

Georgia

29th June to 3rd July 2013

Oscar Campbell, Mark Smiles & Simon Lloyd

This trip report covers a short visit to **Mount Kazbeg** in the Greater Caucasus and the **steppe around Davit Gareji monastery** on the Georgia / Azerbaijan border, both of which are easily reached from Tbilisi. The former is a well-known site for birders searching for Caucasian specials, although primarily earlier in the spring than our visit. The latter provides a complete ornithological contrast and is not covered nearly so specifically in the trip reports we surveyed. In summary, Georgia is an amazing country with scenery, history and natural history that is as good as anywhere in Europe or western Asia. We could easily have spent 10 days here, instead of five, and highly recommend a visit.

Timing and weather

As is well-known, Georgia is at its best in spring, specifically early to mid May. At this time, you can normally see the high altitude specials without having to work too hard, the steppe vegetation is still green and lush and, everywhere, migrants are pouring north. Due to work commitments, we had no option but to go in high summer, rather than May and this meant we had to do a lot of legwork (and, ultimately, failed with the gamebirds). However, an excuse to really get up those amazing mountains is maybe no bad thing, at least if you enjoy serious hiking as well as birding, and the alpine flora puts on a spectacle that you won't get in May. There is still plenty of song, and the added bonus of fledged juveniles of many species. There is also, presumably a higher chance of better weather too: at Mount Kazbeg, we had heavy showers the afternoon we arrived, then two days of brilliant blue skies and hot sun when we had to tromp up to the glacier. After overnight rain, the day we left was cloudy and damp, but not too bad over Stepantsminda. In Tbilisi, and at Davit Gareji, we had clear skies, hot sun and, for much of the day, a cold wind. Bird activity had slowed right down by the afternoon, but we still saw a lot during our visit.

Where to stay

- **In Stepantsminda: Guesthouse Anano** http://www.tripadvisor.com/Hotel_Review-g1156085-d3361456-Reviews-Anano_s_Guesthouse-Stepantsminda_Mtskheta_Mtianeti_Region.html
Email: ananoqushashvili AT yahoo.com (omit spaces). Three nights here. Really excellent, friendly place with very obliging owners. They are well used to dealing with birder's early starts and will transfer you up

to Samedia Church in the morning for a very reasonable price. Cost 35 Lari per person per night sharing a double room, or 50 Lari per person per night for single occupancy.

Co-ordinates:

N 42°39'24.1"	E044°38'24.2"
---------------	---------------

- **In central Tbilisi: Nest Boutique Hostel** http://www.tripadvisor.com/LocationPhotoDirectLink-g294195-d2157691-i67700786-Nest_Hostel_Tbilisi-Tbilisi.html Two nights here. Just opening at the time of writing, they were still getting a few things in order when we arrived. Very helpful, friendly staff. Cost 40 Lari per person, per night sharing a triple room. Tbilisi is a great city, and well worth taking a little time to explore. And that is not just because Armenian Gulls frequent the river!
- Co-ordinates of the hotel:

N 41°41'55.2"	E044°48'13.6"
---------------	---------------

Getting around

We used a combination of taxi and legwork to achieve this. It is possible to take a taxi from the airport straight to Kazbegi, but make sure you agree with the driver the exact fare (and currency!) before you get in; we got done over here. 200 Lari is probably a 'fair' price; we paid much more but did also spend two hours at Lake Lisi en-route and make several prolonged stops between Gaudari and Kobi on either side of the high pass south of Stepantsminda. A direct taxi back to Tbilisi, arranged by the guesthouse, was a knockdown 100 Lari. In Stepantsminda, you can either leg it, or, take a taxi up to Samedia Church. The latter will save you a climb of about 500 metres. We tried both; the taxi should cost 30-40 Lari. To get to Davit Gareji, we looked at renting a car for the day; this would have been feasible but the easy option of renting a taxi and driver, between three of us, was far from excessive (200 Lari in total) for a 13-hour day so we did that. The hostel in Tbilisi was able to help with arranging either option.

Birding sites

Those that we visited are outlined below; see also the annotated list for details of selected key species.

