

Muraviovka, Amurland, Russia

29 June – 1 July 2007



Yellow-breasted Bunting

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General

This trip was essentially a weekend trip with the purpose of finding two difficult target birds occurring primarily in Northeast Asia: Menzbier's Pipit and Band-bellied Crake. I successfully saw the Pipit in its typical song flight and heard the Crake for hours, but as it was not responsive I never saw it. In addition to these target birds, I also had a nice and interesting weekend in a seldom-visited part of Russia. The staff at Muraviovka was very nice and helpful, the landscape and general birding was good and it gave an insight in land/water-based border crossing. Other key birds that I recorded were Oriental Stork, Red-crowned and White-naped Cranes, Baillon's Crake, Von Schrenk's Bittern, Yellow-legged Buttonquail, Ochre-rumped Bunting and a multitude of warblers.



Ochre-rumped Bunting (female), a common species on the wet meadows

Itinerary

29/6

I left Beijing with the 7.30 flight to Harbin in Heilongjiang in northeastern China. After a smooth connection I boarded the second flight further on to Heihe, right at the border with Russia. By then it was midday and I took a taxi (30 min) to the jetty for the boats across the river. There was indeed some initial confusion before I managed to understand that tickets for the Russian boat are sold on board and only Rubels are accepted. As it was not really possible to figure out the cost, it turned out that I had too little Rubel exchanged. I was however quickly through the customs and passport control. I guess that it is not an everyday thing to have Swedes coming through, although with my long-nosed appearance I was blending in well with the ubiquitous Russians. After some final hassle and rip-off, I managed to pay the ticket in RMB and jumped on the boat minutes before it took off. The crossing only took a few minutes and then it was the same, or rather reverse, procedure through customs and immigration.

To my relief, Marina from Muraviovka Park was meeting me at the other side around 14.00 (16.00 Russian time) and we were soon having a delicious lunch in a Russian restaurant. When lunch was finished, the driver came around and we were on our way to the final destination.

At the lodge at Muraviovka I was met by Sergei and installed myself in a nice and clean room. As I was keen to go birding I soon set off into the wetlands straight out from the lodge. The target was to find some short wet grassy area for Menzbier's Pipit. In spite of spending three hours until dusk, I failed to connect with it. There was however a zillion mossies and horse-flies that connected with me! Luckily I had brought

a pair of Wellingtons, which proved extremely useful. The water was often 1-3 dm deep and with the high grass it was not a quick walk to cover the area.

In the evening we were waiting for the Band-bellied Crake to start calling, but it took to well after dark and dinner until it started up. The distance to the bird was difficult to judge, but when I waded out into the wetland again, I realized that it was quite a long way out. I decided to be better prepared for a dawn twitch in order to make use of a little light. That night I fell asleep around 02.00 to the calling Crake.



The lodge at Muraviovka Park

30/6

I was up again after only two hours of sleep. Soaked in mosquito repellent and with a strong torch I set off. There was a thick layer of morning mist over the wet meadows and it took about five meters until I was completely soaked and the water was pouring into the wellies. Most crakes take some hard work and I was determined to not give up easily. I walked towards the calling bird and when still some way to go, it stopped! That's it, nothing more. After trying to wait it out, assisted with a snatch of playback, I eventually gave up and instead concentrated on the Pipit. After about an hour of trashing through the wet grass, I suddenly heard one calling from overhead. Soon I found it in the peculiar circling display flight and could enjoy it for a while until it disappeared against the sun. I must admit I felt elated as Sergei had been a bit worried that I would not find it this late in the season. I waited for a while, but the Pipit did not reappear, so I walked back towards the Crake area until it was time for breakfast.

After breakfast I was longing for a dry walk, so this time I opted for the entrance road that passes through some woodlands. By then it was getting a bit hot and I did not notice any really exciting birds. As the coming night could be a long one, I decided to take an afternoon nap during the heat of the day. I only woke up for a late lunch together with the board of directors of the Park. Only at 17.00 I was up again and set off for another go with the Pipit. No activity was noticed except for hordes of insects (I smashed more than one horse-fly for every second random hand-clap), so I returned for dinner at 20.00.

When dinner was finished, the Crake set off, this evening even before dusk, so I quickly jumped in the wellies, covered myself with double layer clothing and plenty of repellent and brought the big torch. This night the bird again had changed place and in order to find out the distance to the bird I tried to get in a circle around it. Eventually I was probably no more than 10-15 meters from it, although it called much more infrequently, possibly disturbed by me. It was quiet for long times and I thought it was gone, but when I gave it a burst it responded quickly and went silent again. In the twilight (or was it dark?) I could not see

any sign of movements except for the cloud of mossies all around me. After an eternity it started to call briefly at least 100 away. My theory is that it was an unpaired male that was covering some ground in this part of the reserve. Apparently playback was then of no use and I felt my chances of seeing this individual in the dark was as close to nil as one can get. I made another result less attempt before convincing myself that I had to, for the time being, be content with just hearing it. Back at the lodge it did not take me long to fall asleep, again to the background call of the teasing Crake.



