

Georgia - April 2014



Stefan Asker

BIRDING TRIP TO GEORGIA (Kazbegi/Stepantsminda and the Tbilisi area) 19-26 of April 2014.

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ITINERARY

19.04 Flight to Tbilisi. Early pick up 03:20 at the Airport and drive to Kazbegi.
19-22.04 Kazbegi area
23.04 Drive Kazbegi - Tbilisi. Birding in Ananuri, Mtskheta and Lisi Lake.
24.04 David Garejia and Djandara Lake
25.04 Lori Valley
26.04 Kumisi Lake. Flight back from Tbilisi in the evening.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Early pick up at the airport 03:20 by our driver Iago working for Nino Kasradze. We really recommend to establish contact with Mrs Kasradze to make all the arrangements in Georgia. Her company took care of everything including guesthouse in Kazbegi, hotel in Tbilisi, breakfast-lunchbox-dinner and a car (4x4) with a driver. All at a total cost of 825 € per person for a week:

nino.kasradze@iliauni.edu.ge



Mount Kazbegi, 5047 m above sea level

Photo: Stefan Asker

It's possible to exchange money at the airport as well as in Kazbegi. The rate was 1 EUR - 2 Georgian Lari (GEL). If you don't want to use the guide company mentioned there are some hotels and guest-houses available in Kazbegi.

It was light enough for birding in the valley around 06:00 am and the sun set around 08:00 pm. The weather varied a lot during our four days in Kazbegi. We had sunny days with a temperature around +20°C and days with light rain and a temperature of +3°C. The latter forced down the Güldenstädt's from the mountains and grounded migrating birds.

TARGET BIRDS IN KAZBEGI and where to find them

Mountain Chiffchaff (berggransångare)

We only saw two birds among ordinary Chiffchaffs during our stay. When looking at pictures from other trip reports we feel that quite a few were actually Chiffchaffs rather than Mountain Chiffchaffs as claimed. When you see a Chiffchaff with striking warm brown colours, reminiscent of Reed- or even Cetti's Warbler, you have most certainly encountered a true Mountain Chiffchaff! They are much browner than any Chiffchaff and also show a white supercilium. Unfortunately they seemed to be pretty skulky as well. The first one was east of the electricity station in the bushy area (Sea buck-thorn) south of Kazbegi (E in map). The second one was in the bushy lowland along the river south of Kazbegi.

Güldenstädt's Redstart (bergrödstjärt)

Under right weather conditions not hard to find in the Sea Buckthorn areas around Kazbegi. Rainy weather will force them down to the valley. Productive sites were C, E and G in map, but also seen at quite a few other areas. Just find the Sea Buckthorns and start looking. They often sit at the top of a bush. We saw Güldenstädt's every day except for one sunny clear day. Under those conditions it's necessary to climb up the slopes to the rocky cliffs on much higher altitudes. The daily number of birds observed: 0-2-15-4



Male Great Rosefinch in the early morning light our first morning at site E. Photo: Stefan Asker.



Male Güldenstädt's Redstart at site E. Photo: Stefan Asker.

Great Rosefinch (större rosenfink)

Seen every day in the Sea buckthorn areas especially east of the electricity station, E in map. The daily number of birds observed: 8-40-20-5

Caucasian Snowcock (kaukasisk snöhöna)

Their characteristic calls were heard through out the whole mornings. To get a sight of them scan the eastern slopes. We had some nice views of the Snowcocks east of the church behind the pine plantation (east of Kazbegi; B in map).

Caucasian Grouse (kaukasisk orre)

Scan the eastern grassy slopes and as for the snowcocks. We saw them displaying from the church behind the pine plantation. Scan also the slopes a bit more northwards, A in map.



Scanning the steep mountain slopes for target birds....

Photo: Stefan Asker

OTHER BIRDS IN KAZBEGI 19 -22 OF APRIL

Lammergeier (lammgam): some very nice views around the eastern slopes on low altitude. Seem to come down in the valley under bad weather conditions. Sunny days we only viewed distance birds high up around the peaks.



Lammergeier on patrol.

Photo: Anders Boström.

A distinct migration of raptors some days. We did not pay so much attention to it though. A good observation point seemed to be at the church west of the village (The Sminda Sameba Church).

Steppe Eagle (stäppörn) - some birds seen migrating.

Lesser Spotted Eagle (mindre skrikörn) - some birds seen migrating.

