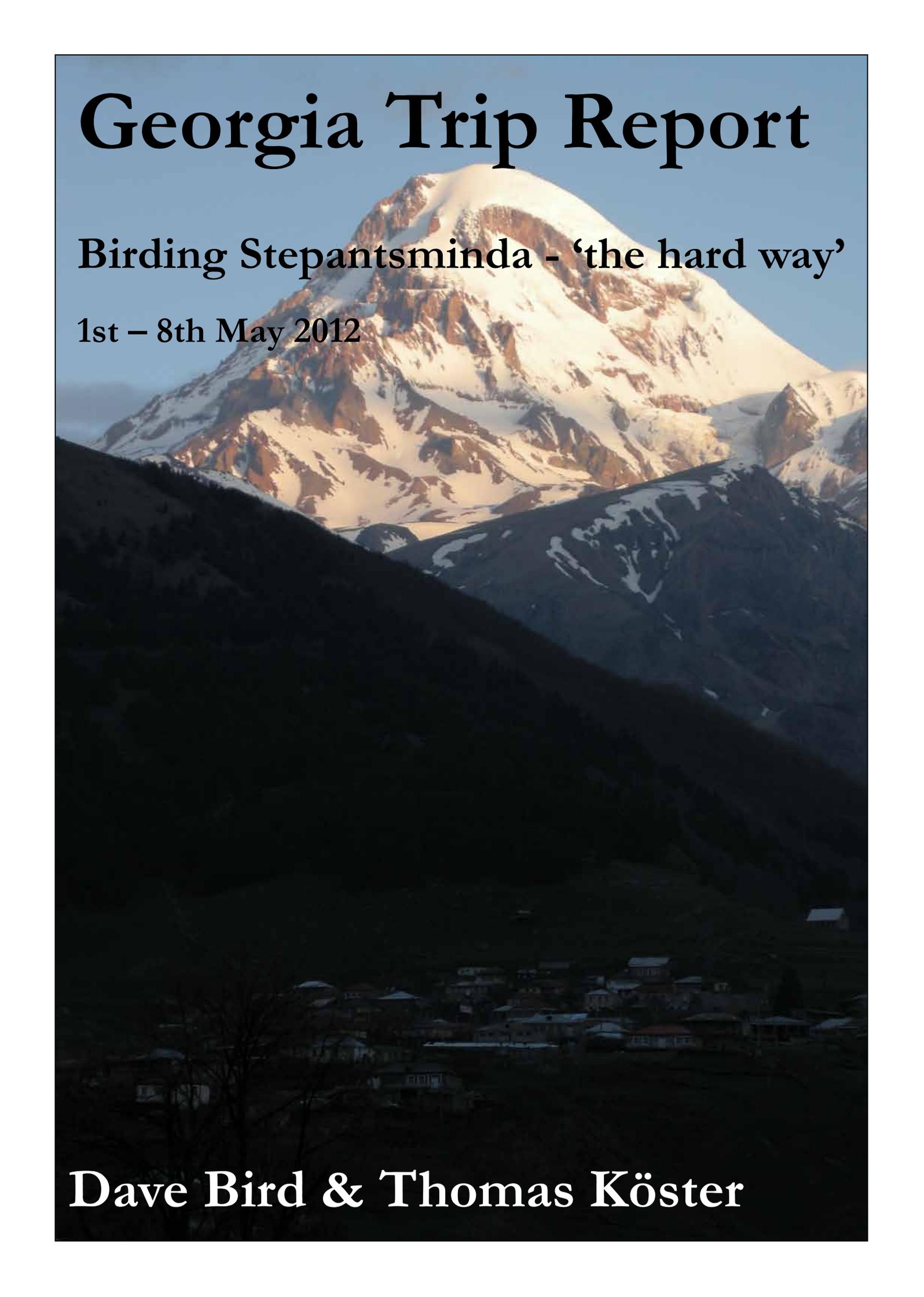


Georgia Trip Report



Birding Stepantsminda - 'the hard way'

1st – 8th May 2012

Dave Bird & Thomas Köster



Typical Caucasian Snowcock habitat

Organisation

After reading various excellent reports over the past few years (Bonser 2008, van der Laan 2010), I decided to organise a trip to Stepantsminda myself.

Contact was made to Exotours in Tbilisi. Our main contact person there was Nana Gelashvili. Normally within a day I would have an answer to any queries that I had. Excellent service.

