

## Natuurpunt Caucasus Royal 2019

### A birdwatching trip through Georgia and Armenia

Participants: An Fiers, Anny Anselin & Luc Vanhercke, Steven Verdrengh, Marc Herremans and Guy Huylebroeck (trip leader)  
Batumi Birding guide: Frans De Schamphelaere

#### About the Caucasus Royal tour

The Caucasus Royal tour is a trip that combines the best birdwatching as well as a variety of culturally important sites in Georgia and Armenia. We typically start off in Northern Georgia, looking for the endemics of the Greater Caucasus and other high mountain species. From there, we set off to explore the remote steppes of Eastern Georgia, before heading down to Armenia for the specialties of the Anatolian plateau, along with a selection of fine wetland birds. Apart from the birding, some of the Southern Caucasus' most beautiful cultural sites can't be missed. From the ancient old churches like Gergeti and Noravank to the rock monastery complex of Davit Gareja, from enjoying wine tasting in Georgia (as well as in Armenia) to strolling through Tbilisi's old town streets, the region easily combines it all. To set up this tour with our BirdLife International partners from Belgium, Natuurpunt, was a pleasure.

#### Target species

Caucasian Snowcock, Caspian Snowcock, Caucasian Black Grouse, Imperial Eagle, Bearded, Black and Egyptian Vulture, Pygmy Cormorant, White-headed Duck, White-tailed Lapwing, Terek Sandpiper, Roller, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, Bimaculated Lark, Western and Eastern Rock Nuthatch, Wallcreeper, Rose-coloured Starling, Güldenstadt's Redstart, Rufous-tailed Bush-robin, White-breasted Robin, Blue and Red-tailed Rock Thrush, Raddes' Accentor, Semi-collared Flycatcher, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Ménétries' Warbler, Upcher's Warbler, Paddyfield Warbler, Red-fronted Serin, Great Rosefinch, Rock Sparrow, Pale Rock Sparrow, Trumpeter Finch, White-winged Snowfinch, Black-headed Bunting, Grey-necked Bunting.

### Saturday May 4<sup>th</sup> – Not the best start

Arrival in Tbilisi from Kiev/Munich airport - in the pouring rain, we start the drive to Stepantsminda, excited to hit the northern high Caucasus ridge. The rain keeps falling as we get a call from Gocha that the road has been closed at the Jvarj pass for an undefined time due to avalanche danger. We have reached the Jvari reservoir when we decide that the only option is to drive back to Tbilisi to spend the night.

### Sunday May 5<sup>th</sup> – Should we stay or should we go?

During breakfast, we receive the good news that the road to Stepantsminda has been opened again and we hit the road by 7:30, saying goodbye to the local mourning doves which nest in the street. From the bus we see a **Levantine sparrowhawk, black kites, honey buzzards and a bee-eater**. All looks great as we joke about doing the same part of the road for four times on this trip. We soon stop laughing however, as an enormous line of trucks and cars is standing still - apparently the Jvari pass is still blocked and the passage not opened. After some negotiation, the police tells us that we can proceed but with the risk that the pass will not be opened at all today. Bringing us to the question – should we stay or should we go now? We decide to go for it and after passing kilometers of cars and trucks stretched out, we find ourselves completely alone on the Military Highway. At the start of the pass, a new line of parked vehicles is seen but again we proceed as we suddenly see literally hundreds of people running back to their cars from the same coffee bar (must have had a golden business time). The pass has been reopened and cars rush to make it to the other side of the pass. The road forms a deep trench through the snow making it quite an unforgettable drive. **Horned lark and ring ouzel** are seen from the bus on the pass. Before lunch, we make a walk along the thornbushes on the east side of Stepantsminda and have excellent observations of **red-throated pipit, northern wheatear, ring ouzel, red-throated flycatcher, whinchat and bullfinches**. The first Caucasian specialties also sign present as we see several **Güldenstadts redstarts, great rosefinches, Caucasian chifchaffs and two distant Caucasian snowcocks**. A very good start and mainly due to the weather conditions with continuous rain which is snow higher up.



*Red-throated pipit - Picture by Guy Huylebroeck*



*Great rosefinch - Picture by Marc Herremans*



*Güldenstadt's redstart - Picture by Guy Huylebroeck*

After lunch we make a short walk along the river in the village and enjoy the raptor migration. **Honey, steppe and long-legged buzzards** are seen continuously. A beautiful **male Levantine sparrowhawk** shows up very close and also **common sparrowhawk** and a single **goshawk** are seen. The first **griffon vultures** soar by. Following the river, **little stint, great northern wagtail, barred warbler, dipper, water pipits, red-breasted flycatchers, common restarts** and surprisingly **3 purple herons** are seen as well as our first mammals of the trip as a group of **Dagestan turs** is foraging very high up the slope on the east side of Stepantsminda.

After the walk, we visit the dam area north of Stepantsminda. Soon after arrival we see a **wallcreeper** flying over the road and in the bushes surrounding the dam two more **Güldenstadts redstarts** are seen as well as a couple of **great rosefinches** and **red-backed shrikes**.



*Wallcreeper - Picture by Guy Huylebroeck*

At a good location for mammals in the Stepantsminda area, we settle for a short evening scanning session for mammals and see two young **Dagestan turs**. It is still pretty early as a huge male **brown bear** is seen on a slope. Some of the group members observing the local **lammergeyers** are not in time to catch a glimpse of it but everyone is keen on trying again the next evening. We drive back to the hotel and toast to a very good first day in the High Caucasus.

## Monday May 6<sup>th</sup> – Breathtaking day –not only in terms of altitude

We get up early to look for **Caucasian grouse** on the slopes east of Stepantsminda. We are happy to find two males and 4 females and enjoy the displaying behaviour. Quite far away but what a scene... In the meantime, **two large male Dagestan turs** seem to be eating lichens high up the ridge. **Great rosefinches** are still around as are **common rosefinches**. Snowcocks are calling from a nearby location but we do not get any views. What a great sound though... to be surrounded by the enormous peaks of the main Caucasus ridge and the **sounds of snowcocks** in the morning is truly fantastic.