Levant Sparrowhawk (balkanhök) - some birds seen migrating.

Montagu's Harrier (ängshök) - some birds seen migrating.

Steppe Buzzard (stäppvråk) - very common migrator.

Black Kite (brun glada) - common migrator.

Long-legged Buzzard (örnvråk) - a few migrators.

Griffon Vulture (gåsgam) - fairly common migrator.

Sparrowhawk (sparvhök) - some birds seen on migration.

Booted Eagle (dvärgörn) - some birds on migration.

Lesser Kestrel (rödfalk) - one male migrating.

Wallcreeper (murkrypare) - 3-4 birds seen daily (F in map), a rock wall close to the road easy to reach. The species seems to favour rock walls with grassy patches of a football size. They seemed to

foraging at those spots. Wallcreepers were also seen at the foot of the rock walls south (and west) of the village.

Semi-collared Flycatcher (balkanflugsnappare) - male and female resting in the village.



Male Semi-collared Flycatcher. Photo Stefan Asker.

Penduline Tit (pungmes) - two birds seen resting at E in map.

Turkish Twite *ssp.brevirostris* (berghämpling) - some birds seen on higher altitudes around the village.

Red-fronted Serin (rödpannad gulhämpling) - seen daily around the village, often at E in map.

Citrine Wagtail (citronärsla) - at least 10 birds were resting in the flat lowland along Terghi River.



Female Citrine Wagtail.

Photo: Anders Boström.

Rock Thrush (stentrast) - two males seen, at site C and south of the village on the western side.

Black-eared Wheatear (medelhavsstenskvätta) - one female observed in the stony area northwest of the village, C in map. A perfect site to look for resting wheatears we think.

KAZBEGI - TBILISI 23 OF APRIL

Early morning drive to Tbilisi 23 of April. We made a few stops. Unfortunately we had mist and snow-fall when we passed the ski resort Gudauri. On our way to Kazbegi, in the very early morning, we saw a lot of birds beside the road in grassy patches in between the snow here. Our idea was to make a longer stop on our way back to Tbilisi (a big mistake due to the weather condition that day!).

Ananuri: We stopped at the fortress. A heavy northbound raptor migration started at around 08:30. We saw the same species as mentioned in Kazbegi but in higher numbers. A heavy migration of Bee-eaters as well. The parking area by the fortress is a perfect look out point. Below the fortress we found two **Middle-spotted Woodpeckers**.



Middle-spotted Woodpecker, Ananuri.

Photo: Stefan Asker.

Mhetsketa: This site is no longer as described in trip reports. The former dams are filled with stones and gravel and did not produce much. We saw a flock of **Armenian Gulls** along the riverside though. The monastery on the eastern side of the river is probably a good raptor point. From the “wrong” side of the river we saw a **Short-toed Eagle**, a **Steppe Eagle**, some **Montague’s Harriers**, a couple of **Black Kites**, a **Booted Eagle** and of course **Steppe Buzzards** passing over the monastery.

DAVID GAREJIA AND DJANDARA LAKE 24 OF APRIL



Pallas's Gull in the hard wind at Djandara Lake.

Photo: Stefan Asker.

A **very** hard wind ruined much of the day at David Garejia. The monastery was a nice place and we found some protection from the wind and observed a pair of **Pied Wheatears** and some **Black-eared Wheatears**. Under other circumstances for sure a spectacular viewing point for raptors. Some warblers and flycatchers were resting in a sheltered slope. **Eastern Orphean Warbler**, **Red-breasted Flycatchers**, **Penduline Tits** and a singing **Lesser Whitethroat (subspecies unknown)** were present. The latter bird had a song we did not recognize at all.

Djandara Lake: A lake worth to visit for sure. Our day was partly ruined because of the very strong wind. The northern part of the lake is the most interesting area and easy to find and access when at the location. In the hard wind we observed 3-4 **Pallas's Gulls**, around 100 **Pygmy Cormorants**, **Armenian Gulls**, **Caspian Gulls**, **White-winged Terns** and **Gull-billed Terns**.

LORI VALLEY 26 OF APRIL

Lori Valley is a looong drive from Tbilisi and miles after miles of gravel roads full of potholes at the end. When we finally got to the valley it was ok but not worth going all the way we felt. Birds close to a huge dam were: **Imperial Eagle** (2cy.) **Ménétrie's Warbler** *ssp. mystacea*, **Black Francolin** and of course a lot of other species (but these were also seen at other places).

