

Uzbekistan

1-3 May 2007



In search of Pander's Ground-Jay

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General

The main purpose of this very short trip to Uzbekistan was to find Pander's Ground-Jay in the Kyzul Kum Desert in western Uzbekistan. Having seen Henderson's and Biddulph's Ground-Jays in China, I had been planning for this trip for two years until the right moment turned up. The secondary purpose was that I wanted to see the ancient city of Bukhara, situated on the old Silk Road. Thanks to the swift arrangements of Olimptur I was able to do this in just two days. The trip also constituted the first leg of a central Asian mop-up trip and I later continued to Kazakhstan for a few days (see separate report). I had been to Uzbekistan in 1983 when it was part of the Soviet Union, but at that time it was not possible to visit the desert areas.

Highlights

Without competition, the title for 'cream of the crop' goes to the absolutely stunning Pander's Ground-Jays. I spent considerable time at a place where four pairs were present and thoroughly enjoyed this charismatic bird.



A beautiful Pander's Ground-Jay perched atop the desert scrub in the Kyzul Kum Desert, what a sight!!

Itinerary

30/4

I left Beijing with China Southern flight at 14.40 and after five hours stop-over in Urumqi in Xinjiang, I boarded the China Southern flight bound for Tashkent. Already in Urumqi, the Russian influences were apparent and most of the passengers on the flight were from Uzbekistan or Russia. Obviously, judging by their luggage, the trade of consumer goods is big business. After a long flight we eventually landed in Tashkent and a tedious queuing started. First I had to get through the immigration, then waiting at least for

an hour for the baggage to show up and then for the customs clearance. The latter was especially frustrating due to the heaps of luggage that everyone had brought along. It was also interesting to fill in the customs declaration form which was entirely in Russian. Nevertheless I got through everything at the end and I was met at 02.30 by a nice representative from Olympic Tour. Then it was a mere 15 min drive to the hotel.

1/5

After just two hours of sleep, we took off at 05.30 for some morning birding before the midday flight to Bukhara. We drove to a river northeast of town near Chircheq, which took less than an hour. It was a sunny clear day, but unfortunately rather windy. We stopped by some small reed-fringed pools and at a few places along the river holding some tamarisk-like vegetation. I noted a few interesting birds, but nothing really over the top. Obviously the spring migration was going on and lots of tristis Chiffchaffs were around as well as some diurnal migration in the form of Indian Golden Orioles, European Rollers, European Bee-eaters. Flocks of what seemed to be Rosy Starlings were seen at a few occasions, but only in poor light.

By 9.00, we were back at the hotel for breakfast and then off to the airport for the domestic flight to Bukhara.

13.30 saw us on time in Bukhara and we were soon on our way to Tudakur Lake, a short drive east of town. The lake is huge and seemed not that interesting from a birder's perspective. However, along the southern shore we birded the tamarisk fringed shore with a bit of steppe close by. In the late afternoon we also stopped at some marshlands with reed-beds between the lake and Bukhara.

At around 18.30 we checked in at our hotel in the old city and also managed half an hour of sightseeing at this ancient town. Very nice atmosphere indeed and reminded me of Jaipur in Rajasthan or Pingyao in Shanxi.

Later in the evening we had an outdoor dinner at the main plaza. Very good salad and Uzbek shashlik



The ancient city of Bukhara mixed up with some Russian Ladas and modern cellular telephony.

2/5

In order to be at the site for Pander's Ground-Jay, we set off at 4.30 from the hotel in Bukhara. The road was quite good and not that busy at this early hour and we thus made about 100 km/h on average. When we left, it was actually some drizzle in the air, but my worries soon disappeared as it quickly dried up. After 1.5 hours we reached the interesting area, which starts at KM 120 from Bukhara. By that time it was full daylight and I was scanning the roadsides for the target bird. However, it was not until KM 146 that we saw one PGJ perched on top of a bush. By the time the driver had stopped the car the bird was already running away in the vegetated sand dunes. I searched the area for a while, but decided that chances would be better by finding another roadside bird. It took a nervously long drive until KM 171, when I spotted one running in the middle of the road ahead of us. I managed to scope it nicely before it was flushed off the road by a truck. After this it was more like the ketchup-effect. A couple of hours later I had feasted on absolutely fantastic views of no less than four pairs along a rather short stretch.

I birded this area for another hour or so, before we started the return trip. We did a number of roadside stops and a few times I also wandered off through the flat scrubby desert. We also stopped at a few oases and at one we had a quick breakfast and noted some migrants.



