Status and distribution of selected bird species on the Russia-Kazakhstan border northwest of the Caspian Sea

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The Astrakhan region lies in south-east European Russia on the northwest Caspian Sea coast (**Figure 1**). It possesses a great variety of landscapes ranging from riverine forests to salt lakes (**Plate 1**) and sandy deserts (**Plates 2 & 3**), allowing a wide diversity of birds to breed and to rest during migration. This coast is an area where the fauna of Europe and Central Asia meet, particularly bird species from the Caucasian region and Kazakhstan. It is particularly important that the current distribution and interaction of resident and visiting species be studied now, because the natural environment is in a state of rapid transformation as the prevailing climatic conditions change just when there has been a significant reduction in economic pressures (Viktor Belik *in litt* 2005).Since Lugovoy's very detailed survey (1963), only a few faunistic papers have been published about the region. In 2004 and 2005, I participated in three expeditions, two in 2004 (28 May–5 June and 24–28 September) being supported by the Ecological Travel Centre (ETC) of Moscow, the aim being to carry out broad-brush assessments of bird variety in remote locations close to the Russia-Kazakhstan border and in the lake-knoll area west of the Volga river. On the third expedition (13–25 May 2005), I visited the Astrakhan region as a local leader and guide for two groups of birders from the Danish Ornithological Society (DOF) led by Hans Meltofte and Hans Meilstrup. We spent the majority of our time in the Volga delta and the lake-knoll area, where much new information was obtained – this lies west of the Volga and is almost 6000km^2 in size. The lake-knoll area typically comprises parallel lines of clay knolls interspersed with sweet-water or salt lakes, the knolls having been formed from deposits from successive drastic changes in the level of the Caspian Sea and their subsequent erosion. During these expeditions I collected new information on the distribution, numbers and population status for fourteen bird species and I relate it to previously published data. Moreover, in some cases I present data collected in the study area in my previous expeditions in 1999, 2001 and 2002.

Figure 1. Astrakhan. 2005 © *Vladimir Arkhipov.*

Plate 1. Baskunchak Salt Lake from Mount Bogdo. 2004 © *Sergei Grigoriev.*

Plate 2. Glayesh semi-desert, east of the Volga. 2004 © *Sergei Grigoriev.*

Plate 3. Sand desert east of the Volga. 2004 © *Sergei Grigoriev.*

Plate 4. Dalmatian Pelican *Pelecanus crispus* going to roost in the Volga Delta. 2004 © *Sergei Grigoriev*.

Plate 5. The lake-knoll area west of the Volga. 2004 © *Sergei Grigoriev.*

Notes on selected species

Dalmatian Pelican *Pelecanus crispus*. (**Plate 4**). A rare breeding species of the Volga Delta in that only 25 to 242 pairs nested during the 1974–91 period when just a few pairs of the extremely rare **White Pelicans** *P. onocrotalus* were confirmed as nesting (1963 and 1980, Krivonosov *et al* 1994, Rusanov 1997). During my visits in 1999, 2001, 2002, 2004 and 2005, I registered about 460 Dalmatian Pelicans throughout the Delta, but only two adult White Pelicans (in the eastern Delta near the village of Kalinino on 9 May 2002).

White-tailed Lapwing [Plover] *Vanellus leucurus* [*Chettusia leucura*]. Since 1994 recorded as a rare breeder in the region. The first possible breeding pair was collected in the eastern (Kazakhstan) part of the Delta in May 1980 (Belik 1989). Single breeding pairs, or pairs with breeding behaviour were registered in 1994, 1997 and 2001 in the lake-knoll area west of the Volga river. (Arkhipov *et al* 2003, Rusanov 2003a) and in 1999 on steppe lakes in the Republic of Kalmykia (Kvartalnov 2003). Three probably migrants were recorded on 19 and 20 May 2005 on a small pond near Budarino village, but were not seen in the following 5 days.

Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei.* Rare spring and autumn migrant through the Delta. Of the two observations from the lake-knoll area, one bird was observed on 30 May 2004 on the salt lake near Zenzely train station, and four were seen flying over Protochnoe village on 24 May 2005. Earlier records related only to the Volga delta and the Caspian Sea islands (Lugovoy 1963, Rusanov *et al* 1999, Rusanov 2003b).

Black-bellied Sandgrouse *Pterocles orientalis.* Rare, but probably breeds. In adjacent Kalmykia, the first confirmed breeding was confirmed in June 1997 (Bliznjuk 2004). In spring and autumn 2001, small flocks had been observed beside artificial ponds in the sands on the west bank of the Volga west of Narimanov town (Arkhipov *et al* 2003). At the same place on 24 September 2004, a our series of 2-hour observations logged 17 flocks (of 2–60 birds), the highest number present being around 200, which total is many times more than recent estimations for the entire European Russian population of this species (Mischenko 2004). On 31 August – 2 September 2005, my colleagues visited these ponds. They observed Black-bellied Sandgrouse on all three days, the maximum day's count reaching 400 on 31 August (Eugeny Koblik pers comm). On the other (east) side of the Volga on 2 June 2004, we flushed a female several times, in the sand desert east of the settlement of Dosang (46°43´N 48°90´E).

Oriental [Rufous] Turtle Dove *Streptopelia orientalis.* Probably scarce migrant in the area. I paid little attention to the record of two sub-adult birds on 5–6 October 2001 in the eastern Volga Delta, until I was unable to find published data on the autumn migration through the Ural River region. In September – October 1973, 1974 and 1975, passage birds were observed along the lower Ural River (Gubin *et al* 1977), which strongly suggests the existence of a migration route from the Urals to Iran along the Ural River valley, and possibly along the Volga too.

