

# GEORGIA AND ARMENIA

## BREEDING BIRDS

### OF THE LOWER CAUCASUS MOUNTAINS



Ortolan Bunting  
(Vasil Ananian)

Monday May 14th– Sunday May 27th 2012

Leaders: Mark Finn and local guides

Group Size: 8

Birds: 180-220

Georgia and Armenia are located in the Lower Caucasus Mountain range situated between the Black and Caspian Seas. It is an extremely important area for migratory and breeding species of high mountains and sub-desert habitats. Our tour covers the main birdwatching areas of Armenia, a country slightly smaller than Belgium, and the high mountains around Stepantsminda in Northern Georgia. Armenia is a fascinating country with its own language and culture going back many centuries. It is also an outstanding place for birds and other aspects of natural history seen amongst some of the most beautiful scenery in extreme south-eastern Europe.

Birdwatching Breaks have visited Armenia and Georgia since 1999 and have an extensive knowledge of the Caucasus region and its bird life.

**Day 1:** Fly from London to Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, where we spend the night.

**Days 2-4:** Today we travel to the village of Stepantsminda situated in the Terek River valley for a three night stay. Birds seen along the Georgian Military Highway which traverses high mountains and passes include Egyptian and Eurasian Griffon Vultures, Lammergeier, Golden Eagle, Horned Lark, the Caucasian race of Twite and White-winged Snowfinch. From our base in Stepantsminda we explore the numerous valleys, gorges and slopes for specialties in Caucasian Black Grouse and Caucasian Snowcock. Two species which have their only location in the Western Palearctic occur in and above Stepantsminda: Güldenstädt's Redstart and Caucasian Great Rosefinch. The beautiful alpine environment of the area attracts Wallcreeper, Red-billed and Yellow-billed Choughs, Alpine Accentor, Water Pipit and Black Redstart whilst the meadows attract flocks of Red-fronted Serins. Riverine scrub, streams and woodland is attractive to Corncrake, Ring Ouzel, Caucasian Chiffchaff, Green Warbler and Common Rosefinch. Migrants use the pass on a regular basis with raptors, bee-eaters, shrikes, warblers, pipits and wagtails featuring on a regular basis.

**Day 5:** An early start back to Tbilisi and

south to the border crossing into Armenia. In the Georgian lowlands we may encounter European Bee-eater, European Roller, Lesser Grey Shrike and Black-headed Buntings. Transfer to Dilijan for a two-night stay.

**Day 6:** The hotel at Dilijan is situated in a beech and oak-forest. This is a fascinating region for breeding woodland species. A walk around the grounds may reveal the local races of Green, Great-spotted, Middle-spotted and Lesser-spotted Woodpeckers, Coal Tit and Hawfinch. Our main area of interest is the mature woodland with Black Woodpecker, Semi-collared and Red-breasted Flycatchers and the constant singing of Green Warblers.

**Day 7:** After breakfast, we travel to Yeghegnadzor for one night. On our descent from Dilijan, we may locate Common Quail and Grey Partridge. We can also check a degraded marsh and adjacent industrial area where Booted and Lesser-spotted Eagles appear on a regular basis. Later, we visit Lake Sevan, standing at 1916 metres above sea level, where hundreds of Armenian Gulls nest with lesser numbers of Black-necked Grebe, Common Tern and Ruddy Shelduck. Stands of birch and sea buckthorn may yield Barred and Marsh Warblers and, in the marshy areas, Citrine Wagtail and the local race of Reed

Bunting. From Lake Sevan we journey along the recently refurbished Sulema Pass to Yeghegnadzor where we stay the night with local families.

**Day 8:** Today we head south towards Meghri situated on the Araks River and the border with Iran. A stop at an abandoned building en route should reveal the presence of Lesser Kestrels. The road passes through a high plateau area with Eurasian Black and Egyptian Vultures, Long-legged Buzzard and the brookei race of Peregrine Falcon. Fallow fields attract colourful flocks of Rose-



Common Rosefinch (Vasil Ananian)

coloured Starlings. Before reaching the town of Goris, we may see Bimaculated Lark, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler and Crimson-winged Finch. A rocky gorge with a wooded gully has several interesting species including Common Nightingale and Eurasian Golden Oriole. The road between Goris and Meghri snakes over wooded hillsides with Common Buzzard and other raptors including Eurasian Griffon Vulture and Lammergeier. We have three nights staying with local families in the vicinity of Meghri.