A pair of Pander's Ground-Jays

In the middle of the afternoon we were almost back to Bukhara and the final stop was at some reed-fringed pools about 40 km northwest of Bukhara.

Back in town we had a very late lunch and then I did some good sightseeing in the ancient city before it was time to leave for the airport. The flight bound for Tashkent at 19.30 was bang on time and it did not take long before I installed myself at Hotel Uzbekiston.



Sandro is marking the site for Pander's Ground-Jays

3/5

Up early again in order to catch the 06.00 flight bound for Almaty in Kazakhstan for the second leg of the trip.



The famous mosques in Bukhara, an important Silk Road city

Weather

The weather was very good the entire time, with the exception of the strong winds in Tashkent and during the afternoons in Bukhara. Temperatures varied from warm to sometimes rather hot. We had a few drops of rain in the early morning in Bukhara, and apparently it had been raining significantly recently as the desert was quite green.

Logistics

The entire trip was arranged by Olympic Tours in Tashkent. The key guy here is Zak, a very friendly and efficient person that also happens to know the birds of the area. Besides Zak, Sardro accompanied me the whole trip and made sure that everything went smoothly, which it indeed did. In Bukhara I met Zak, who was accompanying a commercial birding tour group. Zak can be contacted at olimptur@globalnet.uz and he can be thoroughly recommended to set up local logistics.

Site descriptions

Cherchiq (Tashkent)

Cherqig is a small town to the northeast of Tashkent along a stretch of the river that holds some grassy and bushy areas. Not a real hotspot for birds, but still a decent place to kill a few hours. I stopped randomly along the river where it looked good. If more time is available, Chimgan Hills is the key place to visit, which I also did in 1983.



Cherchiq, here spelled Cercik.

Tudakur Lake (Bukhara)

Tudakur Lake is a relatively huge lake (not possible to see across) and we birded along the southern shoreline during one afternoon. The surrounding steppe was not very rich in birds and it was quite windy at the time of our visit. There is a grassy and bushy area along the lake shore and that was by far the best area with several migrating warblers and other passerines. We drove along the main road that leads east along the south side of the lake (a few hundred meters from the water edge) until we saw some dirt roads leading to the lake itself. We then spent most of the time birding along a stretch of tamarisk bushes and wetlands. On the way back to Bukhara we stopped at some reed-beds and wetlands, which was fairly productive in spite of the late afternoon hours and the persistent wind.

Kyzul Kum Desert (Bukhara)

We took the road that ultimately leads to Khiva, a long way northwest of Bukhara. This road goes through the desert and about 120 km from Bukhara is the start of sand dunes, which is the habitat of Pander’s Ground-Jay. This habitat continues for a long way, although we only carried on until 171 km from Bukhara. There is also the occasional oasis that attracts migrant birds, and should therefore not be neglected. I also spent several hours walking at randomly selected stops in the desert and this produced a number of the central Asian desert birds.

About 40 km northwest of Bukhara along the same road, there are some reed-fringed pools just next to the road. These pools held quite a lot of birds and would certainly be worth at least a quick stop.



Green marking is showing the road into the Kyzul Kum Desert, as well as to Tudakur Lake

Birds

Little Grebe, *Tachybaptus ruficollis* ssp

One heard at Cherchik and five at the pools 40 km northwest of Bukhara.

Great Cormorant, *Phalacrocorax carbo sinensis*

8 migrating at Kyzyl Kum Desert (120-171 km from Bukhara).

Pygmy Cormorant, *Phalacrocorax pygmaeus*

30+ at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara) and one at the pools 40 km northwest of Bukhara.

Grey Heron, *Ardea cinerea cinerea*

Two at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).

Purple Heron, *Ardea purpurea purpurea*

5-7 at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara) and three at the pools 40 km northwest of Bukhara.

Great Egret, *Ardea alba alba*

One at the pools 40 km northwest of Bukhara.

Little Egret, *Egretta garzetta garzetta*

50+ at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).

Glossy Ibis, *Plegadis falcinellus*

Five at the reed-beds near Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).

Eurasian Spoonbill, *Platalea leucorodia leucorodia*

Two at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).

Greylag Goose, *Anser anser rubrirostris*

Two migrating with cormorants at Kyzyl Kum Desert (120-171 km from Bukhara).

Gadwall, *Anas strepera strepera*

50 at the reed-beds near Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).

Eurasian Teal, *Anas crecca*

Two at the reed-beds near Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).

Mallard, *Anas platyrhynchos platyrhynchos*

Five at Cherchik (NE of Tashkent).

Northern Shoveler, *Anas clypeata*

Ten at the reed-beds near Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).