*Dagestan tur on the lookout - Picture by Frans De Schampelaere*

After breakfast we move up to the Gergeti Trinity church looking out over the village. There is a new road which is very comfortable to drive but that and the big parking lots on the mountain do take away the aspect of the unreachable church it once used to be. Around the church many **fire fronted serins** and a **common rock thrush** are seen as well. **Griffon vultures** from the nearby breeding colony are around and a pair of **lammergeiers** start a stunning displaying flight over the valley. Migrating raptors are still there but very high and include both **honey and steppe buzzards**. One aquila spec. is seen gliding off but is spotted just too late. We see three **twites** that seem to want to make our boots their new home as they proceed foraging on the ground right between our feet. We head down for lunch.



*The group in front of Mt. Kazbek - Picture by Frans De Schamphelaere*

After lunch, we make a walk in the valley past Gergeti where we continuously see **griffon vultures** from the nearby colony. **Two black vultures** fly by and so does a **peregrine falcon** that briefly lands on the rocks above us. Green warbler does not seem to have arrived in big numbers and we do not see any. **Mountain chiffchaffs** and **black tits** are around as is **dipper**, **one wallcreeper**, **ring ouzel**, **fire fronted serin** and **mistle thrush**.





Early evening we leave to the scanning spot and settle with some Georgian wine! Surrounded by the high peaks, with a glass of wine in one hand and the handle of the telescope in the other, we scan the area cautiously. Simply perfect. A pair of **golden eagles** flies by. A group of 4 **Dagestan turs** is seen in the distance followed by another individual and then a group of 7 very nearby. Great to observe their behavior from a close distance. Then all of a sudden Luc says that he saw movement on a nearby slope. After some intense minutes, a **bear** cub appears from behind the rocks. What a fantastic moment. Also the mother bear appears on stage and we follow mom and cub as they are foraging on the slope. Two Russian families ask us what we are looking at. When we say that we are looking at bears they start to laugh, saying they also see bears every time they've been drinking wine. Looking through the telescope though, they can't believe their eyes actually looking at the bears. Pictures are being taken with us as they cheerfully leave the place. We watch the bears until it gets too dark to see. We raise the glass to the Caucasian nature and proceed back to the hotel. What an evening!



*One of the two bears seen on this evening - Picture by Frans De Schamphelaere*

## Tuesday May 7<sup>th</sup> – From the mountains to the steppes

Early morning, some of the participants go for another try for good views of Caucasian snowcock and Caucasian grouse at the known viewpoint east of the town. A couple of **Caucasian grouse** is seen and the **snowcocks** are continuously calling, although from pretty far. Two are seen flying in the distance. One of them purely by coincidence as it flies by in the telescope view where the grouses are - the two top species in one view. A **red-throated pipit** is seen as well. After yesterday's sunny weather, the snow is melting very fast and it seems like Güldenstadts restarts and great rosefinches have already moved up very far. Through the scope we see some **great rosefinches** very high up near the snow line. It is the difficulty with these birds in Kazbegi - one day you see them easily near the village whereas the next day you might need to try to get to the Gergeti pass and glacier to see them...



*Ice cold morning at a known viewpoint for Caucasian snowcocks - Picture by Anny Anselin and Luc Vanhercke*



*Record shot of a Caucasian grouse - Picture by Frans De Schamphelaere*

Driving back to the hotel, a **Caucasian squirrel** crosses the road (the forest on the slope east of Stepantsminda is a good place).

After breakfast, the drive to Signaghi in the Kakheti region is started. We make a stop in the Truso valley. Always a nice place and now **golden eagles** are displaying. Some buzzard migration is still ongoing and we are very happy to see a 1st year **imperial eagle** making its way north as well. The pools around the road are good for amphibians including brown-legged woodfrog and green toad.

We make another stop at the Jvari pass where a couple of **horned larks** is seen as well as the usual suspects - **water pipits, white wagtails and black redstarts**.

At the Georgian-Russian Friendship Monument, two **alpine accentors** are seen although not everyone in the group is in time to see them. **Alpine swifts** fly by at eye-height and what fantastic birds they are. It is time to say goodbye to the snowy peaks of the High Northern Caucasus ridge!

Lunch is at the Ananuri castle complex which we visit and where we see **blackcap, robin, greenfinch, nuthatch and little flycatcher**. A thunderstorm is coming up so we decide to stop our little walk in the forest and drive on to Signaghi.

We arrive in Signaghi and do some wine and chacha tasting - welcome to Kakheti!



*Not a bad name for wine tasting on the day before our attempt to see wild pheasants - Picture by Frans De Schampelaere*



*The most important part of the trip – wine tasting - Picture by Frans De Schamphelaere*

Lying in bed, through the hotel window, **nightingales** sing us to sleep...

### **Wednesday May 8<sup>th</sup> – Eastern Georgia’s remote steppes**

Early morning rise and shine as we have a rather rough day of exploring the Kakheti region ahead with a lot of “Delica-kilometers”. We arrive at the first location and see a **pheasant** from the car. Great start! As we get out of the car, a **jackal** is seen through a scope and we see **woodchat shrike, lesser grey shrike, golden oriole, a black vulture, black headed buntings, woodlark** and many more. It’s a beautiful morning and in total we see about 8 **pheasants** and a second **jackal**. Raptor activity starts too with 5 **griffon vultures, kestrels** and a **short-toed snake eagle**.



*Early morning observation of a pheasant - Picture by Frans De Schamphelaere*



*Black-headed bunting - Picture by Guy Huylebroeck*

Time to start the drive to Chachuna. Near Dedoplistkaro, we see a **lesser spotted eagle**, a **marsh harrier**, a **male montagu's harrier** and, from the car another monpal. A **hamster** and three **white-breasted hedgehogs** are seen as unfortunate roadkills.