Phone: (+995 32) 291-31-91; 299-71-31

Email: georgia@exotour.ge

Web: www.exotour.ge

A car with an English speaking driver for the one-way journey from Tbilisi airport to Stepantsminda was organised as well as accommodation in Stepantsminda. These 2 items were paid for in advance by bank transfer. Having someone to pick you up at the airport and take you directly to your guesthouse in Stepantsminda was excellent, but is costly 180USD/112GBP/140euro. Still I would recommend this course of action.

Flights

On 1st May we caught a connecting flight from Leipzig to Munich. At 21.15 we left Munich to arrive in Tbilisi at 03.00 local time.

Return was on 8th May – departed Tbilisi 04.00 arrived Munich 05.50, connecting flight 07.55 to Leipzig. All flights departed and arrived on time. Airline - Lufthansa.

Accommodation

Exotours booked us in the guesthouse 'ANANO', centrally located in Stepantsminda. The bedrooms had recently been renovated and they were in the process of renovating downstairs.

We had half board, times of meals could be arranged with the owner. All meals were very good and there was always plenty to eat. Booking with Exotour 1 night half board cost 38USD/23GBP/29euro. The family, who run the guesthouse speak English, have an email address and can be contacted directly to book accommodation. This reduces the costs by a third. In May 2012, 1 night half board cost 45 Lari = /28USD/ 17GBP/21euro.

Contact: Anano Qushashvili

Email: ananoqushashvili@yahoo.com

Mobile: +995 598 58 96 62

Local Taxis

In Stepantsminda a car isn't required unless you need or want to go birding in the mountains near Sameba Church.

The owners of the guesthouse can book a taxi for you. A return journey to Sameba church from Stepantsminda costs between 80-120 Lari. Basically the taxi drops you off and picks you up again at a specified time. It's only 6km but takes 30 minutes and is a journey of a lifetime!

Return to Tbilisi

We used a local minibuss back to Tbilisi. They leave every hour from ca. 9 to 5 in the afternoon, from the main road in the centre of Stepantsminda. Price May 2012 – 10 Lari. Time 3 hours. (Our driver - 2 and a half hours)

From the bus depot in Tbilisi we caught the metro to the main station, 2 or 3 stops then Bus 37, from the main station, to the airport. This takes about 45-60 minutes and is 15km.

It seems the metro and buses in Tbilisi only have one price for any length of journey 0.50 Lari. Getting a ticket is a bit tricky but we always found someone to help.

The Weather

In the right conditions, I think it is possible to see all target species in basically one small area in Stepantsminda, i.e to the south and east of the village.

The mountains east of Stepantsminda have Caucasian Snowcock and Caucasian Black Grouse, whilst the bushes and surrounding area south of the village can hold Güldenstädt's Redstart, Great Rosefinch and Mountain Chiffchaff. Plus many other very interesting species are to be seen in these 2 areas.

From reading the many reports it seems the beginning of May is the ideal time to visit. At this time there's a good chance snow is still present or it will snow and this forces the birds down from the mountains and into the valley, where Stepantsminda is located at 1800m.

On 2nd May 2012 we arrived in glorious sunshine, what a place, huge mountains on either side of the valley with Mt. Kazbegi standing above them all. The rest of the week the weather remained good and thus our chances to see our target species in the valley were gone.

Maps & Co-ordinates

In both trip reports mentioned above GPS data is given showing location of bird sightings. This is excellent to give you an idea where you have to go. Use Google earth to do this.

Photographs

All photographs taken at Stepantsminda are:

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Snowcocks and Grouse east of Stepantsminda

At 8.00 we arrived at our guesthouse and 15 minutes later we were on the road. Our first target were the mountains slopes east of Stepantsminda. As we approached the slopes we could already hear the Snowcocks calling. We hiked up the slope past some bushes and just kept going higher and higher until we reached 2200m. From this point we had excellent views of Snowcocks on the ground, flying and calling. Not only that but Caucasian Black Grouse were also here and were seen at close quarters.

After 10.30 the numbers of birds heard or seen dropped off considerably, although the occasional call was heard throughout the day.