Red-crested Pochard, *Netta rufina*

Two at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara), three at the reed-beds near Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara) and ten at the pools 40 km northwest of Bukhara.

Ferruginous Pochard, *Aythya nyroca*

One pair at the pools 40 km northwest of Bukhara.

European Honey-buzzard, *Pernis apivorus*

One at the pools 40 km northwest of Bukhara.

Black Kite, *Milvus migrans (lineatus?)*

One at the reed-beds near Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara) and three at Kyzyl Kum Desert (120-171 km from Bukhara).

Egyptian Vulture, *Neophron percnopterus percnopterus*

One at Kyzyl Kum Desert (120-171 km from Bukhara).

Short-toed Eagle, *Circaetus gallicus*

One at Kyzyl Kum Desert (120-171 km from Bukhara).

Western Marsh-Harrier, *Circus aeruginosus aeruginosus*

Two females at Cherchik (NE of Tashkent), 20 at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara) and the reed-beds near Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara) and five at the pools 40 km northwest of Bukhara.

Harrier sp, *Circus pygargus/macrourus*

One female seen from the car at Cherchik (NE of Tashkent) was either Montagu's or Pallid.

Shikra, *Accipiter badius cenchroides*

One near Cherchik (NE of Tashkent) and two in Tashkent.

Eurasian Buzzard, *Buteo buteo vulpinus*

Two at Kyzyl Kum Desert (120-171 km from Bukhara).

Eurasian Kestrel, *Falco tinnunculus tinnunculus*

One at Kyzyl Kum Desert (120-171 km from Bukhara).

Eurasian Hobby, *Falco subbuteo subbuteo*

One pair and a single at Cherchik (NE of Tashkent).

Common Moorhen, *Gallinula chloropus chloropus*

One heard at the pools 40 km northwest of Bukhara.

Eurasian Coot, *Fulica atra atra*

Five at the pools 40 km northwest of Bukhara.

Black-winged Stilt, *Himantopus himantopus himantopus*

20 at the reed-beds near Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).

Collared Pratincole, *Glareola pratincola pratincola*

50+ at a distance at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara) were presumably this species.

White-tailed Lapwing, *Vanellus leucurus*

Two at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara) and 5-7 at the reed-beds near Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).

Little Ringed Plover, *Charadrius dubius curonicus*

A few at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara) and at the reed-beds near Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).

Kentish Plover, *Charadrius alexandrinus alexandrinus*

Ten at the reed-beds near Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).

Greater Sandplover, *Charadrius leschenaultia crassirostris*

One female at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).

Marsh Sandpiper, *Tringa stagnatilis*

Two at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).

Common Greenshank, *Tringa nebularia nebularia*

Five at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).

Green Sandpiper, *Tringa ochropus*

Two at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).

Wood Sandpiper, *Tringa glareola*

Five at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).

Common Sandpiper, *Actitis hypoleucos*

One at Cherchiq (NE of Tashkent) and ten at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).

Temminck's Stint, *Calidris temminckii*

15-20 at the reed-beds near Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).

Ruff, *Philomachus pugnax*

One at the reed-beds near Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).

Red-necked Phalarope, *Phalaropus lobatus*

Six at the reed-beds near Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).

Steppe Gull, *Larus barabensis*

One adult at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).



Adult Steppe Gull

Adult, or near-adult, Tundra Gull

Unidentified large white-headed gull, *Larus* sp

1 1yr and 1 2yr at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara). Based on studies of photos, these were probably *barabensis*.

Tundra Gull, *Larus heuglini*

One adult at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).

Black-headed Gull, *Larus ridibundus*

Ten at the reed-beds near Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).

Slender-billed Gull, *Larus genei*

Four at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara) and three at the reed-beds near Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).



Adult Slender-billed Gull

First-summer Slender-billed Gull

Little Gull, *Larus minutus*

Six 2yr at the reed-beds near Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).

Common Tern, *Sterna hirundo minussensis*

10-15 at Cherchiq (NE of Tashkent), 50 at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara), 20 at the reed-beds near Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara) and two at the pools 40 km northwest of Bukhara.

Little Tern, *Sterna albifrons albifrons*

30+ at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara) and 20+ at the reed-beds near Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).

Eurasian Collared-Dove, *Streptopelia decaocto decaocto*

One at Cherchiq (NE of Tashkent), a few at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara) and frequently seen northwest of Bukhara.

Laughing Dove, *Streptopelia senegalensis cambayensis*

Common in Tashkent, at Cherchiq (NE of Tashkent) and at Bukhara.