**Days 9-10:** Meghri has a dry sub-tropical climate with wilted vegetation, rocky gorges, deciduous woodlands and arid open juniper woodlands side by side. At our first stop we can check a traditional area for Levant Sparrowhawks. A rocky gorge may have Chukar, Rock and Eastern Rock Nuthatches, Lesser Whitethroat, Upcher's Warbler, Red-fronted Serin and Sombre Tit. Just past Meghri, an abandoned railway dominates the border area with Iran. Our main interest is a dry rocky gorge with the localised Rufous-tailed Wheatear in residence. A pomegranate orchard further up the valley attracts Eastern Orphee, and Menetries's Warbler and Woodchat Shrike. On one morning we start early in order to find Caspian Snowcock in the high mountains above Meghri. Other species of this high altitude habitat include Chukar, Alpine Swift, Alpine Accentor, Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush and Rock Bunting.

**Day 11:** Today we make the long journey north to Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, situated in the Lower Caucasian Mountains, a picturesque city with a pleasant main square. Birding en route.

**Day 12:** We start today by visiting Armash



White-winged Snowfinch (Vasil Ananian)

Fishponds overlooked by biblical, snow-capped Mount Ararat. Armash is simply outstanding for wetland species, attracting Pygmy Cormorant, Little Bittern, Purple and Squacco Herons, Black-crowned Night Herons, White-headed and Ferruginous Ducks. The stands of reeds at Armash resound with the calls of Great Reed, Reed, Moustached and Paddyfield Warblers and Bearded Reedlings. Open waters have Marbled and Ferruginous Ducks and Red-crested Pochards. Whiskered, White-winged, Black and Little Terns hawk over the pools for insects. Water meadows and muddy areas have Glossy Ibis, Collared and, on occasions, Black-winged Pratincoles, White-tailed Lapwing and Kentish Plover. Armash regularly holds migrant Terek and Curlew Sandpipers and spinning Red-necked Phalaropes. Armash is surrounded by sub-desert with tamarisk, camels thorn and sagebrush bushes. This unique habitat lures White-throated Robin, Finsch's and Eastern Black-eared Wheatears, Eastern Olivaceous, Menetries's and Upcher's Warblers. Vedi, nearby, is an extremely arid region noted for Pallid Harrier, Long-

legged Buzzard, Isabelline and Finsch's Wheatears, Upcher's Warbler, Trumpeter Finch and Grey-necked Bunting and irregular species such as Mongolian Finch and Pale Rockfinch.

**Day 13:** Mount Aragats is our final birdwatching destination. The lower valleys are dominated by juniper scrub adjacent to fast-flowing mountain streams. This unusual habitat attracts Bluethroat, Siberian Stonechat, White-throated Robin, Radde's Accentor and Ring Ouzel. Further up the valley, we can study nesting Rock Petronia and Rock Bunting. The road terminates at a scenic watch-point overlooking a ruined castle and church. Raptors occurring on a regular basis include Steppe and Long-legged Buzzards, Booted and Lesser-spotted Eagles. At the summit, we pass alpine meadows and rock-strewn slopes and have a final opportunity to observe Horned Lark, White-winged Snowfinch and Alpine Accentors.

**Day 14:** Fly to London where the tour concludes.

Ground Price: £2595

Single room: £200

\*Air Fare: £400

Total Tour Price: £2995

Total Tour Price Tbilisi/Yerevan: £2595 Deposit: £250

\*please refer to our terms and conditions relating to flights on pages 5 and 71

This holiday is fully inclusive of flights, accommodation and meals, transport and permit fees, guidance, tips and taxes.

**Not included:** drinks, insurance, items of a personal nature and any relevant fuel surcharges. Visas required for Georgia and Armenia.

Good accommodation throughout Georgia and Armenia with en-suite facilities. Family homes are more basic with shared facilities. Evening meals based on traditional Georgian and Armenian cuisine. Picnic lunches provided.

Transport by small bus/minibus and 4x4 in the mountains. Short walks through forest and marshes and two optional strenuous walks in the mountains of both countries.