Getting there

Using, for example, Google earth or Google Maps it's possible to see the pine forest east of Stepantsminda. Keeping to the south of the forest but skirting it at the same time, you come to a very steep slope with a deep gully going up the mountain. This is where we climbed up. We could hear Snowcocks from the bottom but we didn't see any until we ascended the mountain. The next mountain slope directly south of this one is more grassy. From the bottom of the mountain we saw Caucasian Black Grouse every day, up to 4 birds. Obviously not fantastic views due to the distance but nice to see.

Güldenstädt's Redstart

The first day we went to Sameba Church we didn't check the bushes south of Stepantsminda due to a lack of time. This was a great mistake. On this day 1 or 2 male Güldenstädt's Redstart's were present in the bushes. Advice check the bushes every day.

What to do if you can't find Güldenstädt's Redstart in the bushes SE of Stepantsminda

By chance we heard of a tip from a Georgian guide. Go back to the Snowcocks. We climbed the snowcock slope yet again up to 2300m, we were now under the rocky crags. On this very steep slope we tried to find a comfy spot to scan the ridge of the mountain. After about 2 or 3 hours a male Güldenstädt's Redstart was seen 3 times albeit briefly on the mountain ridge. Not fantastic views but better than nothing. Great views of Caucasian Snowcocks, Caucasian Black Grouse and Alpine Accentor again.

Great Rosefinch

No Great Rosefinches in the area south of Stepantsminda. Along with a group of Belgian birders we went by taxi to Sameba Church, 2200m, and headed into the mountains. We were dropped off ca. 0.5km before the church and from there walked along a path heading west, through a small valley and climbed up until we were walking more or less in the open. At 2400m and higher snow was patchy, but some places impassable meaning you had to choose your route carefully.

Walking higher we connected with a number of Caucasian Black Grouse and Alpine Choughs. We reached a dead end at ca. 2600m due to snow so here we stopped. Scanning the mountain sides finally produced a small flock of up to 15 Great Rosefinches, at ca. 2900m. We were able to watch the birds at some distance for 30 minutes.

The following day we did the same hoping to find Güldenstädt's Redstart if we went higher. We climbed up to 2950m basically to the snowline, no Redstarts but nice views of 2 female Great Rosefinches for over 1 hour. Other specialities included 4 Alpine Accentor's, Shorelark, Twite and Chough. Caucasian Snowcocks were also heard calling from this point towards Kazbegi.



Caucasian Snowcock

Systematic Species List

Stepantsminda 1 - 8 May 2012

When relevant, I indicate the sub-species expected to be found in the region in the trip list. This is for completeness and does not imply that I successfully identified individuals to the rank of sub-species.