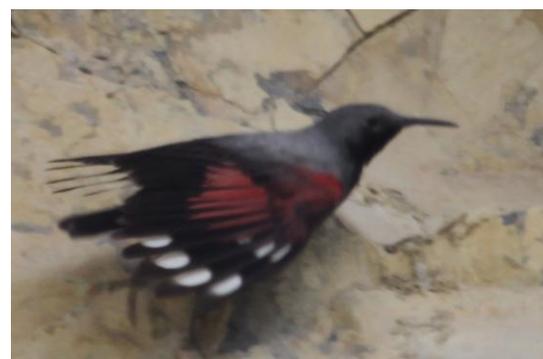
1 Lisi Lake

This is on the north west edge of Tbilisi and is a popular recreation spot. We went straight here from the airport and circled the lake on foot, so covering the reedbeds, scrub and dry grassland on the west edge. This yielded almost two hours of great birding. Species seen included **Black-headed Bunting**, **Lesser Grey Shrike** and **Golden Oriole** on territory, three species of **vulture** low overhead (four individuals being **Black!**) and, along the water's edge, lots of **Great Reed Warblers** and several **Little Bitterns**. However, we failed to locate **Paddyfield Warbler**; this is a known site for them.



2 Stops along the E117 between Tbilisi and Stepantsminda

- You drive through great scenery much of the way along this route, ultimately ascending the pass above Gaudari at c2300m. We made a short stop at the scenic Ananuri Castle finding **Red-backed Shrike**, a family of *samamisticus* **Common Redstart**, **Gull-billed Terns** over the lake and singing **Rock Bunting** nearby.
- We also had the necessary raptor breaks over the high pass as and when required. These produced, amongst others, at least two **Lammergier** on our return trip.
- **Wallcreepers!** One definite stop that you want to be making is where you descend the pass into the valley towards the village of Kobi; look for where the road crosses over (the only?) bridge after the tunnels and roadworks. The co-ordinates are: N 42°32'33.7" E044°29'48.6". We stopped on speculation here and soon found two stunning male **Wallcreepers** on the low outcrop above the bridge, i.e. on the west side of the road. It was possible to watch them feeding very closely as they worked the low cliff faces; we had several sightings of this species on the climb to the Kazbeg glacier but they were all brief flyovers. We also had our first **Red-fronted Serins** here, plus **Rock Thrush**, very close **Crag Martins** and



our first singing **Scarlet Rosefinch**. The latter was nice at the time but, after we got to Stepantsminda, hardly seemed like an achievement any more...

- Several km further on, north of Kobi we made another speculative stop for photos and where soon to be buzzed by a stunning adult **Lammergier** that sailed right overhead before dropping onto the slopes of the gully below to walk around like an incongruous gamebird. As if this wasn't enough, **Golden Eagle** and our first **Chough** flock also featured here.



3 Around Stepantsminda

This friendly and birdy village is the access point for Mount Kazbeg and has lots of accommodation plus a number of good local restaurants. At least in high summer it is quite a busy place with hikers and general tourists as well as the odd group of birders. In early spring you can hear snowcocks from the village; we had to settle for the likes of **Red-backed Shrike** and **Scarlet Rosefinch** in the garden. We spent much time pottering through Gergeti, the very rustic village on the other (west) side of the river from Stepantsminda, and climbing through the pine and birch woods up towards the famous and obvious Sameba church (illustrated, from above, as the header picture). The key species here, both very abundant on voice, are **Green Warbler** and **Caucasian Chiffchaff**. We saw both well, but both gave even better views on our last morning when we walked up to the small church below Mount Kuro on the east side of the valley. We also had **Corncrakes** (three singing in the meadows above Gergeti), **Rock Bunting**, plenty of **Rock Thrushes**, **Ring Ousels** and **Red-backed Shrikes** and a liberal sprinkling of **Red-fronted Serins** scattered all over the place, amongst many commoner species. A walk along the river on our last morning produced **Dipper**, **Grey Wagtails**, **Griffons** and both **Little Ringed Plover** and **Green Sandpiper**.

4 Climbing to the Mount Kazbeg glacier

In summer this exhilarating (some would say brutal) undertaking is essential to stand any chance of locating any of the high Caucasian specials. Make sure are fully prepared for any and all types of weather, which you could easily experience in the same afternoon. You can cut the climb by taking a taxi up nearly to the Sameba Church; from the eroded track through the grassland about 400m west of the church, a several trails start and take different routes to the same place. If you don't take a taxi, a steep path up through the birch woods drops you at GPS waypoint 2 (see table below); from here it is obvious where to head next! We recommend keeping as close as possible to the gorge to the north, i.e. following the ridge as high as possible; this means a steady but gradual climb all the way to the ridge cross (GPS waypoint 3) rather than long flat bits and lots of abruptly steep bits; you also have epic views over that incomparable gorge, where, if you are very lucky, you may pick out a gamebird by scanning. The latter means that bringing a scope, arduous as it sounds, is also a very good idea.