KUMISI LAKE 26 OF APRIL

We had a fantastic last day at Kumisi Lake (a lake close to Tbilisi). A misty rainy night and morning had grounded a lot of vagrants. Through out the day the weather became better and a heavy raptor and **Bee-eater** migration started. **Eagles, vultures, hawks** and **harriers** headed north. A flock of 150 **White-winged Terns** took off from the lake and headed north. Because of the weather many hundreds of **Ortolan Buntings, Yellow Wagtails, swallows, larks** and **pipits** had been grounded, as well as many **Rollers** and **waders**. A flock of eighteen **Demoiselle Cranes** was a nice surprise.

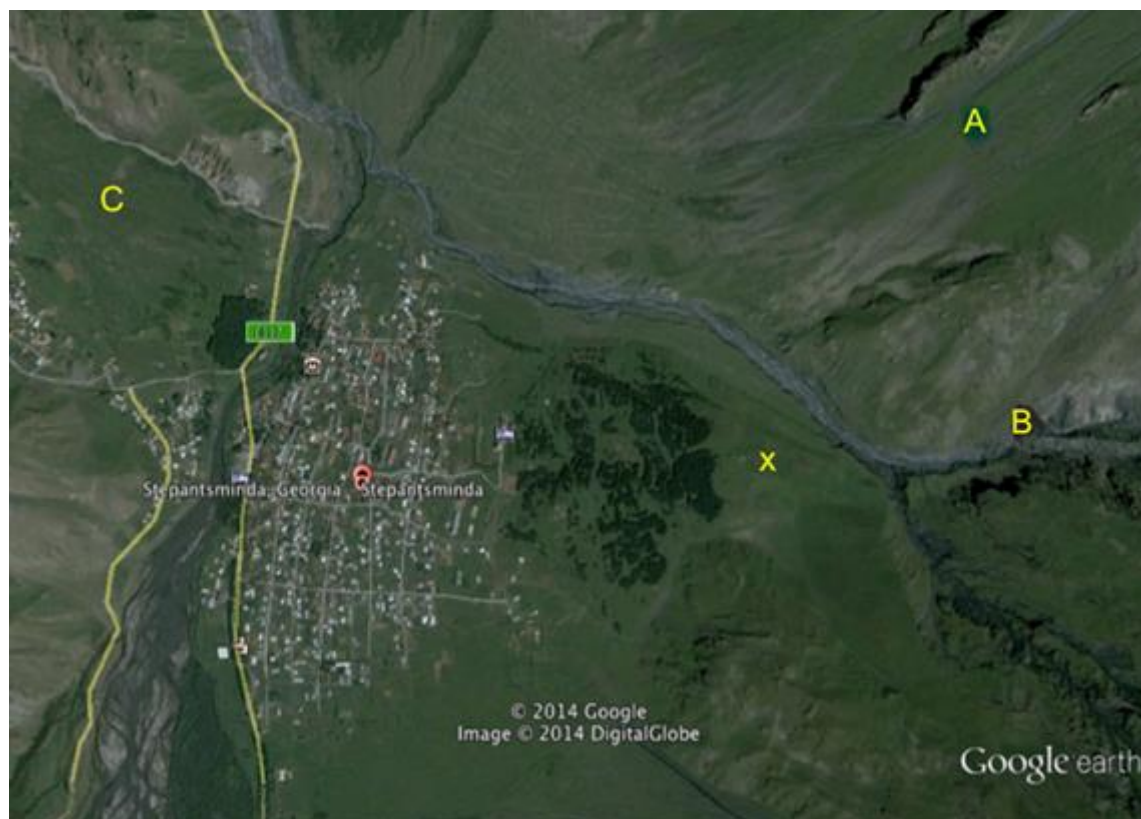
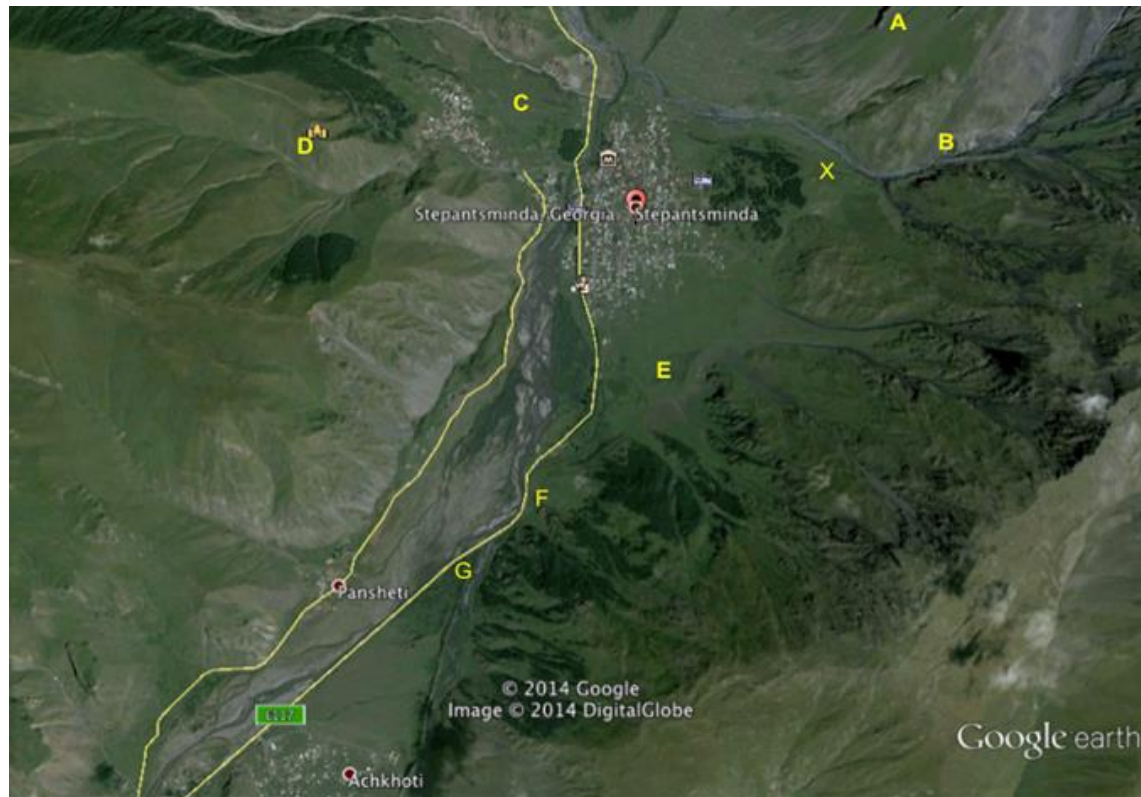