1/7

I woke up at 4.30, just before dawn and immediately heard the Crake greeting me good morning. Fully equipped, I set off for yet another wet odyssey into the wetlands. The Crake probably felt he'd teased me enough and instead shut up early. I walked over to the core Pipit area, but at 6.30, I had not heard a crack of it and I had return for brecky and packing up. By 7.30 I left with the car back to Blagoveschensk. The driver kindly helped me to procure a ticket with the Russian boat and rather smoothly I was through all the controls and onto the boat. Stepping ashore on the Chinese side it felt good to be home again and I took a taxi to a good restaurant in downtown Heihe for a Gongbaojiding as second breakfast. I had allowed myself plenty of time to get to the airport, which was completely unnecessary as the flight was seriously delayed due to a late incoming flight. I killed some time by walking around near the airport, but only noted some commoner birds, although cream of the crop was some China tick Northern House-Martins.

Weather, etc

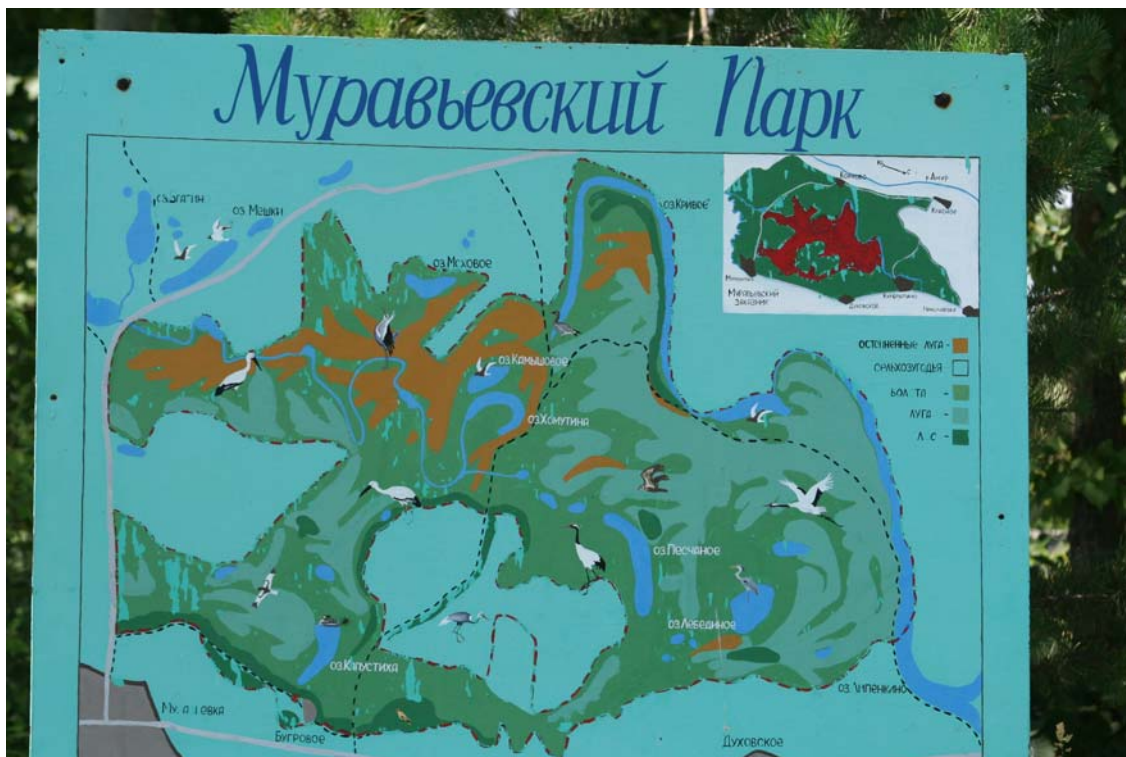
The weather was stunningly beautiful, although a bit hot during midday, probably about 30 degrees. The only reason for having an extra layer of clothes was as protection against all the biting and sticking insects.