There is nice birding all the way up, with **Water Pipits** everywhere, mixed flocks of both **Chough** species feeding young, **Northern Wheatears** singing and the perpetual possibility of bumping into **Red-fronted Serin**, **Twite** and so on. The serious stuff starts as you approach the obvious cross on a cairn that marks the ridge T-junction (GPS waypoint 3). Here we started seeing **Wallcreepers** flying over, **Alpine Accentors** are suddenly obvious and, once you know the call, there are lots of delightful, song-fighting **Shorelarks**. One of us saw **Snowfinch** here and also a (massive) bonus: a flyover **Caucasian Black Grouse** – lots of scanning for these in the rhododendron shrubbery elsewhere drew a blank. Of the three biggies, possible the easiest is **Great Rosefinch** – they like areas of boulder fields and we saw them on both sides of the ridge. The best place to look is on the walk from the ridge towards the glacier; we got them here both visits and, once you know the distinctive call they are not difficult to locate. **Caucasian Snowcock** caused more problems; we heard them calling quite frequently from 1000-1100hrs on our first visit from the slopes below the ridge (beyond the river valley, not between the ridge and river) but could not locate any. Next day, no amount of scoping or listening produced a sniff and the 'last resort' tactic of covering as much of the area as possible on foot also failed to deliver. Finally,



Guldenstadt's Redstart did deliver, but it was hard work. We glimpsed a male well off the trail that is the final ascent up to the glacier on the first day; on the second day, instead of crossing the river to go towards the glacier, we kept left and reached a flattish, evenly upward sloping 'whaleback' of slate and patchy grass that allowed us to easily walk right up to the walls of the mountain. From here, we were able to look across towards the glacier trail and we eventually saw a pair of redstarts, spending much of their time perched atop the biggest boulders. The male kept his distance (again, a scope was very useful) but the female spent some time feeding on the whaleback edge on our side of the river.

GPS waypoints for use with sections 3 and 4 above:

1 Guesthouse Anano in Stepantsminda (1740m asl)	N 42°39'24.1"	E044°38'24.2"
2 Between church and the trailhead for Mt Kazbeg glacier (2160m asl)	N 42°39'54.8"	E044°37'05.6"
3 Ridge T-junction cross / cairn (2930m asl)	N 42°39'31.5"	E044°34'24.7"
4 Bottom of Glacier, Mt Kazbeg (3260m asl)	N 42°40'09.4"	E044°32'55.4"

5 Birding the steppes around Davit-Gareji monastery

We used a taxi to get here, but if you want to drive yourself, try this: head out of Tbilisi, on the main road east to Sagarejo. Here you must turn south; Davit Gareji is prominently signposted with a large brown sign. From here it is c50km to the junction at GPS waypoint 5 in the table below. The only settlement on the steppe in between this turn and the junction is Udabno, famous – at least for us – for it breeding Rosy Starlings and at GPS waypoint 3 below.



GPS waypoints for use with sections 5:

1 Hotel in Tbilisi (425m asl)	N 41°41'55.2"	E044°48'13.6"
2 Lakes on steppe; one each side of road (840m asl)	N 41°34'25.6"	E045°19'14.5"
3 On edge of Udabno (780m asl)	N 41°30'21.5"	E045°23'01.8"
4 Dam on right of roadside (720m asl)	N 41°28'51.4"	E045°19'26.2"
5 Junction with blue signposts (770m asl)	N 41°28'19.6"	E045°18'53.6"
6 Davit Gareji monastery (700m asl)	N 41°26'54.1"	E045°22'33.9"
7 Junction to Natlismtsmelemi monastery (turn north here) (700m asl)	N 41°28'25.9"	E045°17'41.0"
8 Natlismtsmelemi monastery (657m asl)	N 41°29'44.8"	E045°17'26.8"

Not long after you turn off the main road, you will start to roll through the steppe. There is the potential for great birding anywhere and everywhere here; go slow and stop wherever you need to. It is worth bearing in mind, however, that there is great birding at Davit Gareji too, and rather more varied habitat there, so it might be worth trying to get there before it gets too hot. The only trip report that we found that covers this area is posted at http://josstratford.co.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=19&Itemid=26 and is worth a read.