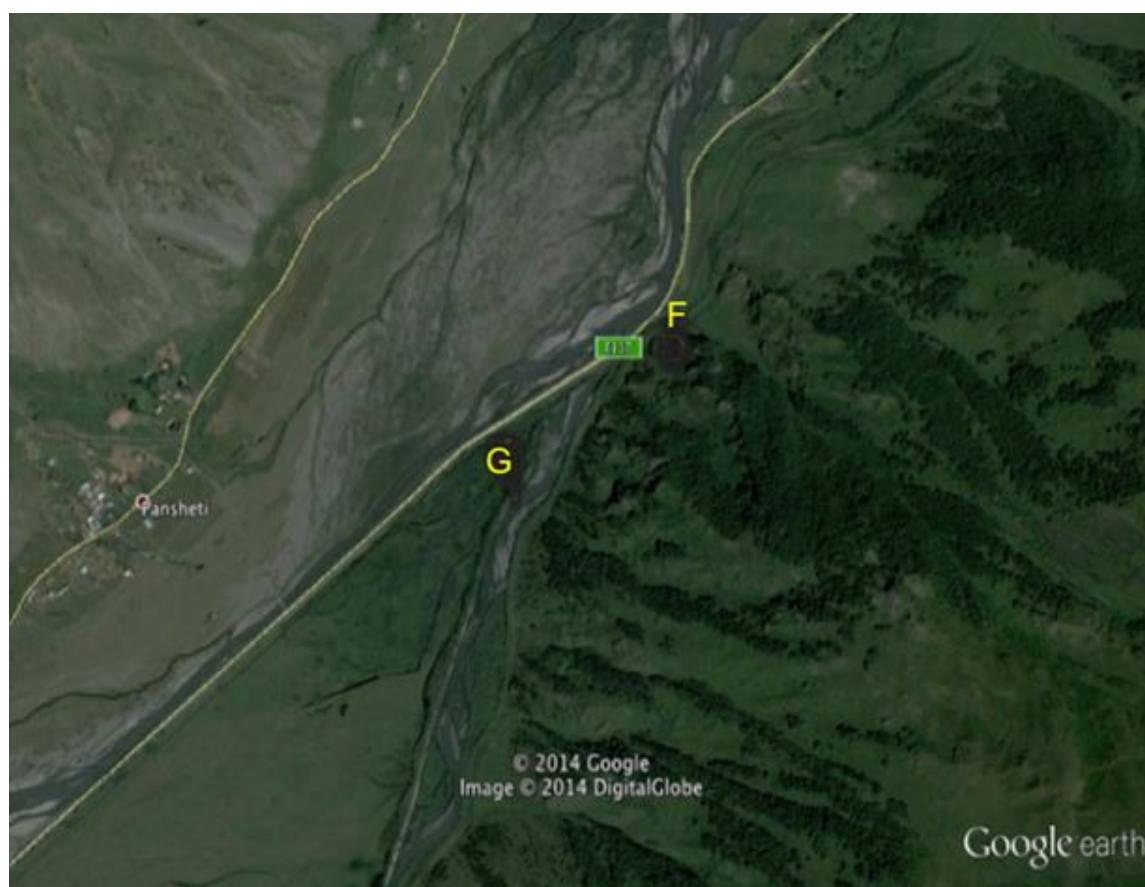
*One of many **Rollers** tries to get dry after a rainy morning at Kumisi Lake.*