Logistics & Site description

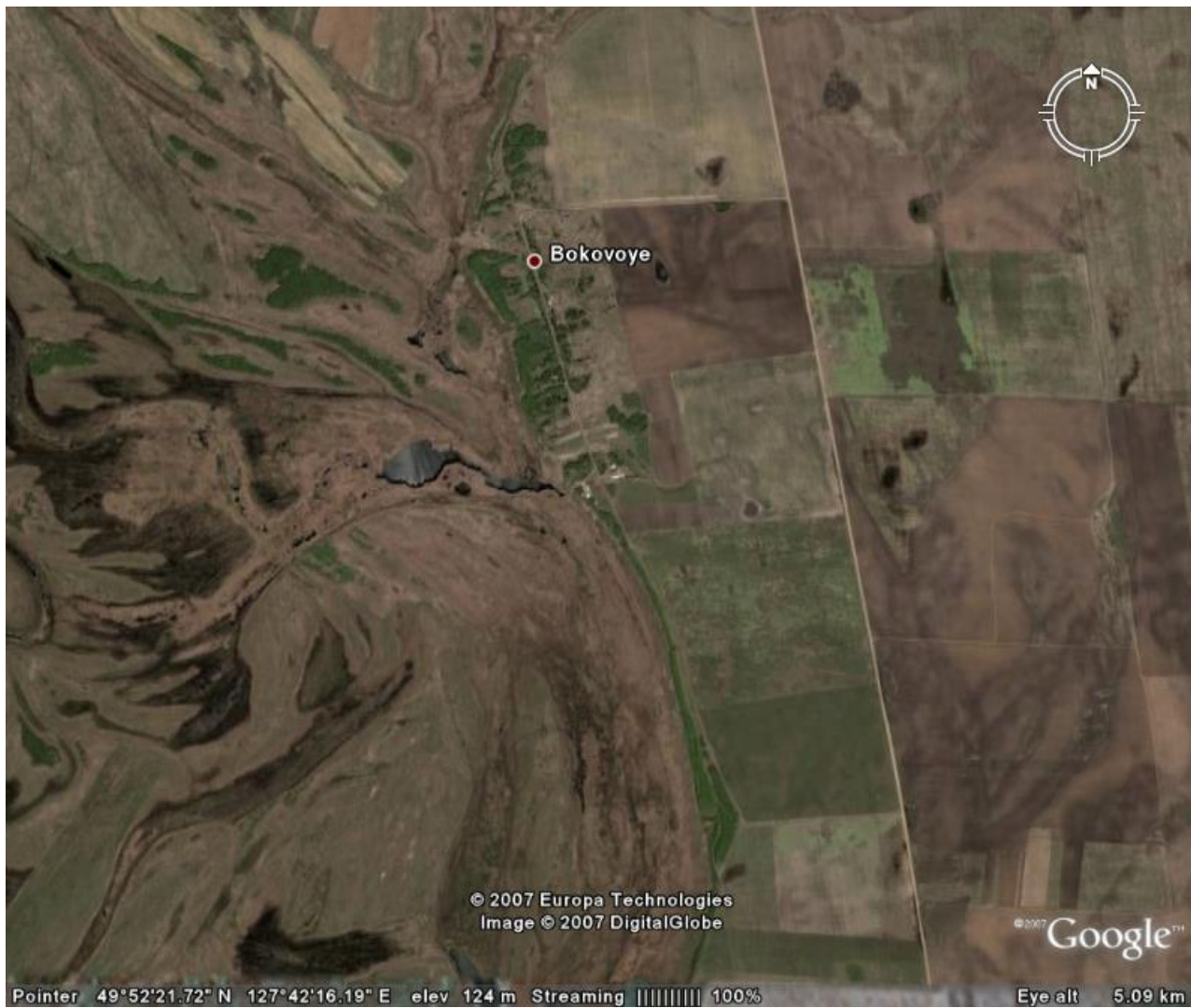


Panorama over the meadows straight out from the lodge. The area for Menzbier's Pipit is to the left and away from the small patch of trees just left of the center of the photo. The Band-bellied Crake was in the area between the patch of trees and the open water.

Muraviovka Park was created in 1996 and is 5206 ha of wetlands and arable lands leased from the Tambovka district in Amur Region. Six species of cranes and Oriental Stork use the area for breeding or migration stopover. Red-crowned and White-naped Cranes are breeders in small numbers, although the former is decreasing seriously in numbers. For global birders it is a good site to look for two species restricted to the Russian Far East, namely Menzbier's Pipit and Band-bellied Crake. The Park arranges lots of nature conservation education and camps for kids. On Birdlife International's website there is an update of a record of a Streaked Reed-Warbler (*A. sorgophilus*) having been seen and photographed in 2004. I asked Sergei about it and although he knew of it, he had no further information so could neither confirm nor deny it. If the record is true, it is indeed a very exciting such, as there are no recent records of this species (anywhere in the world?). The breeding grounds have never been found, although are suspected to be somewhere in northeast Asia.