Blue-cheeked Bee-eater *Merops persicus.* Rare breeding species. The northern range limits of this species are not well known. A pair that probably bred had been found near Promislovka village (southwestern Astrakhan region) in 2001 (Arkhipov *et al* 2003). On 20 and 23 May 2005, I registered 16 pairs in the same area. Interestingly, this species selects very flat plain as its habitat, unlike **European Bee-eater** *M. apiaster*, which is very common in the region.

'Steppe' Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor pallidirostris*. Locally common breeder to the east of the Volga. The Astrakhan region contains this form's northernmost European occurrence at its westernmost breeding range, where since the 1930s, there have been no data (Vorobiev 1936). However, in June 2004, I found this species rather common in the deserts east of the Volga. Altogether, we found 4 of that year's nests, empty, with juveniles and adults nearby. This species occurs in the sand dunes and haunts the planted bush windbreak strips in the predominantly clay semidesert.

White-winged Lark *Melanocorypha leucoptera.* Locally common breeder in northern Astrakhan region. Despite very careful searches from 1999 through to 2005, it was not found in Astrakhan and the adjacent Kalmykian steppes west of the Volga nor in the sand deserts on the eastern side of the river. Our most southwesterly records from 2004 came from near Lake Baskunchak (48°80´N 46°54´E) in the northern Astrakhan region, where it was common. Farther west in Kalmykia, but only in 1993, were a few breeding records reported after a mass influx had occurred the previous winter (Belik & Muzaev 1995). The present-day breeding range therefore probably does not extend as far south and southwest as stated in recent literature (Snow & Perrins 1998, Stepanyan 2003).

Sykes's Warbler *Iduna* [*Hippolais*] *rama*. Locally common breeder in the desert east of Volga. Groups of singing males were registered in the bushes on the sand dunes. On 2–3 June 2004 the species was found to occur as far north as Tambovka village.

Eastern Olivaceous Warbler *Iduna* [*Hippolais*] *pallida*. This species has become a common breeder in the western knoll-lake area, but had not been recorded in the Astrakhan region before 1996. Five were collected in 1996 (Rohwer *et al* 2001) in the western lake-knoll area (46o17´N, 47o22´N), one female carrying eggs, the largest being 6mm long (Arkhipov 2004). During 28–31 May 2004, I observed males and pairs in the lake-knoll area near Budarino village. Four singing males were counted along a 1km transect on 28 May amongst the adjacent tamarisk *Tamarix* sp bushes.

'Siberian' Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita tristis.* Probably common on autumn migration. Its high-intensity autumn song is typical of Chiffchaff spp (Cramp 1992). In September 2004 I heard a number of singing chiffchaffs migrating through the Volga Delta, heading south. On 26–27 September 2004 in the riverine forest in the central Delta I found 7 singing birds, 4 of which uttering the typical disyllabic Siberian Chiffchaff song. There are no breeding records of any Chiffchaff subspecies from this region.

Rosy (Rose-coloured) Starling *Sturnus roseus*. Common breeder. Previous published data (Lugovoy 1963) and our observations from 1999–2004 show that it is a mostly regular, common but not numerous breeding species in the region. In 2005, we observed exceptionally high numbers of this species in the lake-knoll area. From 18–25 May we saw several thousand birds each day, flocks in the steppe being up to 1000 strong. On 18 May at least 10 000 throughout the day passed over Budarino village in a northeasterly direction in flocks of 50–300 birds. On 23 and 25 May we visited the Kalmyk village of Dzhalikovo, where I estimated no fewer than 4000bp nested under the house roofs,. There was no detectable difference in the abundance of orthopteran prey from previous years, so in this area, year-to-year variation in prey availability did not explain annual variation in starling numbers.

Pied Wheatear *Oenanthe pleschanka*. A probable breeding pair of this species was observed in the backyard of a Buddhist temple in the settlement of Liman on 20 and 23 May 2005. Earlier, it had been regarded as an accidental migrant in the west of the lake-knoll area (**Plate 5**) and in the Volga delta (Vorobiev 1936).

Black-headed Bunting *Emberiza melanocephala*. In 2001 and 2002, it was a locally common breeder to the west of the Volga in steppe-desert on the border with Kalmykia (Arkhipov *et al* 2003). On 25 May 2004 and on 19, 20 and 23 May 2005 we found pairs and singing males in the area west of the Zenzely-Yandiki-Oleynikovo line. This area remains a traditional steppe landscape dotted with small tamarisk bushes and is rather remote from settlements and the planted tree windbreaks that are quickly colonised by **Rook** *Corvus frugilegus*, the main cause of the bunting's range contraction further west and south. Corvids remain rare here.

Red-headed Bunting *Emberiza bruniceps.* Locally common breeder to the east of the Volga. During 2–5 June 2004, territorial males and pair were found everywhere east of the Volga. The species was also found in the sand desert near Dosang, east of Tambovka and a few pairs were located in the Baskunchak area. The species had not been registered in the region by Vorobiev (1936). The 1950s saw the first breeding records coming from further northeast (the Volgograd region and adjacent areas of Kazakhstan) (Lindeman 1971), but we discovered that the species has extended its range further southwest than shown in CBWP (Snow & Perrins 1998).

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