Common Cuckoo, *Cuculus canorus canorus/subtelephonus*

Two at Cherchiq (NE of Tashkent) and one heard at the pools 40 km northwest of Bukhara.

Little Owl, *Athene noctua bactriana*

One at Kyzyl Kum Desert (120-171 km from Bukhara).

Common Swift, *Apus apus (pekinensis?)*

Very common in Tashkent, a few at Cherchiq (NE of Tashkent) and common around Bukhara.

Common Kingfisher, *Alcedo atthis (ispida?)*

Two at Cherchiq (NE of Tashkent) and one at the reed-beds near Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).

Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, *Merops persicus persicus*

Four showing beautifully in the late afternoon light at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara) and a few pairs at Kyzyl Kum Desert (120-171 km from Bukhara). Green as in green!



Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters

European Bee-eater, *Merops apiaster*

About 50 together near Cherchik (NE of Tashkent), two at the reed-beds near Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara) and four northwest of Bukhara.

European Roller, *Coracias garrulous* ssp

10-15 at Cherchik (NE of Tashkent), apparently migrating along the valley, two east of Bukhara and five northwest of Bukhara.



European Roller

Eurasian Hoopoe, *Upupa epops epops*

One at the reed-beds near Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara) and a few at Kyzyl Kum Desert (120-171 km from Bukhara).

Lesser Short-toed Lark, *Calandrella rufescens heinei*

20+ at Kyzyl Kum Desert (120-171 km from Bukhara).

Crested Lark, *Galerida cristata subtaurica/magna*

One at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara) and common at Kyzyl Kum Desert (120-171 km from Bukhara).

Bank Swallow, *Riparia riparia riparia*

20+ at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara) and the reed-beds near Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara) and a few at Kyzyl Kum Desert (120-171 km from Bukhara).

Barn Swallow, *Hirundo rustica* ssp

Common around Cherchik (NE of Tashkent), Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara), at the reed-beds near Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara) and at Kyzyl Kum Desert (120-171 km from Bukhara).

Red-rumped Swallow, *Cecropis daurica daurica*

Two at Cherchik (NE of Tashkent) and one at Tashkent.

White Wagtail, *Motacilla alba personata*

Ten at Cherchik (NE of Tashkent).

White Wagtail, *Motacilla alba alba*

One at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara) and one at the reed-beds near Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).

Citrine Wagtail, *Motacilla citreola calcarata*

Two at the reed-beds near Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).

Yellow Wagtail, *Motacilla flava feldegg*
30+ at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).



Yellow Wagtail feldegg

Yellow Wagtail, *Motacilla flava beema*
30+ at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).

Streaked Scrub-Warbler, *Scotocerca inquieta platyura*
One at Kyzyl Kum Desert (120-171 km from Bukhara).

Savi's Warbler, *Locustella luscinioides fusca*
One heard at the pools 40 km northwest of Bukhara.

Paddyfield Warbler, *Acrocephalus agricola capistrata*
Four at the pools 40 km northwest of Bukhara.

Clamorous Reed-Warbler, *Acrocephalus stentoreus brunescens*
Three heard singing at Cherchiq (NE of Tashkent), ten at the reed-beds near Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara), one at Kyzyl Kum Desert (120-171 km from Bukhara) in the second oasis and ten at the pools 40 km northwest of Bukhara.

Sykes' Warbler, *Hippolais rama*
A few heard calling and singing at Cherchiq (NE of Tashkent), 10-15 incl one nest found (no eggs yet) at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara) and two at Kyzyl Kum Desert (120-171 km from Bukhara).



Sykes's Warblers

Common Chiffchaff, *Phylloscopus collybita tristis*

At least 20 at Cherchiq (NE of Tashkent), mostly heard calling, but a few were singing. One at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).

Greenish Warbler, *Phylloscopus trochiloides viridanus*

Two at Cherchiq (NE of Tashkent) and two at Kyzyl Kum Desert (120-171 km from Bukhara) in the second oasis.

Lesser Whitethroat, *Sylvia curruca curruca/halimodendri*

One at Cherchiq (NE of Tashkent) and two at Kyzyl Kum Desert (120-171 km from Bukhara).