Photo: Stefan Asker.

SITE MAPS: KAZBEGI AREA

A = Caucasian Grouse, **B** = Caucasian Snowcock, **C** = Wheatear site, **D** = Raptor point, **E** = Güldenstädt's Redstart/Great Rosefinch, **F** = Wallcreeper, **G** = Güldenstädt's Redstart, **X** = The Church





SITE MAP: KUMISI LAKE

Northern side - look for a huge steel drilling-tower (G). Gravel roads leads down from the Kumisi village.



BIRD LIST (some species):

Ruddy Shelduck (rostand) - three birds at a dam north of Ubando and two at Kumisi lake.

Caucasian Grouse (kaukasisk orre) - seen in the grassy slopes east of Kazbegi.

Caucasian Snowcock (kaukasisk snöhöna) - heard daily around Kazbegi (also seen).

Pygmy Cormorant (dvärgskarv) - around a hundred Djandara Lake.

Lammergeier (lammgam) – at least two different birds at Kazbegi 3 of 4 days.

Black Vulture (grågam) - 3 Lori Valley, 2 Kumisi Lake.

Egyptian Vulture (smutsgam) - 3 Kumisi Lake.

Golden Eagle (kungsörn) - daily sightings Kazbegi.

Imperial Eagle (kejsarörn) - 1 2cy Lori Valley, 1 2cy Kumisi Lake.

Lesser Spotted Eagle (mindre skrikörn) - several at Kazbegi. 2 on our way to Lori Valley, a few Ananuri and some Kumisi Lake.

Steppe Eagle (stäppörn) - 1 Mtskheta, some birds Kazbegi, Ananuri and Kumisi Lake.

Short-toed Eagle (ormörn) - one bird seen Mtsketha.

Hen Harrier (blå kärrhök) - one female Kumisi Lake.

Montagu's Harrier (ängshök) - a fairly common migrator.

Long-legged Buzzard (örnvårk) - a few birds seen.

Levant Sparrowhawk (balkanhök) - some birds seen on migration.

Lesser Kestrel (rödfalk) - 1 Kazbegi, 1 Kumisi Lake.

Peregrine Falcon (pilgrimsfalk) - 4-5 seen.

Demoiselle Crane (jungfrutrana) - 18 in a flock at Kumisi Lake.

Marsh Sandpiper (dammsnäppa) - 3 foraging at Kumisi Lake.

Armenian Gull (armenisk trut) - flocks at Mtskheta and Djandara Lake.

Pallas's Gull (svarthuvad trut) - 3-4 at Djandara Lake.

Caspian Gull (kaspisk trut) - some at Djandara Lake.

Gull-billed Tern (sandtärna) - 5 birds at Djandara Lake.

White-winged Tern (vitvingad tärna) - some birds at Djandara Lake, about 150 birds Kumisi Lake.

Alpine Swift (alpseglare) - 2 in Kazbegi, 1 Lori Valley.