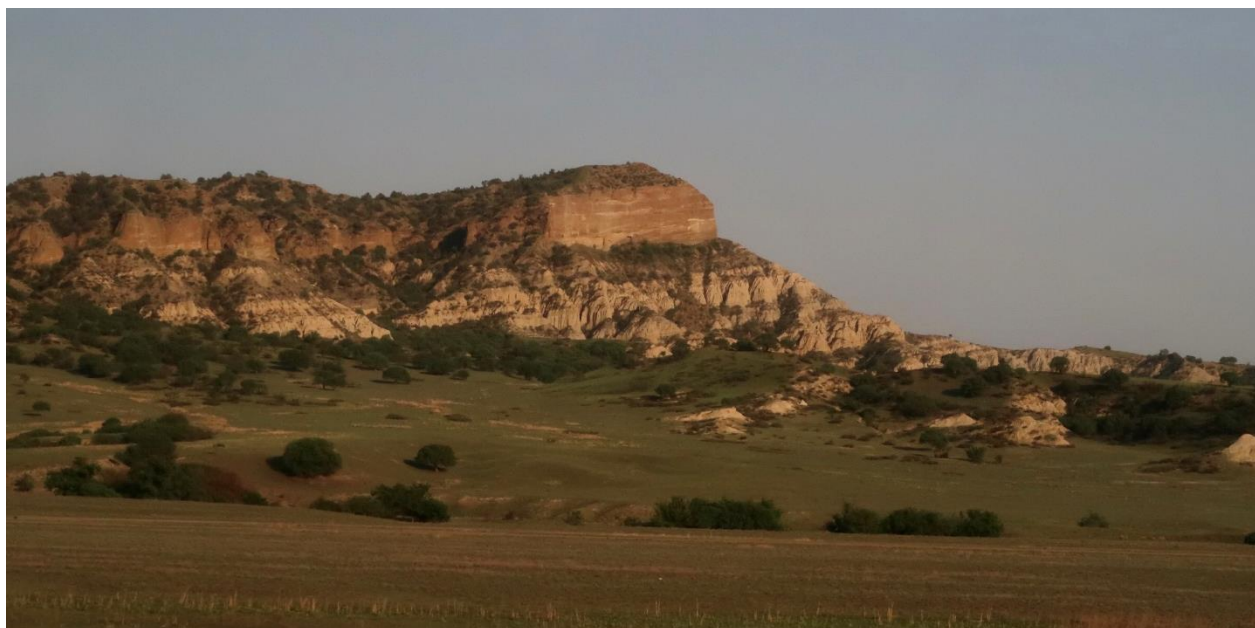
*Lesser spotted eagle - Picture by Guy Huylebroeck*

The dry steppe areas towards Chachuna are good for **calandra**, **short-toed**, **lesser short-toed and crested larks** and all are seen relatively easy. **Imperial eagles** nest near the lunch place. The pond where we have lunch attracts **willow**, **icterine** and **great reed warbler**.

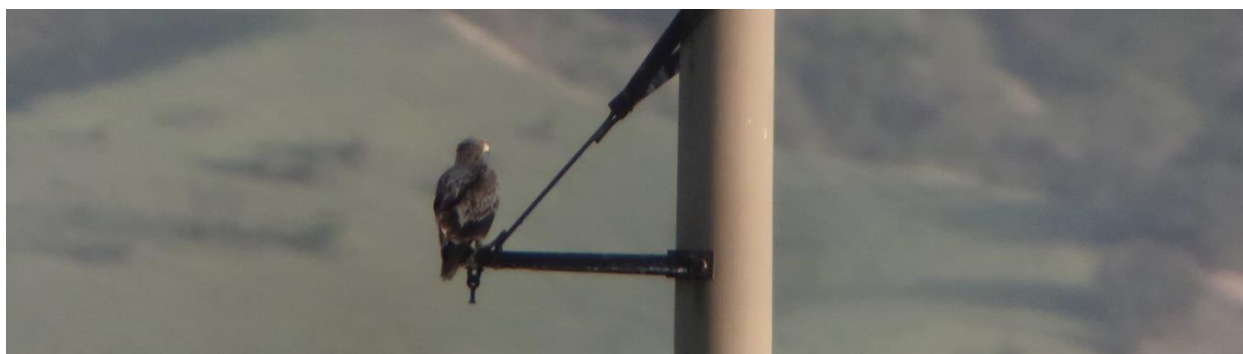
It is too hot for much activity in Chachuna as we arrive there. Some **turtle doves** (so rare in Belgium these days), a lonely **ruddy shelduck**, **house martins**, **barn swallows**, **black headed buntings** and distant **grebes** on the lake are the only active birds. As it cools down, we look around the dam and see at least 6 **black francolins** while hearing many more. About 4 **Ménétries warblers** are present as well and a **Syrian woodpecker** shows up nicely. **Green woodpecker** is an additional new species.



*Record shot of the ever-shy black francolin - Picture by Frans De Schamphelaere*



*Evening falls over the steppe landscapes around Chachuna - Picture by Frans De Schamphelaere*



*Imperial eagle on the lookout - Picture by Frans De Schamphelaere*

We start the long drive back to Signaghi and see one immature **imperial eagle** and a **jackal** crossing the road. It has been a very long day with many kilometers.



*Time to head home after a long day in the steppes of Eastern Georgia - Picture by Frans De Schamphelaere*

#### **Thursday May 9<sup>th</sup> – Birding the border with Azerbaijan**

Today we take it easy with the wake-up call and after breakfasts leave to Davit Gareja although not before buying some local adjika spices

On the way to Davit Gareja, two **ortolan buntings**, several **isabelline wheatears**, our first **rock sparrows**, an **Egyptian vulture** and a male **pied wheatear** are seen. We start the walk visiting the main site at the parking where **rock sparrows** and a **blue rock thrush** are seen. However, no rock nuthatch is found. We ascend further towards the Udabno monastery while **many griffon vultures**, **4 Egyptian vultures** and a **black vulture** are continuously seen as is an **Eastern black-eared wheatear** and several **black-headed buntings**. We make it to the ridge, where the border situation with Azerbaijan is currently quite tense.

Azerbaijan has recently blocked people from entering the Udabno area, which is claimed to be officially in Azeri territory. We are allowed to pass with Georgian soldiers on the left of the trail and Azeri soldiers on the right - quite an intense atmosphere although we are greeted friendly by military of both parties.



*On top of the ridge towards the Udabno monastery, with a great view of Azerbaijan - Picture by Frans De Schamphelaere*

Around the Udabno monastery, **rock buntings** and **Finsch's wheatears** are the main birds seen. Descending from the other side of the hill, **Eastern orphean warblers** are seen as well as **spotted flycatchers** while **nightingales** are singing in the forested valley. **Linnets** keep us company during lunch.