Common birds on the steppe included **Calandra** and (especially) **Sky Larks**; **Red-backed** and (especially) **Lesser Grey Shrikes**, **Black-headed** and **Corn Buntings** and **Tawny Pipit**. The most amazing spectacle (of the entire trip) was our discovery of a plague of breeding **Rosy Starlings**, taking advantage of a plague of grasshoppers in the fields on the edge of Udabno; we followed the noise up the hill to find all the fledglings sat around on boulders (see GPS waypoint 3). **Wheatears** suddenly became common south of Udabno; a few **Isabelline** but mainly **Pied**. The latter need a careful look, we saw about 30, including six clear cut males, but these were outnumbered by at least nine obvious (to us; we have been tripped up by these in the UAE in recent springs and, hopefully learnt

from our mistakes then!) **Pied x Black-eared hybrids!** We did not see anything that struck us as pure *melanoleuca* (although we didn't see many females really closely and could have overlooked them) but they are mapped as occurring very close to here, so some hybrids are not too surprising. But we didn't expect more hybrids than the real thing! We tried Natlismtsmelemi for Finsch's Wheatear to no avail, but we did find at least two hybrids here. On the subject of enthralling but tricky small chats, we found a male (**Eastern**) **Stonechat** just north of Udabno; had to be *armenicus* on range but, at least in terms of underpart colouration, it actually most resembled the illustration of *rubicola* in the Collins 2nd edition! Raptors were not too abundant given the vast skies and landscapes (more on migration presumably) but included **Long-legged Buzzard** and several **Black Vultures** and both **Peregrine** and **Saker Falcons**; the latter was on the ground at the dam at GPS waypoint 4, but soon made a run for it. Once we made it to both monasteries, a couple of other species became obvious: both **Rock Nuthatch** and **Rock Sparrow** were easy to find, as was **Blue Rock Thrush** whilst **European Bee-eaters** obviously nest in the vegetated gorges.

Finally, some wetland birds. Jandari Lake, which is visible from the ridge above Davit Gareji, is a vast steppe lake lying on the Georgia / Azerbaijan border and, presumably accessible by continuing west along the track instead of turning north at GPS waypoint 7. However, the road is very bad and our taxi driver was not keen to try this so we didn't go. There are few lakes on the drive between Sagarejo and Udabno; most of these were wind-blasted, unvegetated and sterile but one rather better one is referenced by GPS (waypoint 2). Here we had **Ruddy Shelduck** with young and some migrating *Tringa*; presumably on a calm day it would be worth trying for Paddyfield Warbler here too.

Species list with annotations for selected species

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*

Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus*

Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea*

Black Kite *Milvus migrans*

Lammergeier *Gypaetus barbatus*

1 watched scavenging on the ground at Kreskovvy Pass on 29th June, with 2 at the same location on 1st July. 2 also seen around Sameba Church, Kasbegi, on 30th June.

Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*

An adult and immature at Lisi Lake, Tbilisi, on 29th June. One also seen at Davit Gareji monastery on 3rd July.

Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus*

Seen every day, with 8 around Kazbegi village on 1st July and 10 in the Krestovvy Pass the following day.

Cinereous Vulture *Aegypius monachus*

4 seen at Lisi Lake, Tbilisi on 29th June and 1 or 2 at Davit Gareji monastery on 3rd July.

Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*

Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*

Steppe Buzzard *Buteo buteo vulpinus*

2 near Guraudi on 29th June, 1 Mt Kazbeg on 30th June and 2 Krestovvy Pass on 2nd July.

Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus*

1 was seen at the large lakes near Udabno on 3rd July.

Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*

2 passed high through Krestovvy Pass on 29th June.

Aquila sp

1 Golden/Imperial Eagle was seen at Davit Gareji monastery on 3rd July.

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*

Saker Falcon *Falco cherrug*

1 was flushed from beside a small pool in the Udabno area on 3rd July.

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrines*

An immature passed through Udabno on 3rd July.

Caucasian Black Grouse *Tetrao mlokosiewiczi*

A male was seen briefly in flight whilst ascending towards the pass to Mt Kazbeg on 30th June.



Caucasian Snowcock *Tetraogallus caucasicus*

1 was heard calling several times in the area to the north of the glacier below Mt Kazbeg on 30th June, but could not be located.

Corncrake *Crex crex*

Up to 2 were heard calling at close range in a meadow below Sameba Church on 30th June, with 3 there the following evening.