- 1. Caucasian Black Grouse** *Tetrao mlokosiewiczii*
ca. 10 birds seen east + west of Stepantsminda.
- 2. Caucasian Snowcock** *Tetraogallus caucasicus*
ca. 10 birds seen east of Stepantsminda, heard only towards Mt. Kazbegi.
- 3. Purple Heron** *Ardea purpurea purpurea*
1 - south of village on 5.5.12
- 4. Honey Buzzard** *Pernis apivorus*
5+ - seen on 7.5.12
- 5. Black Kite** *Milvus migrans migrans*
1 - seen on 7.5.12
- 6. Lammergeier** *Gypaetus barbatus barbatus*
2 or 3 sightings ad + imm
- 7. Egyptian Vulture**
Neophron percnopterus percnopterus
1 ad - on 6.5.12
- 8. Griffon Vulture** *Gyps fulvus fulvus*
Up to 15 seen in a day
- 9. Pallid Harrier** *Circus macrourus*
1 female in the village on 2.5.12
- 10. Sparrowhawk** *Accipiter nisus nisus*
1 on 7.5.12
- 11. Levant Sparrowhawk** *Accipiter brevipes*
1 male seen very well 3.5.12
- 12. Steppe Buzzard** *Buteo buteo vulpinus*
30+ on 7.5.12
- 13. Long-legged Buzzard** *Buteo rufinus rufinus*
1 with 2 Steppe Buzzards on 2.5.12
- 14. Golden Eagle** *Aquila chrysaetos homeyeri*
2 or 3 sightings
- 15. Kestrel** *Falco tinnunculus tinnunculus*
Often seen in high mountain areas
- 16. Hobby** *Falco subbuteo subbuteo*
1 at Sameba Church on 3.5.12
- 17. Corncrake** *Crex crex*
3 or 4 birds calling throughout the week
- 18. Crane** *Grus grus*
A flock of 25 birds north past Sameba church 3.5.12
- 19. Little Ringed Plover** *Charadrius dubius curonicus*
2 along the river
- 20. Common Sandpiper** *Actitis hypoleucos*
2 or 3 along the river
- 21. Wood Sandpiper** *Tringa glareola*
1 south of Stepantsminda on 3.5.12
- 22. Rock Dove** *Columba livia neglecta?*
Up to 8 birds – status uncertain
- 23. Cuckoo** *Cuculus canorus*
2 or 3 birds seen
- 24. Swift** *Apus apus apus*
Seen on 2 occasions max 5 on 7.5.12
- 25. Bee-eater** *Merops apiaster apiaster*
Often heard and observed, once at 3000+m above Sameba Church
- 26. Hoopoe** *Upupa epops epops*
Single birds daily
- 27. Great-spotted Woodpecker**
Dendrocopos major tenuirostris?
Single bird on 5.5.12
- 28. Red-backed Shrike** *Lanius collurio kobylini*
Up to 2 birds most days
- 29. Lesser Grey Shrike** *Lanius minor*
1 S.E Stepantsminda on 2.5.12
- 30. Alpine Chough**
Pyrhacorax graculus graculus
Up to 50 on different days
- 31. Chough** *Pyrhacorax pyrrhacorax docilis*
50 near Sameba Church on 4.5.12
- 32. Jay** *Garrulus glandarius krynicki*
1 or 2 most days
- 33. Hooded Crow** *Corvus cornix sharpii*
1 or 2 most days
- 34. Raven** *Corvus corax*
Single birds seen in the mountains
- 35. Blue Tit** *Cyanistes caeruleus*
Daily
- 36. Great Tit** *Parus major major*
Daily
- 37. Coal Tit** *Periparus ater*
1 or 2 birds most days
- 38. Woodlark** *Lullula arborea pallida*
1 bird heard singing but not seen on 2 days

39. Shorelark *Eremophila alpestris penicillata*
1 with Great Rosefinches at 2950m west of Sameba Church

40. Crag Martin *Ptyonoprogne rupestris*
Max 5 birds in a day

41. Swallow *Hirundo rustica rustica*
Small passage 30 birds on 7.5.12

42. House Martin *Delichon urbicum urbicum*
5 on 7.5.12

43. Lorenz's Warbler (Mountain Chiffchaff)
Phylloscopus sindianus lorenzii
Up to 6 birds daily – bush area SE Stepantsminda

44. Chiffchaff
Phylloscopus collybita collybita or *abietinus*?
1 seen 2.5.12

45. Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*
Max 3 in a day

46. Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla dammholzi*?
Only 1 recorded

47. Lesser Whitethroat / Hume's Lesser Whitethroat
Sylvia curruca / *Sylvia curruca althaea*?
2 birds singing in the bushes S.E of Stepantsminda. One bird seen quite well showed a grey mantle. According to Svensson *et al* 2009 *althaea* has not been recorded within our region

48. Treecreeper *Certhia familiaris caucasica*
1 in small wood near bridge 6.5.12

49. Caucasian Wren
Troglodytes troglodytes hyrcanus
1 or 2 seen or heard daily

50. Caucasian Ring Ouzel
Turdus torquatus amicornum
Up to 10 birds seen daily

51. Blackbird *Turdus merula aterrimus*
Seen daily less than 10

52. Mistle Thrush
Turdus viscivorus viscivorus
Max 5 in a day

53. Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata striata*
1 on 6+7.5.12

54. Red-breasted Flycatcher *Ficedula parva*
1 near Pine forest on 2.5.12

55. Black Redstart
Phoenicurus ochrurus ochrurus or *semirufus*
Which subspecies occurs in Stepantsminda? *Phoenicurus ochrurus ochrurus* or *semirufus* or both?

56. Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*
1 or 2 birds seen seemed to be normal redstarts

57. Ehrenberg's Redstart
Phoenicurus phoenicurus samamisticus
A few seen mostly in village throughout the week.

58. Gldenstdt's Redstart
Phoenicurus erythrogastrus erythrogastrus
1 male bird seen on the mountain ridge above the snow-cock slope 3 times on 5.5.12

59. Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra*
Up to 4 seen in a day

60. Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe libanotica*
Common

61. Alpine Accentor *Prunella collaris collaris*
4 west of Sameba church, cliffs on 4.5.12, 2 snowcock slopes 6.5.12

62. Dunnock *Prunella modularis obscura*
Daily in bushes S.E Stepantsminda

63. House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*
A few in the village

64. Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flavissima*

- **Blue-headed Wagtail** *M.f. flava*
Max 4 on 3.5.12
- **Grey-headed Wagtail** *M.f. thunbergi*
1 each on 2+3.5.12
- **Yellow-headed Wagtail** *M.f. lutea*
1 on 3.5.12 aka
- *M.f. superciliaris*
1 on 2.5.12 (all wagtails in fields with cows)

65. Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea cinerea*
1 or 2 daily

66. White Wagtail *Motacilla alba dukhunensis*
20 daily

67. Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis trivialis*
1-3 birds in Pine forest east of village

68. Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis pratensis*
2 on 3.5.12

69. Red-throated Pipit *Anthus cervinus*
1 on 2.5.12 Pine Forest area

70. Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta coutellii*
Common

71. Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*
Present in the Pine forest

72. Red-fronted Serin *Serinus pusillus*
Seen most days, max 20 near Sameba Church on 4.5.12

73. Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*
Up to 10 most days

74. Linnet *Carduelis cannabina bella*

Up to 10 on 1 or 2 days

75. (Turkish) Twite *Carduelis flavirostris brevirostris*
2 snowcock slope on 2.5.12, 4 Sameba area on 4.5.12

76. Common Rosefinch

Carpodacus erythrinus kubanensis

Up to 5 normally south of Stepantsminda

77. Caucasian Great Rosefinch

Carpodacus rubicilla rubicilla

15 birds, males and females – long range, at 2950m west of Sameba Church on 3.5.12, 2 females same area close range on 4.5.12

78. Bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*

2 birds most days

79. Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella erythrogegens*

1 in small wood near bridge

80. Black-headed Bunting *Emberiza melanocephala*

1 in village on 5.5.12

References

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Svensson, L., Mullarney, K. & Zetterstrom, D. 2009. *Collins Bird Guide 2nd edition*. HarperCollins Publishers, London.

van der Laan, J. 2010. Report of a Birding Trip to Stepantsminda, Georgia from 28th April to 2nd May 2010 [online PDF]. Available from: http://www.jnvddlaan.home.xs4all.nl/Georgia_2010.pdf [accessed May 2012].

Trip Pictures

A selection of pictures taken during the trip at Stepantsminda by Dave Bird.