*Rock bunting - Picture by Guy Huylebroeck*



*The famous frescoes of Udabno monastery in Davit Gareja - Picture by Frans De Schamphelaere*



*Part of the group (without Anny) with the unearthly Davit Gareja landscape in the back - Picture by Frans De Schamphelaere*

In the afternoon, we drive to Jandauri lake and in the way there see **short-toed larks**, a **little owl** and a **fox**. At Jandauri lake, **great crested**, **little and black-necked grebe** are present as are **hobby**, **white-winged**, **whiskered** and **little tern**, **long-legged stint**, **slender-billed** and **Armenian gull**.



*Whiskered tern - Picture by Guy Huylebroeck*

Walking to the center of Tbilisi in the evening along the Mtkvari river, various **black-crowned night herons** as well as **little egret** are seen.

Our last evening in Georgia! We toast to that!



*Last evening in Georgia well spent in lovely Tbilisi - Picture by Frans De Schampelaere*

### Friday May 10<sup>th</sup> – Part II - Armenia

Our driver Gio drops us at the border in Sadakhlo. We cross the noman's land over the river, where as usual **nightingales** are singing out loud. Once in Armenia, we set course to our first stop in Dilijan. On the way there, **black headed and corn buntings** are plentiful and during a stop we have an encounter with a couple of **barred warblers** and a **wryneck**. We have a coffee in Ijevan and the owner invites us for a cognac, which the town is well-known for in Armenia. It's 11 o'clock but refusing is not an option. Same goes for the second round. Along the way to Haghartsin we search for **semi-collared flycatchers** and happen to find some. **Great spotted woodpecker, tree creeper, nuthatch and green warbler** are found as well. After a visit to the monastery of Haghartsin, we lunch with a view on a group of **common rosefinches** and a **jay**.

We begin the drive to Sevan where we will spend the night after a visit to Norashen, which holds the largest population of Armenian gulls in the world. North of Sevan, a **male pallid harrier** is seen from the car. We make an evening walk through the Norashen reserve accompanied by **northern wheatears, Cetti's warblers, hoopoes, coots, moorhens**, thousands of **Armenian gulls** and **cormorants**, a couple of

**pigmy cormorants, black-crowned night herons** as well as **great grey and purple herons**. The **white-winged terns** are a pleasure to see and when the evening sets in, we hear a group of **common cranes** that is just out of reach to be seen... a nice surprise at the end of our first day in Armenia.



*Armenian gull - Picture by Guy Huylebroeck*

### **Saturday May 11<sup>th</sup> – Towards the heart of Armenia**

After breakfast, we start the drive to Vayots Dzor. The road leads us past the West Bank of the Sevan lake, where we see several **long legged buzzards** as well as **ruddy shelduck** and an **eagle owl**. A short walk in Lichk is good for several **purple herons, great grey herons, rosy starling, tufted ducks, lesser grey shrikes** and a class of motivated school children visiting the place together with an excellent guide. It is always a pleasure to see the interest of the younger generations for the local bird life.



*Ruddy shelduck - Picture by Guy Huylebroeck*



*Kashkar or old gravestone on Noratus cemetery - Picture by Frans De Schamphelaere*



*Meanwhile at the fish store on the shores of Lake Sevan - Picture by Frans De Schamphelaere*



*Eagle owl - Picture by Guy Huylebroeck*

We drive through the green meadows of the Selim pass, where we have beautiful observations of **snowfinches**, a **bluethroat** and our first **Radde's accentors**. **Garganey**, **yellow wagtails**, **common** and **spotted redshanks**, **whinchats** and **rock sparrows**.



*Radde's accentor - Picture by Marc Herremans*



*Snowfinch - Picture by Guy Huylebroeck*

Once over the pass, the landscape changes dramatically into the typical arid Vayots Dzor mountains. We have lunch at the Orbelian's caravanserai – what a splendid remnant of the Silk Road- and make a short stop where **rock buntings** are the main attraction. We drive on to Noravank where we will spend the afternoon and evening. On the way there, several **storcks** of the nearby breeding colonies are seen from the bus. Noravank is a good as always with fantastic observations of **lammergeiers** (at a given moment 3 adults together sitting down at the rocks on a very nearby location and starting a top-gun inspired dogfight a little later), **chukars** and **golden eagles** to name a few. **Eastern rock nuthatches** are heard. One of the other star attractions, however, are the **Bezoar goats**. Noravank is one of the best places to see them, probably even in the world, and also now we see several groups of females with young as well as young males. Soon people start gathering around the telescopes to catch a glimpse of these near-mythical goats. The queuing time reaches ten minutes at a given time...

End of a long but beautiful day.

The next page is solely dedicated to the fantastic lammergeiers of the Noravank gorge.



*Lammergeier patrolling the ridges above Noravank monastery - Picture by Guy Huylebroeck*



*3 Lammergeiers over disputed territory - Picture by Marc Herremans*

## Sunday May 12<sup>th</sup> – A long drive south

A long drive ahead as we want to make it to Tatev, hoping for good raptor migration along the Tatev gorge. We make some stops around the Vorotan pass where several breeding colonies of **lesser kestrel** can be found and we also add a **steppe eagle** and several **crimson-winged finches**. Fantastic and energetic birds!



*Crimson-winged finch - Picture by Guy Huylebroeck*

We have lunch at the Armenian Stonehenge, Carahunge. **Corn buntings and skylarks** are present.



*Carahunge, aka the Armenian Stonehenge - Picture by Frans De Schamphelaere*



*Lesser kestrel - Picture by Guy Huylebroeck*



*Cuckoos are omnipresent in every type of landscape in this time of the year - Picture by Guy Huylebroeck*



*Looking for birds around Carahunge - Picture by Frans De Schamphelaere*

Raptor migration in general is not super today but the cable ride to the Tatev monastery and the monastery complex itself are definitely worth a visit. **Egyptian vultures**, **ortolan bunting** and an **Alpine swift** between the **common swifts** are seen from the cable ride platform. From a tower in the monastery complex, scanning the very far ridges towards the Shikahogh reserve, miraculously we find a... **Caucasian grouse**... Why not! We drive back towards Yeghegnadzor to spend the night there. A **nightjar** is seen on the road.



*The Vorotan gorge, unfortunately raptor migration was not very strong on this day - Picture by Frans De Schamphelaere*

## Monday May 13<sup>th</sup> – Enjoying the Yeghegnadzor mountains

We start with a morning scanning session in the Yeghegnadzor area to see **Bezoar goats** and find several groups including some distant large males. Bears are also common and regularly seen in the mountains of Vayots Dzor. On our previous trips, we have always seen them but it seems we might have been spoilt too much in Kazbegi... Raptors seen include **lammergeiers, golden eagles, goshawk, peregrine falcon, honey and steppe buzzards. Golden orioles** as well as **rock bunting** are present around the viewpoint as well as a **Cetti's warbler**.



