sylvia communis* - a few birds were found in and around the village.

**Sedge Warbler** *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus* - just a single, migrant bird recorded.

**Cetti's Warbler** *Cettia cetti* - two singing birds in riverside scrub south of Kazbegi.

**Caucasian Chiffchaff** *Phylloscopus lorenzii* - a fairly common breeder in forests around Kazbegi, especially in the dwarf birch forest on the western slope.

**Green Warbler** *Phylloscopus nitidus* - a fairly common breeder around Kazbegi, occurring a little lower down than Caucasian Chiffchaff, with several birds singing in and around the village, and also in the deciduous forest above Gergeti.

**Goldcrest** *Regulus regulus* - a single bird heard in pine forest above Gergeti.

**Winter Wren** *Troglodytes troglodytes* - a few singing birds heard.

**Spotted Flycatcher** *Muscicapa striata* - a single bird seen in forest above Gergeti.

**Great Tit** *Parus major* - a few pairs around the villages.

**Coal Tit** *Pariparus ater* - one pair seen in pine trees in Kazbegi.

**Eurasian Blue Tit** *Cyanistes caeruleus* - a few pairs around Kazbegi.



*Caucasian Chiffchaff.*

**Wallcreeper** *Tichodroma muraria* - at a big ,circular concrete viewing platform just below the Jvaris Pass a pair were feeding on the concrete walls as well as on buildings nearby.

**Red-backed Shrike** *Lanius collurio* - a very common breeder around Kazbegi, especially in the sea-buckthorn shrub in the river valley, with 48 birds counted in one overcast and windy morning.

**Common Magpie** *Pica pica* - one bird seen at Tbilisi airport.

**Eurasian Jay** *Garrulus glandarius* - a few birds in forests around Kazbegi.

**Red-billed Chough** *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax* - 50+ birds seen around the Jvaris pass, and around 15 on the western slope above Kazbegi.

**Alpine Chough** *Pyrrhocorax graculus* - 10-15 birds found feeding on the slopes on both sides of the village.

**Hooded Crow** *Corvus cornix* - a few pairs around Kazbegi.

**Common Raven** *Corvus corax* - one or two pairs seen around Kazbegi.

**Common Starling** *Sturnus vulgaris* - seen commonly around Tbilisi.

**Rose-coloured Starling** *Pastor roseus* - at Kazbegi a single bird was roosting in one of the few trees around the Gergeti Trinity Church, before being chased off by a Ring Ouzel.

At the airport at Tbilisi several flocks (11 to 100+ birds) were seen flying eastwards before sunset, and a total of 371+ were counted in a couple of hours.

**House Sparrow** *Passer domesticus* - common.

**Chaffinch** *Fringilla coelebs* - fairly common.

**Linnet** *Carduelis cannabina* - fairly common.

**Twite** *Carduelis flavirostris* - a few birds of the striking ssp. *brevirostris* were found on the higher slopes around Kazbegi.

**European Goldfinch** *Carduelis carduelis* - fairly common.

**European Greenfinch** *Carduelis chloris* - fairly common.

**Red-fronted Serin** *Serinus pusillus* - 2-3 birds seen daily around Kazbegi.

**Eurasian Bullfinch** *Pyrrhula pyrrhula* - one pair seen along the river south of Kazbegi.

**Common Rosefinch** *Carpodacus erythrinus* - common breeding bird with 31 birds counted in one morning.

**Caucasian Great Rosefinch** *Carpodacus rubicilla* - I searched in vain for birds around the snow line at 3000 m asl. below the Gergeti Glacier, but descending a little back towards Kazbegi, I stumbled upon 4♂♂ and 3♀♀ in an area of snow melt, in an otherwise snowfilled valley (GPS N 42°39.487' E 044°34.591'). They weren't particularly shy, but would fly off on occasions, only to return a little later.

**Black-headed Bunting** *Emberiza melanocephala* - one male was singing at the Tbilisi Airport.

**Corn Bunting** *Miliaria calandra* - a few singing birds heard.

**Rock Bunting** *Emberiza cia* - a single bird found above Gergeti village.



*Caucasian Great Rosefinch – the strawberry-bird.*