Hoopoe (härfågel) - mostly single birds seen at many locations.

Bee-eater (biätare) - common migrator.

Roller (blåkråka) - seen at several locations, around 20 at Kumisi Lake.

Short-toed Lark (korttälärka) - seen Kazbegi, Djandara Lake and Kumisi Lake.



Demoiselle Cranes at Kumisi Lake.

Photo: Stefan Asker.

Lesser Short-toed Lark (dvärglärka) - 5 Lori Valley, some Kumisi Lake.

Calandra Lark (kalanderlärka) - fairly common in suitable areas.

Tawny Pipit (fältpiplärka) - 2 Lori Valley, 3 Kumisi Lake.

Water Pipit (vattenpiplärka) - very common, *ssp. coutelli*.

Red-throated Pipit (rödstrupig pipilärka) - locally fairly common.

Citrine Wagtail (citronärla) - 10 Terghi Valley Kazbegi, small flocks and single birds seen/heard at other suitable locations.



Male Citrine Wagtail keeping track of an overflying Griffon Vulture. Photo: Stefan Asker.



Male Yellow Wagtail, subspecies *lutea*. Photo: Stefan Asker.

Yellow Wagtail (gulärla) - common. We saw different subspecies as *lutea* and *feldegg* for instance.

Redstart (rödstjärt) - we saw some birds of the subspecies *samamasicus*.



Male Redstart of the subspecies *samamasicus*. Photo: Stefan Asker.



Male Güldenstädt's Redstart foraging on Sea Buckthorn.

Photo: Anders Boström.

Güldenstädt's Redstart (bergrödstjärt) - in the Sea Buckthorn areas around Kazbegi. Up to 15 birds a day.

Isabelline Wheatear (isabellastenskvätta) - fairly common Lori Valley, some at Kumisi Lake.

Black-eared Wheatear (medelhavsstenskvätta) - a female Kazbegi, 4-5 birds in the David Garejia area.

Pied Wheatear (nunnestenskvätta) - three pairs in the vicinity of David Garejia.

Ring Ouzel (ringtrast) - very common around Kazbegi.



Ring Ouzels were drawn to the Sea Buckthorn bushes as many other birds.
Photo: Stefan Asker.

Rock Thrush (stentrast) - 2 males Kazbegi.

Eastern Orphean Warbler (mästersångare) - 1 David Garejia, several Lori Valley.

Ménétrie's Warbler (östlig sammetshätta) - 5-10 individuals of the subspecies *mystacea* in Lori Valley. Probably common in suitable habitats in the south-eastern part of Georgia.

Mountain Chiffchaff (berggransångare) - 2 seen in Kazbegi.

Red-breasted Flycatcher (mindre flugsnappare) - two in Kazbegi, several at David Garejia.

Semi-collared Flycatcher (balkanflugsnappare) - two birds Kazbegi.

Penduline Tit (pungmes) - 2 Kazbegi, 6 Lori Valley, some Kumisi Lake.

Wallcreeper (murkrypare) - in total six birds seen around Kazbegi on steep cliff walls.

Lesser Grey-shrike (svartpannad törnskata) - one Lori Valley, three Kumisi Lake, one Rustavi.

Woodchat Shrike (rödhuvad törnskata) - 20 Lori Valley, 5 Kumisi Lake.

Spanish Sparrow (spansk sparv) - breeders Lori Valley and Kumisi Lake.



Male Spanish Sparrow at Kumisi lake.

Photo: Stefan Asker.

Rock Sparrow (stensparv) - several Kazbegi, David Gareija and Kumisi Lake.

Snowfinch (snöfink) - seen from the car early morning Gudauri, some birds Kazbegi.

Turkish Twite (berghämpling) - some birds of the subspecies *brevirostris* around Kazbegi.

Red-fronted Serin (rödpannad gulhämpling) - daily sights around Kazbegi.

Great Rosefinch (större rosenfink) - daily sights around Kazbegi in Sea Buckthorn areas. Often foraging on ground. Up to 40 birds.

Ortolan Bunting (ortolansparv) - some birds at different locations but around Kumisi Lake perhaps 500 resting.

Black-headed Sparrow (svarthuvad sparv) - one male Kumisi Lake.

Rock Bunting (klippsparv) - a few birds seen almost every day.



Two of many hundreds Ortolan Buntings at Kumisi Lake.

Photo: Stefan Asker.