Common Coot *Fulica atra*

Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*

Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*

Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*

Common Sandpiper *Tringa hypoleucos*

Armenian Gull *Larus armenicus*

At least 3 seen on the river in central Tbilisi on 2nd July; also seen here whilst driving through on other dates.

Gull-billed Tern *Sterna nilotica*

Little Tern *Sterna albifrons*

Feral Pigeon *Columba livia*

Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur*

Laughing Dove *Streptopelia senegalensis*

Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*

Little Owl *Athene noctua*

Alpine Swift *Apus melba*

Common Swift *Apus apus*

European Bee-eater *Merops apiaster*

European Roller *Coracias garrulus*

Hoopoe *Upupa epops*

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*

Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra*

Approx 20 seen in the Udabno area on 3rd July.

Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*

Woodlark *Lullula arborea*

1 or 2 near the patch of stunted birch above Sameba Church on 30th June.

Skylark *Alauda arvensis*

Shore Lark *Eremophila alpestris*

Sand Martin *Riparia riparia*

Crag Martin *Hirundo rupestris*

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*

House Martin *Delichon urbica*

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*

Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris*

Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis*

Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta*

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*

Dipper *Cinclus cinclus*

Winter Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*

Alpine Accentor *Prunella collaris*

Dunnock *Prunella modularis*

Rufous-tailed Rock-Thrush *Monticola saxatilis*

Blue Rock-Thrush *Monticola solitarius*

Ring Ouzel *Turdus torquatus*

Blackbird *Turdus merula*

Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*

Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*

Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*

Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*

Guldenstadt's Redstart *Phoenicurus erythrogaster*
1 male briefly in the area below the glacier on Mt Kazbeg on 30th June, with a male and female in the same area the following day.

Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra*

Siberian stonechat *Saxicola maurus armenicus*
1 male, presumably *armenicus*, in the hills close to Udabno on 3rd July.

Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*

Pied Wheatear *Oenanthe pleschanka*
Up to 30 found in the area between Udabno and Davit Gareji monastery on 3rd July. Of ca 15 males seen, 9 appeared to be Pied x Eastern Black-eared *O.hispanica melanoleuca* hybrids: see image above.

Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina*

Great Reed-Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus*

Caucasian Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus lorenzii*
Commonly heard and seen well in pine woodland around Stepantsminda between 29th June and 1st July.

Green Warbler *Phylloscopus nitidus*
Common around Stepantsminda, but often difficult to see well. Seen daily between 29th June and 1st July.



Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla*

Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis*

Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca*

Coal Tit *Periparus ater*

Great Tit *Parus major*

Blue Tit *Parus caeruleus*

European Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*

Western Rock-Nuthatch *Sitta neumayer*

Single birds seen and heard calling at Davit Gareji and an adjacent monastery on 3rd July.

Wallcreeper *Tichodroma muraria*

2 males seen at close range at Krestovvy Pass on 29th June, with 2-3 in the Mt Kazbeg glacier area the following day.

Eurasian Treecreeper *Certhia familiaris*

Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus*

Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*

Lesser Grey Shrike *Lanius minor*

Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius krynicki*

Common Magpie *Pica pica*

Red-billed Chough *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*

Alpine Chough *Pyrrhocorax graculus*

Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix*

Northern Raven *Corvus corax*

Rose-coloured Starling *Sturnus roseus*

A huge breeding colony, comprising an estimated 4000 birds, including juveniles, was found at Udabno on 3rd July.

European Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis*

Fairly common in the fields around Udabno on 3rd July.

Rock Sparrow *Petronia petronia*

Seen around the monasteries of Davit Gareji on 3rd July.

White-winged Snowfinch *Montifringilla nivalis*

2 seen briefly in flight near the glacier at Mt Kazbeg on 30th June.

Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*

Red-fronted Serin *Serinus pusillus*

Common around Kazbegi and Gergeti villages.

Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris*

Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*

Twite *Carduelis flavirostris brevirostris*

Common above 2500m on Mt Kazbeg.

Linnet *Carduelis cannabina*

Common Rosefinch *Carpodacus erythrinus*

Fairly common below 2500m in the Kazbegi region.

Great Rosefinch *Carpodacus rubicilla*

Two males were seen well on 30th June below the glacier on Mt Kazbeg, with at least 5 located the following day.

Bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*

Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia*

Singles seen at Gergeti village on 30th June and Davit Gareji monastery on 3rd July, plus another en-route back to Tbilisi

Ortolan Bunting *Emberiza hortulana*

Black-headed Bunting *Emberiza melanocephala*

Corn Bunting *Miliaria calandra*