*One of the group members, An Fiers, decided to make the walk to the old Smbatarbed fortress, situated on one of the ridges high above the Yeghegis valley. Luckily, not without the usual Caucasus-dog-guide - Picture by Frans De Schamphelaere*

In the afternoon, we drive higher up in the mountains towards more botanically interesting areas for tulips whereas another part of the group makes a walk in a remote side valley. Apart from many **rock buntings** and the resident pair of golden eagles, the absolute highlight of the walk is an impressive group of **more than 20 big male Bezoar goats** resting on a nearby slope.

As you could guess, the following page is dedicated to the (return of the) fantastic bezoar goats of Vayots Dzor.



*Some impressive male Bezoar goats - Picture by Frans De Schamphelaere*



*King of the valley - Picture by Frans De Schamphelaere*

## Tuesday May 14<sup>th</sup> – Into the heat

It is our last morning in the beautiful Vayots Dzor mountains as we leave the hotel early. The target species for this morning is Caspian snowcock, a reasonably widespread but local species in the region. 4WDs take us up to a higher viewpoint. **Chukar** is the first bird seen and at least two **Caspian snowcocks** show up high on the ridge. The Vayots Dzor mountains stand for stunning scenery and we have breakfast with the calls of Caspian snowcocks and **several groups of Bezoar goats** in the telescope. A pair of **common rock thrushes** is present as well and on the way down, we make several stops at some of the botanically interesting places, including remarkable tulip fields.



*Scanning for Caspian snowcocks - Picture by Anny Anselin and Luc Vanhercke*



*Typical view of a Caspian snowcock - Picture by Frans De Schamphelaere*



*Jeeps are required to get to the best spots - Picture by Anny Anselin and Luc Vanhercke*

We are set for our drive to a completely new area, off to the Ararat valley and its surrounding dry hills and mountains. On the way to the village of Vedi, we add **olivaceous warbler** and make a lunch break which is good for our first **Upcher's warblers** and **white-throated robins** as well as for **Eastern rock nuthatches**, **stonechats** and **common rosefinches**. At a given time, a bell of vultures forms including several **griffons**, **2 blacks** and a **lammergeier**.

We spend the afternoon in and around the Vedi gorge, which has run almost completely out of water at the usual place. Nevertheless, we have brief observations of 3 **desert finches**, at least one **trumpeter finch** and one **pale rock sparrow** (which was not picked up by everyone in the group and is known to be a late arriver in the gorge). Several **grey necked buntings** are seen and heard. Other species include **Egyptian vulture**, **Upcher's warbler**, **rufous-tailed bush robin**, **crested lark**, **raven**, **rock sparrow** and many **bee-eaters**.



*Upcher's warbler - Picture by Frans De Schamphelaere*



*Rufous-tailed bush robin - Picture by Guy Huylebroeck*



*Eastern rock nuthatch - Picture by Guy Huylebroeck*

The night is spent in Yerevan.

### Wednesday May 15<sup>th</sup> – Birdwatching at the border of Armenia, Turkey, Azerbaijan and Iran

After breakfast, we drive to the well-known fish ponds of Armash. Armash is an incredibly attractive place for birds and birdwatching and a true hotspot in terms of Caucasian biodiversity. Some of the main attractions here are the **white-tailed lapwings**, **blue-cheeked bee-eaters**, **paddyfield**, **moustached**, **Savi's** and **Ménétries' warblers**, **common pratincoles**, **grey-headed swamphens**, **ferrugineous** and **white-headed ducks**. Additionally we see **bearded reedlings**, **osprey**, **white-winged terns**, **spoonbill**, **storcks**, **pochards**, **mallards**, **garganeys**, **long-winged stilts**, **lapwings**, **great** and **common reed warblers**.



*Blue-cheeked bee-eater - Picture by Guy Huylebroeck*



*White-tailed lapwing - Picture by Guy Huylebroeck*



*Birdwatching the Armarsh wetlands with the stunning view of Mount Ararat in the back - Picture by Frans De Schampheleere*

By noon, it has become very hot in the Ararat valley and we take our time during lunch with some cold beers. We trade in the minibus for two 4WDs as we are heading to the Ooranos mountains in the afternoon. The Ooranos area is the driest mountain range of Armenia and that means something. We explore the area with necessary caution as Levantine vipers are common in these types of habitats. Soon we find **Persian wheatear** as well as **grey-necked and black-headed buntings**, **chukars**, **white-throated robins**, **eastern rock nuthatches**, **fire-fronted serins**, **crested larks** and **golden eagles**.



*Red-tailed wheatear - Picture by Guy Huylebroeck*



*Grey-necked bunting hiding behind the grass - Picture by Guy Huylebroeck*



*White-throated robin - Picture by Guy Huylebroeck*



*Dice snake - Picture by Guy Huylebroeck*

At a drinking place, we are surprised to find first one and then several more **crimson-winged mountain finches**! An unexpected species here but it might be worth to look around for them here in the future. In the meantime, a small temporary pond is occupied by several dice snakes. Quite an impressive sight to see them swimming around.



*Crimson-winged finch at temporary pond - Picture by G. Huylebroeck*

We drive down and enjoy the views over the Ararat valley, which are made ever more mysterious as we are able to see Turkey, Nakhchivan (Azerbaijan) and Iran all at once. Mount Ararat towers out over the Armash marshes down in the valley as we realize that we have also been very lucky with the weather during this trip. While driving back to Yerevan, we make a short stop at the monastery of Khor Virap, situated at the border with Turkey and one of the most well-known churches in Armenia because of the dramatic setting with Mount Ararat in the background.



*Khor Virap - Picture by Frans De Schamphelaere*

#### Thursday May 16<sup>th</sup> – Always end with a highlight

Unfortunately, today is our last day in the Caucasus. And thus we need to end with a highlight. Quite literally as well, as we are driving up to Mount Aragats today. With 4090 meters, Mount Aragats is the highest mountain in present Armenia. We will drive to the highest reachable point, which is Lake Kari at 3185 meters. On the way to Mt. Aragats, we make a stop in the meadows north of Yerevan and see several **bimaculated larks** as well as **crested larks** and a very nice **long-tailed weasel/ermine**.