Eastern Orphean Warbler, *Sylvia crassirostris jerdoni*

Two at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).
Spotted Flycatcher, *Muscicapa striata* ssp
Five at Kyzyl Kum Desert (120-171 km from Bukhara) in the second oasis.
Common Nightingale, *Luscinia megarhynchos hafizi*
One heard singing at Cherchik (NE of Tashkent).
Common Redstart, *Phoenicurus phoenicurus phoenicurus*
One at Kyzyl Kum Desert (120-171 km from Bukhara) in the second oasis.
Siberian Stonechat, *Saxicola torquatus maurus*
One female at Kyzyl Kum Desert (120-171 km from Bukhara).
Pied Bushchat, *Saxicola caprata rossorum*
Five at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara) and a pair at Kyzyl Kum Desert (120-171 km from Bukhara).
Isabelline Wheatear, *Oenanthe isabellina*
One between Bukhara and Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara) and ten at Kyzyl Kum Desert (120-171 km from Bukhara).
Bearded Tit, *Panurus biarmicus russicus*
Two at the reed-beds near Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).
Penduline-Tit sp, *Remiz* sp
One or two heard at Cherchik (NE of Tashkent).
Indian Golden Oriole, *Oriolus kundoo*
At least five were seen migrating north along the valley. Of these, at least one male showed the head-pattern of the Indian species.
Southern Grey Shrike, *Lanius meridionalis pallidirostris*
One plus a pair at Kyzyl Kum Desert (120-171 km from Bukhara).
Isabelline (Turkestan) Shrike, *Lanius isabellinus phoenicuroides*
One male at Kyzyl Kum Desert (120-171 km from Bukhara). Nice rufous head and very different from the karelini birds in Kazakhstan.
Long-tailed Shrike, *Lanius schach erythronotus*
Three seen along the road to Cherchik (NE of Tashkent), one east of Bukhara and ten northwest of Bukhara and at Kyzyl Kum Desert (120-171 km from Bukhara).
Eurasian Magpie, *Pica pica bactriana*
Common around Tashkent and Bukhara.

Pander's Ground-Jay, *Podoces panderi*

The first was seen atop a roadside bush at KM 146 northwest of Bukhara. Then we saw one running on the road at KM 171 and we then stayed with this bird for the full morning, only to discover that there were in fact four pairs next to each other along the road. A single bird was also seen during a long walk through the desert almost at midday. I was able to take a number of photographs and make recordings of the call. In behavior it was much like Henderson's and Biddulph's G-J, but the coloration was very different. Pander's showed a soft grey tone to most of the upperparts and a nice pink flush to the underparts. Apparently the easiest way to find this bird is to drive along the road, as they seemed to feed on dead insects. When flushed by a passing car they often ran or flew into the scrub, but mostly it did not take many minutes for them to return to the road again. To follow them into the undulating sand dunes proved rather difficult as they move much quicker than one can walk.





Rook, *Corvus frugilegus frugilegus*

20+ near Bukhara airport.

Oriental Crow, *Corvus orientalis*

At least ten around Cherchiq (NE of Tashkent).

Common Myna, *Acridotheres tristis tristis*

Common in and around Tashkent and Bukhara.

Rosy Starling, *Pastor roseus*

A few flocks between Tashkent and Cherchiq (NE of Tashkent) and many large flocks involving several hundred birds at central Bukhara. Several flocks were also seen around the oasis northwest of Bukhara and at Kyzyl Kum Desert (120-171 km from Bukhara).



Rosy Starlings

European Starling, *Sturnus vulgaris porphyronotus*

10-15 at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara). Look very glossy black, almost like Spotless Starling.

House Sparrow, *Passer domesticus bactrianus*

Fairly common in small flocks around Cherchiq (NE of Tashkent), at Bukhara and Kyzyl Kum Desert (120-171 km from Bukhara). This taxon is migratory and only breeds in trees, as opposed to regular House Sparrows that prefer buildings and also have a different coloration on the male's head.



House Sparrow of the distinctive taxon bactrianus.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow, *Passer montanus ssp*

A few seen east of Bukhara.

Common Rosefinch, *Carpodacus erythrinus erythrinus*

One heard in Tashkent and a few small loose flocks migrating at Cherchiq (NE of Tashkent) and one at Kyzyl Kum Desert (120-171 km from Bukhara) in the second oasis.

Desert Finch, *Rhodospiza obsolata*

One at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara) and a total of at least 30 at Kyzyl Kum Desert (120-171 km from Bukhara), often around oasis and buildings.

Ortolan Bunting, *Emberiza hortulana*

One male at Kyzyl Kum Desert (120-171 km from Bukhara).

Red-headed Bunting, *Emberiza bruniceps*

One male at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara).

Mammals

Saslik

One at Tudakur Lake (east of Bukhara) and one at Kyzyl Kum Desert (120-171 km from Bukhara).

Hare

One at Kyzyl Kum Desert (120-171 km from Bukhara).