Map of Muraviovka Park



Satellite photo of Muraviovka from Google Earth. The lodge is the white building at the center of the photo.

Situated right at the border with China it is accessible either through domestic Russian flights or by domestic Chinese flights. Coming from the Chinese side, I found it difficult and expensive to fly to Blagoveschensk. Instead I opted for a land (or rather water) border crossing from Heihe. There are no direct flights to Heihe from Beijing, so I had to fly via Harbin. Another option is to take the train from Harbin, but then it is not really a weekend twitch. From Blagoveschensk it takes 1.5 hours to drive on mostly good roads. The ferry crossing from Heihe to Blagoveschensk is rather smooth, although beware sometimes long lines to buy tickets or get through customs and immigration. Expect no one to speak any English and this is valid for both sides of the Amur River/border. There are ferries frequently operated by a Chinese as well as a Russian company. I used the Russian and realized they only charged in Rubel.

The lodge at Muraviovka is located right on an embankment at the edge of the wetlands with a fantastic view over the area. The lodge has electricity and serves good food. To make reservations contact either the director Marina Kolodina (0079098169443, muraviovkapark@mail.ru) or the founder Sergei Smirenski (sergei@savingcranes.org). Sergei is a keen birdwatcher.

Birds

Great Cormorant, *Phalacrocorax carbo sinensis*
20 at HB and two at Muraviovka Park.

Grey Heron, *Ardea cinerea jouyi*
Two at BH and about five at Muraviovka Park.

Purple Heron, *Ardea purpurea manilensis*
Two at Muraviovka Park.

Von Schrenk's Bittern, *Ixobrychus eurhythmus*
One heard calling distantly at night at Muraviovka Park. This year it was not so common as most years.

Oriental Stork, *Ciconia boyciana*
One active nest in a tree straight out from the lodge at Muraviovka Park and 1-3 more birds seen in flight in the same general area. 12 pairs are in the reserve this year.



Oriental Stork

Mallard, *Anas platyrhynchos platyrhynchos*
Two at Muraviovka Park.

Harrier sp, *Circus* sp
One very distant bird was either Eastern Marsh or female Pied.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk, *Accipiter nisus nisosimilis*
One at Heihe airport.

Amur Falcon, *Falco amurensis*
A total of at least 20 birds in and around Muraviovka Park.

Japanese Quail, *Coturnix japonica*
2-4 heard at Muraviovka Park.

Ring-necked Pheasant, *Phasianus colchicus pallasii*
At least five heard at Muraviovka Park.

Yellow-legged Buttonquail, *Turnix tanki blanfordii*
One heard shortly after dusk from the lodge at Muraviovka Park.

White-naped Crane, *Grus vipio*
One or two pairs seen briefly at a couple of occasions and a few heard in the morning mist at Muraviovka Park.

Red-crowned Crane, *Grus japonensis*
One pair and also one single were seen from the lodge at Muraviovka Park. This year was the first ever with only one breeding pair. Apparently the numbers are going down quickly in parallel with the seriously declining wintering population in China.

Water Rail, *Rallus aquaticus indicus*

Heard several times from the lodge at Muraviovka Park. Most common call was the shrill “weeah-weeah-weeah-weeah-weeah”

Baillon’s Crake, *Porzana pusilla pusilla*

One heard several times from the lodge at Muraviovka Park. Calling most active before and at dusk, not during night or dawn. The call was to my ears very similar to the western taxon.

Band-bellied Crake, *Porzana paykullii*

One was heard calling from the lodge at Muraviovka Park. The first night it started calling well after dusk and called through the night until stopping half an hour after dawn. The second night it started calling half an hour before dusk. This was the first year one has been recorded near the lodge, as normally they favor more forested areas. This was probably a wandering male as it during 10 days gradually changed place, and this might have been the reason it was not so responsive to playback. When I played the call it responded very briefly and then went quiet and later started to call from much further away. The call is like a very intensive Baillon’s Crake a repetitive drumming, probably audible at up to 3-400 meters, “drrrrrr, drrrrrr, drrrrr,”. Spaces between the strophes were 1.5-2 seconds and each call lasted about 1 seconds.

Far Eastern Curlew, *Numenius madagascariensis*

One Curlew flying by in poor light at Muraviovka Park was possibly this species.

Wood Sandpiper, *Tringa glareola*

One heard at Muraviovka Park.