Hitting the slopes of Mount Aragats, along the way to lake Kari, we make several stops with observations of **ortolan buntings**, **Radde's accentors**, **bluethroat**, **twites**, **rock sparrows**, **horned larks**, **alpine accentors** and **long-legged buzzards**. A beautiful Armenian steppe viper is seen well by every group member as well. At Lake Kari, we make our way along a path carved out in the snow, leading to the ever open small bar. It is time for another toast! When we ask the lady of the house what it is like to stay here in winter, she simply replies "*Snow, wolves and vodka*". We gather around the small fire to warm up.

Some pictures to highlight the beauty of Mount Aragats.



*Ermine - Picture by Guy Huylebroeck*



*Bimaculated lark - Picture by Guy Huylebroeck*



*Bluethroat - Picture by Guy Huylebroeck*



*Horned lark - Picture by Guy Huylebroeck*



*Armenian steppe viper - Picture by Frans De Schamphelaere*



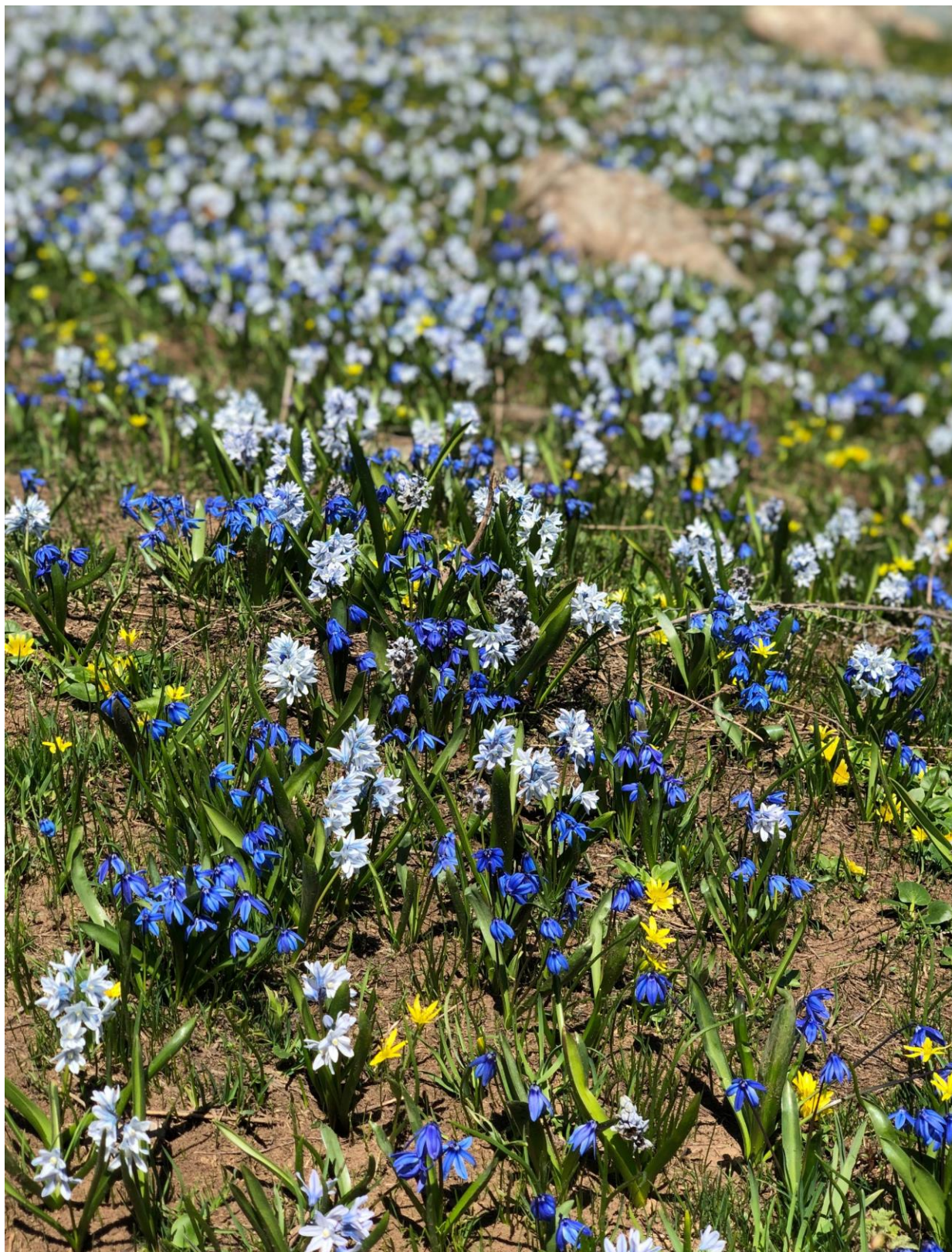
*Mount Aragats - Be prepared for any kind of weather in the Caucasus - Picture by Frans De Schamphelaere*



*Warming up on Mt. Aragats - Picture by Frans De Schampelaere*



*Alpine accentor - Picture by Guy Huylebroeck*



*Just the normal colors of Mount Aragats - Picture by Frans De Schamphelaere*

On the way back, lunch is taken at the Amberd castle where **common rock thrush** and **black redstart** are seen. We drive back to Yerevan where we make a short stop at the Genocide Memorial Complex.

The sun sets over Yerevan on our last evening in the Southern Caucasus. It has been an intense trip and we have crossed many kilometers through this fascinating region. Not only nature wise have we seen a lot, also in terms of culture we have definitely combined a lot in this tour. The excellent weather conditions in combination with a very motivated group with a lot of knowledge have for sure had a big part in the observations we made in terms of birds and mammals as well as in general.

Time for a last dinner before we prepare our bags. Back to the west, back to Belgium.

### **Friday May 17<sup>th</sup> – Leaving the Caucasus**

Very early departure to Kiev/Bucharest for our connecting flights to Brussels.