Caucasian Snowcock



Caucasian Snowcock



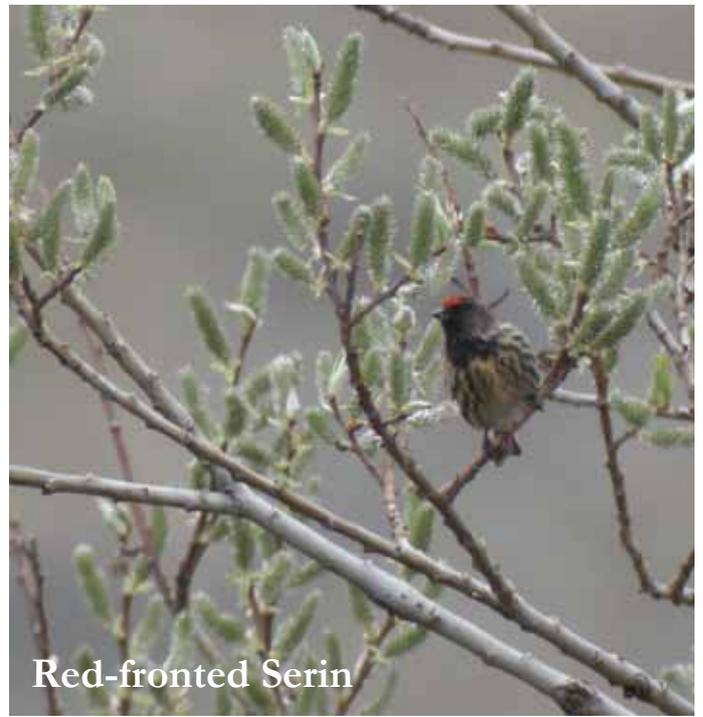
Caucasian Black Grouse



Caucasian Black Grouse



Common Rosefinch



Red-fronted Serin



Black Redstart



Mountain Chiffchaff

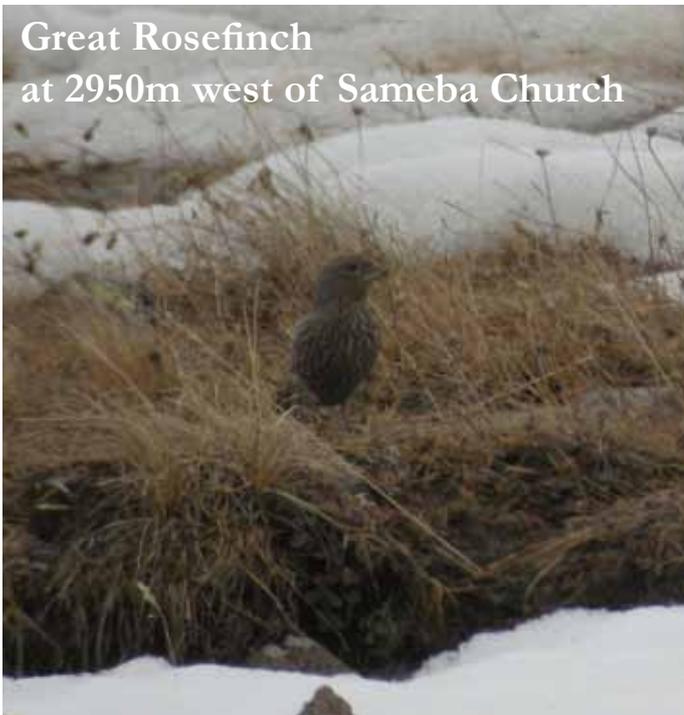


Twite

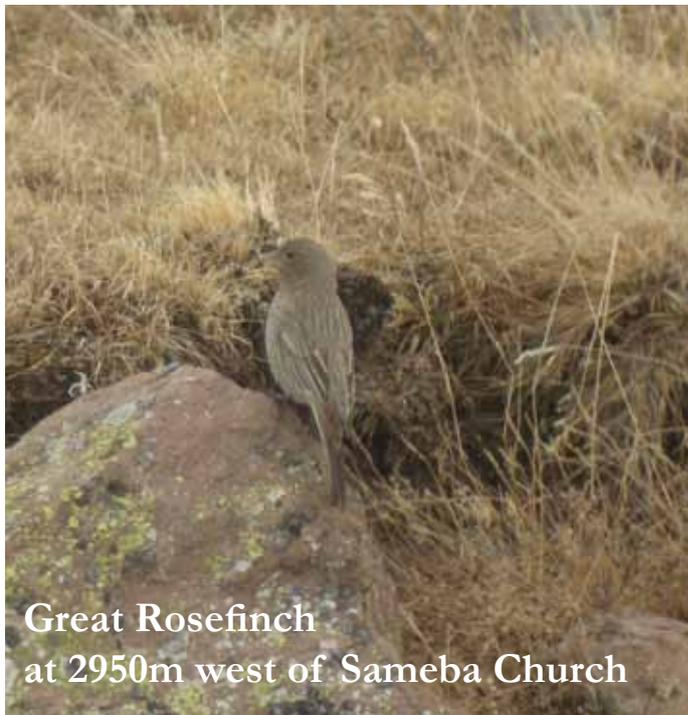


Ring Ouzel

Great Rosefinch
at 2950m west of Sameba Church



Great Rosefinch
at 2950m west of Sameba Church



Alpine Accentor



White Wagtail



Yellow Wagtail *M.f. superciliaris*



Yellow Wagtail *M.f. lutea*





Mountain Slopes east of Stepantsminda

Slope on the left excellent for Caucasian Snowcock. Mainly seen in the rocky areas, near the gully on the left.

The slope located in the middle and to the right always held up to 4 male Caucasian Black Grouse.

An excellent tip for those who aren't lucky enough to find Gldenstdt's Redstart in the bushes in the bottom right hand corner of the picture, is to climb as high as possible on the 'Snowcock Slope' and scan the mountain ridge. It worked for us. Scanning the ridge also produced Alpine Accentor.

In the bushes mentioned Mountain Chiffchaffs, Ring Ouzels, Red-fronted Serins were often present and Gldenstdt's Redstart one day when unfortunately we weren't there.

Dave Bird May 2012

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