Common Tern, *Sterna hirundo longipennis*

One at Muraviovka Park.

White-winged Black-Tern, *Chlidonias leucopterus*

One seen when flying over at Muraviovka Park.

Oriental Turtle-Dove, *Streptopelia orientalis orientalis*

Common at and around Muraviovka Park.

Common Cuckoo, *Cuculus canorus canorus*

15-20 at Muraviovka Park.

Long-eared Owl, *Asio otus otus*

One heard begging and an adult responding at the lodge at Muraviovka Park and also one hunting in the morning at Muraviovka Park.

Fork-tailed Swift, *Apus pacificus pacificus*

Five at Heihe airport and a few unidentified swifts at Blagoveschensk.

Red-rumped Swallow, *Cecropis daurica daurica*

A few at Heihe airport.

Barn Swallow, *Hirundo rustica tytleri*

A few at Muraviovka Park and at Blagoveschensk.

Northern House-Martin, *Delichon urbicum lagopodum*

20 at Heihe airport was a China tick.

Grey Wagtail, *Motacilla cinerea melanope*

One at Heihe airport.

Menzbier’s Pipit, *Anthus menzbieri*

One was seen in its peculiar song-flight at Muraviovka Park during the first morning. In spite of two attempts in the afternoons/evenings and another during the second morning, this was the only time I observed it. Apparently the timing of the year might have influenced the activity. The Pipits are only found in short, often wet, grass that has been burned in the early spring. This year there were not so many such areas and they were also very spread out in the park. Fortunately there was a place which Sergei recommended being straight out from the lodge and this was where I eventually found one bird. The song is very high-pitched and not very loud (as is Pechora) and it is therefore easy to walk past them. They deliver the song in a circular song flight at a height of some 50 meters, which does not make it any easier. Add to that the immense number of mosquitoes and horse-flies that get into your ears and eyes and one can picture the situation.

Lanceolated Warbler, *Locustella lanceolata*

About five at Muraviovka Park.

Pallas's Grasshopper-Warbler, *Locustella certhiola certhiola/rubescens*

At least 20 at Muraviovka Park.



Pallas's Grasshopper-Warbler, not quite as skulking as on migration

Black-browed Reed-Warbler, *Acrocephalus bistrigiceps*

At least 20 at Muraviovka Park.

Oriental Reed-Warbler, *Acrocephalus orientalis*

5-10 at Muraviovka Park.

Thick-billed Warbler, *Acrocephalus aedon stegmanni*

Three at Muraviovka Park.

Dusky Warbler, *Phylloscopus fuscatus fuscatus*

About ten at Muraviovka Park.

Radde's Warbler, *Phylloscopus schwarzi*

Two at Heihe airport.

Siberian Rubythroat, *Luscinia calliope*

About five at Muraviovka Park.

Siberian Stonechat, *Saxicola maurus stejnegeri*

At least 30 at Muraviovka Park. Warning whistle call was upward-inflected.

Willow Tit, *Poecile Montana baicalensis*

Seven at Muraviovka Park. Very inconspicuous pale wing-panel, large black bib.

Great Tit, *Parus major kapustini*

One pair with young at the Blagoveschensk ferry. Adult with seemingly yellowish underparts.

Black-naped Oriole, *Oriolus chinensis diffusus*

About ten at Muraviovka Park.

Chinese Grey Shrike, *Lanius sphenocercus sphenocercus*

One in flight near the lodge at Muraviovka Park.

Azure-winged Magpie, *Cyanopica cyana pallescens*

A gang of about ten at Muraviovka Park.

Eurasian Magpie, *Pica pica sericea*

Fairly common at and around Muraviovka Park.

Daurian Jackdaw, *Corvus dauuricus*

Two between Blagoveschensk and Muraviovka Park.

Oriental Crow, *Corvus orientalis*

Two at Muraviovka Park and 30 en route to Blagoveschensk.

White-cheeked Starling, *Sturnus cineraceus*

Seven at Muraviovka Park.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow, *Passer montanus montanus*

Many around the lodge at Muraviovka Park.

Long-tailed Rosefinch, *Uragus sibiricus sibiricus*

Three family parties at Muraviovka Park.

Ochre-rumped Bunting, *Emberiza yessoensis continentalis*

20-30 at Muraviovka Park. This was a frequent bird in the wet grasslands, where I was looking for Menzbier's Pipit.



Mr and Mrs Ochre-rumped Bunting

Yellow-breasted Bunting, *Emberiza aureola ornata*

10-20 at Muraviovka Park.

Black-faced Bunting, *Emberiza spodocephala spodocephala*

Three at Muraviovka Park and two at Heihe airport.