**A big thanks to all participants - An Fiers, Anny Anselin & Luc Vanherck, Steven Verdrengh, Marc Herremans and Guy Huylebroeck (trip leader from Natuurpunt side) - for making this a fantastic trip!**

*Birding the Caucasus in the best possible way, meanwhile investing in local nature conservation - that is what drives us.*



*Part of the group with the legendary Mount Ararat in the back - Picture by Frans De Schamphelaere*

# List of birds – 218 species observed

		4/05/2019	5/05/2019	6/05/2019	7/05/2019	8/05/2019	9/05/2019	10/05/2019	11/05/2019	12/05/2019	13/05/2019	14/05/2019	15/05/2019	16/05/2019
1	Black-necked Grebe						1	10						
2	Little Grebe						2	1	3				15	
3	Great Crested Grebe					2	25	23	15				10	
4	Great Cormorant							1000						
5	Pygmy Cormorant							8					30	
6	Common Little Bittern												1	
7	Black-crowned Night-heron						20	11	1				10	
8	Cattle Egret								1					
9	Little Egret						35	5	1				5	
10	Great White Egret								2					
11	Grey Heron							2	12				2	
12	Purple Heron		3					2	2				13	
13	White Stork			3					14	1		1	72	
14	Glossy Ibis						3						25	
15	Eurasian Spoonbill												1	
16	Ruddy Shelduck					1	1		5				2	
17	Mallard						1	4	6				2	
18	Gadwall							2	7				3	
19	Northern Shoveler							4					1	
20	Common Teal						1							
21	Garganey								1				4	
22	Common Pochard							1					100	
23	Red-crested Pochard												100	
24	Ferruginous Duck												10	
25	White-headed Duck												40	
26	Bearded Vulture		3	3					5	6	1	3		
27	Griffon Vulture		25	20	5	5	30			1		3	1	
28	Cinereous Vulture			2		2	1					2		
29	Egyptian Vulture						5			1		1		
30	Osprey												1	
31	Golden Eagle			2	2				1	1	7		2	
32	Eastern Imperial Eagle				1	4								
33	Lesser Spotted Eagle		1			1								
34	Steppe Eagle								1					
35	Short-toed Snake-eagle					1								
36	Booted Eagle						1	1		1	1	1		1
37	Black Kite		5	3	1		2			1			1	
38	Western Marsh-harrier		2			1	2	5	4			1	15	
39	Montagu's Harrier					1					1			
40	Pallid Harrier							1						
41	Long-legged Buzzard		5	1			2	1	1	6	2	7	2	4
42	Eurasian Buzzard		1	200+	2	7	10				4			
43	European Honey-buzzard		200+	50	5	1	10	1		1	2			
44	Eurasian Sparrowhawk		1											

		4/05/2019	5/05/2019	6/05/2019	7/05/2019	8/05/2019	9/05/2019	10/05/2019	11/05/2019		12/05/2019	13/05/2019	14/05/2019	15/05/2019	16/05/2019
45	Levant Sparrowhawk		2	3	3		5					2			
46	Northern Goshawk		1									1			
47	Common Kestrel			1	2	4	1		4			2			
48	Lesser Kestrel										40		6	1	
49	Eurasian Hobby						3								
50	Peregrine Falcon			1								1			
51	Caucasian Grouse			5	2						1				
52	Caucasian Snowcock		2	A	4										
53	Caspian Snowcock												2		
54	Black Francolin					15									
55	Chukar					A			A			1	4	10	
56	Common Quail					2									
57	Common Pheasant					8									
58	Western Water Rail							2							
59	Common Moorhen					2		1							
60	Common Coot							200	200						
61	Purple Swamphen													2	
62	Common Crane							A							
63	Black-winged Stilt						1							9	
64	Collared Pratincole													1	
65	Northern Lapwing													6	
66	White-tailed Lapwing													10	
67	Curlew Sandpiper							1							
68	Wood Sandpiper							1							
69	Common Sandpiper		10		4										
70	Common Redshank								1	1				4	
71	Spotted Redshank								3						
72	Whimbrel						A								
73	Black-headed Gull						1								
74	Slender-billed Gull						2								
75	Armenian Gull					2	25	2500	150	2				20	
76	Caspian Gull						1								
77	Lesser Black-backed Gull						1								
78	Little Tern						2								
79	Common Gull-billed Tern							10							
80	White-winged Tern						15	400						1000+	
81	Whiskered Tern						7								
82	Rock Dove		30	50	80	60	200+	8							
83	Common Woodpigeon				1	8	3	5	6	2			2	2	
84	Eurasian Collared-dove				10	6		5							
85	European Turtle-dove					3	1								
86	Laughing Dove		4												
87	Common Cuckoo		1	3	1	6	5			2	1	6	25		
88	Eurasian Eagle-owl								1						
89	Little Owl						1		1						
90	Eurasian Scops-owl					A									

		4/05/2019	5/05/2019	6/05/2019	7/05/2019	8/05/2019	9/05/2019	10/05/2019	11/05/2019	12/05/2019	13/05/2019	14/05/2019	15/05/2019	16/05/2019
91	European Nightjar								1					
92	Common Swift		300+	50	200	100	500	100	300	160	20	500	1000+	300
93	Alpine Swift				15					2	15			
94	Common Hoopoe				1	4	3	4	8	1	2	2	20	4
95	Common Kingfisher						2						2	
96	European Bee-eater		1	2	4	70	100	50	5	4	A	20	6	1
97	Blue-cheeked Bee-eater												4	
98	European Roller					1				1			2	
99	Eurasian Green Woodpecker					A								
100	Syrian Woodpecker					1		1			2			
101	Eurasian Wryneck							1						
102	Eurasian Skylark					10	12	1	25	50				10
103	Crested Lark				2	60	16			1		6	10	10
104	Woodlark					2						4		3
105	Greater Short-toed Lark					7	1					1		
106	Lesser Short-toed Lark					7								
107	Calandra Lark					100	54							
108	Bimaculated Lark												3	
109	Horned Lark		1		2									7
110	Collared Sand Martin						200		1000+ nest					
111	Eurasian Crag Martin		1	10	2			2	50	1	3	5	150	30
112	Barn Swallow		40	2	100	300	200	150	70	17		60	6	40
113	Northern House Martin		10		40	80	110	50	140	28			5	10
114	Tawny Pipit					5	3							
115	Water Pipit		100	200	100	200			4					5
116	Tree Pipit				4	1			6	4				2
117	Red-throated Pipit		2		1	1								
118	White Wagtail		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
119	Western Yellow Wagtail		4			5			20	2			5	
120	Grey Wagtail		10	1	2			1			1	1		
121	Northern Wren		1	10	5			3						
122	White-throated Dipper		3	1							1			
123	Dunnock		20	10	1									
124	Alpine Accentor				2									20
125	Radde's Accentor								3					3
126	European Robin				2			1						
127	Common Nightingale					20	4	16	1			1		
128	Rufous-tailed Scrub-robin											1		
129	Bluethroat								2					1
130	White-throated Robin											4	5	
131	Common Redstart		20		2	2		2						
132	Black Redstart		80	10	5				4			2	1	6
133	White-winged Redstart		20											
134	Northern Wheatear		30	20	30			5	8	2				
135	Isabelline Wheatear					40	6					14	10	30
136	Black-eared Wheatear						1		3	1		2	2	

		4/05/2019	5/05/2019	6/05/2019	7/05/2019	8/05/2019	9/05/2019	10/05/2019	11/05/2019		12/05/2019	13/05/2019	14/05/2019	15/05/2019	16/05/2019
137	Pied Wheatear						1								
138	Finsch's Wheatear					3	5						15	4	
139	Red-tailed Wheatear													2	
140	Whinchat			3					9	10			1		
141	Common Stonechat					3	2					2	4		1
142	Blue Rock-thrush						2		1			2	4	3	
143	Rufous-tailed Rock-thrush			1					1				2		2
144	Song Thrush					6		1				1			
145	Mistle Thrush		50	30	10	100	8	20	6	3	7	13			2
146	Eurasian Blackbird		20	5	7								1		1
147	Ring Ouzel			10	10										
148	Garden Warbler					2									
149	Barred Warbler		1					4		1					
150	Eurasian Blackcap				1	2	2	6							
151	Eastern Orphean Warbler						4								
152	Lesser Whitethroat		2				3						3		
153	Menetries's Warbler					7							2		
154	Common Whitethroat					10	5			1	2	4			
155	Moustached Warbler													4	
156	Cetti's Warbler							10	20	1	1	10	15		1
157	Common Reed-warbler													60	
158	Marsh Warbler													1	
159	Paddyfield Warbler													5	
160	Great Reed-warbler					6		1						50	
161	Icterine Warbler					1									
162	Upcher's Warbler												4	2	
163	Olivaceous Warbler												1	1	
164	Willow Warbler		1			1	1			2		1			
165	Common Chiffchaff		1												
166	Caucasian Chiffchaff		10	20				3	25	1	3				
167	Green Warbler							1		3					
168	Goldcrest		1												
169	Spotted Flycatcher		2				2	2						1	
170	Red-breasted Flycatcher		4	1	1			1							
171	Semi-collared Flycatcher							2							
172	Great Tit		10	20	4	10	2	6	5	3	3	4	1		
173	Coal Tit			5	1			3							
174	Eurasian Blue Tit		1		2			4	1	1	1				
175	Bearded Reedling													100	
176	Eurasian Nuthatch				2			2							
177	Western Rock Nuthatch								Nest						
178	Eastern Rock Nuthatch								A		A	4	15		
179	Wallcreeper		1	1											
180	Eurasian Treecreeper							2							
181	Red-backed Shrike		6			20	4	6	5	7	2	4	3		3
182	Woodchat Shrike					10			1				4		

		4/05/2019	5/05/2019	6/05/2019	7/05/2019	8/05/2019	9/05/2019	10/05/2019	11/05/2019		12/05/2019	13/05/2019	14/05/2019	15/05/2019	16/05/2019
183	Lesser Grey Shrike				2	4	1	1	2		1		4		
184	Eurasian Magpie				20	50	17	45	40		30	3	31	30	30
185	Eurasian Jay		1		1	15		1			5	7	3		
186	Eurasian Jackdaw					9	1	30	30		1			22	5
187	Red-billed Chough		80	20	10				12			15	1		
188	Yellow-billed Chough		150	30	2										
189	Rook						30							8	7
190	Carrion Crow		2		10	20	100	40	30		18	5	24	45	30
191	Common Raven		10	5	10		3	8	2		3	1	2		1
192	Common Starling				50	50	260	9	60		30		15	3	
193	Rosy Starling					40	9	100	3				207		30
194	Eurasian Golden Oriole					10	2				1	2	3		
195	House Sparrow		10		10	700	250	70	16		28		50	130	15
196	Spanish Sparrow					100									
197	Eurasian Tree Sparrow					3			3					6	1
198	Rock Sparrow						12		6		1		10		20
199	Pale Sparrow												1		
200	White-winged Snowfinch		1						3						
201	Common Chaffinch		8	3	5	4	4	15	2		2	3	1		10
202	Common Linnet		3				2		14		2	2	16	20	
203	Twite		1	4	10				7		5				25
204	European Goldfinch		2		7	40	1	14	6		1		2	6	
205	European Greenfinch				2	2		10							
206	Red-fronted Serin		10	10	10				4			6		20	
207	Eurasian Bullfinch		2	3											
208	Common Rosefinch		1	10	2		1	5			4	3	7	2	
209	Great Rosefinch		40	3	10										
210	Trumpeter Finch												1		
211	Eurasian Crimson-winged Finch										4			4	
212	<i>Desert Finch</i>												3		
213	Reed Bunting							2						1	
214	Ortolan Bunting						2				1		2		4
215	Grey-necked Bunting												6	4	
216	Black-headed Bunting					300	25	5			14		60	10	5
217	Corn Bunting				15	50	7	6			20		8		15
218	Rock Bunting		1				2		2			15	13	2	1

## List of mammals – 9 species observed

		5/05/2019	6/05/2019	7/05/2019	8/05/2019	9/05/2019	10/05/2019	11/05/2019	12/05/2019	13/05/2019	14/05/2019	15/05/2019	16/05/2019
1	Indian Porcupine				S								
2	Caucasian Squirrel			1									
3	European Hamster		RK		1								
4	Snow Vole												10
5	Southern White-breasted Hedgehog				3 RK		2 RK						
6	Brown Bear	1	2										
7	Stoat												1
8	Wild Goat or Bezoar Goat							16		45	35		
9	East Caucasian Tur	35	13	1									



*Time to say goodbye (not farewell) to the Caucasus - Picture by Frans De Schampelaere*