

New and significant bird records from Buryatia, Russia

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Significant bird records from a visit to Buryatia on 18-30 June 2001 are presented. These include observations of six threatened species (Swan Goose *Anser cygnoides*, Baikal Teal *Anas formosa*, Greater Spotted Eagle *Aquila clanga*, Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca*, Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni*, Great Bustard *Otis tarda*), three Near Threatened species (White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla*, Cinereous Vulture *Aegyptius monachus*, Asian Dowitcher *Limnodromus semipalmatus*), and new breeding records or range extensions of Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*, Pied Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta*, Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei*, Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella*, Yellow-browed Bunting *Emberiza chrysophrys* and Pallas's Bunting *Emberiza pallasi*. Observations of Northern House Martin *Delichon urbica* suggest that the taxonomic status of *D. u. urbica* and *D. (u.) lagopoda* merit further investigation.

INTRODUCTION

The autonomous Russian republic of Buryatia is located south and east of Lake Baikal and covers a total area of approximately 350,000 km². With direct flights from Moscow to its capital city Ulan-Ude, Buryatia is one of the more accessible areas of Siberia. The republic offers a variety of habitats and climates in a relatively small area and this is reflected in the diversity of bird species recorded (Dorzhev 1997).

Despite its potential attraction to birdwatchers, Buryatia remains ornithologically poorly understood, and the precise ranges and habitats of many of its species are unknown. Here we present a summary of the more interesting records from a trip to the republic from 18 to 30 June 2001, focusing on unexpected species and

those of particular conservation concern. The principal sites of ornithological interest and the bird species typical of them have been described elsewhere (Mlíkovský *et al.* 2002, Tebb and Ranner in press). Table 1 presents a brief listing of the places referred to in the text. For each globally threatened species the IUCN Red List category is given, taken from BirdLife International (2000).

SIGNIFICANT RECORDS

SWAN GOOSE *Anser cygnoides* Endangered
This species was rare on migration through the Khamar-Daban area south of Lake Baikal in the 1940s (Vasil'chenko 1987) and is presumed to have bred in

Table 1. An overview of the sites mentioned. The letters following the site names indicate the districts: D: Dzhidinskiy; K: Kabanskiy; and S: Selenginskiy.

Site	Coordinates	Notes
Belyye Ozera, D (White Lakes)	50°40'N 105°46'E	Two large steppe lakes located 30 km to the east of Petropavlovka. These differ in depth and salinity and thus support slightly different populations of breeding birds. They are referred to in the following accounts as 'lower' Belye Ozero and 'upper' Belye Ozero.
Bol'shoy Mamay valley, K	51°27'N 104°52'E	Valley of the Bol'shoy Mamay river in the Baikal National Park on the southern bank of Lake Baikal, near Tankhoy. The valley gives access to the foothills of the Khamar-Daban range.
Borgoy, D	50°45'N 105°51'E	Village in the steppe near Petropavlovka.
Bulag Springs, D	50°38'N 105°28'E	Spring that feeds a small lake in the steppe about 10 km to the east of Petropavlovka.
Dzhida valley, D	50°28'N 105°06'E	Here used to mean the valley of the Dzelteriyn-Gol, a tributary of the Dzhida river that runs north from Mongolia and joins the Dzhida river near the village of Zheltura, 8 km north of the Mongolian border.
Petropavlovka, D	50°38'N 105°20'E	Town in the steppe in southern Buryatia.
Selenga Delta, K	52°20'N 106°30'E	Wetlands covering an area of over 1,000 km ² where the Selenga River flows into Lake Baikal.
Tankhoy, K	51°32'N 105°05'E	Town on the southern shore of Lake Baikal.
Tashir, S	51°05'N 105°47'E	Village in the steppe in southern Buryatia.
Ulan-Ude	51°55'N 107°40'E	Capital city of Buryatia.
Yekhe Tsagan, S	51°07'N 106°22'E	Small town c.15 km south of Gusinoe Ozero, the second largest lake in the republic.

the Selenga Delta into the 1970s (Pronin 1988). To our knowledge, there have been no records of the Swan Goose from Buryatia for the past 20 years and the species was therefore considered to be extirpated from the republic, although it remains a fairly common breeding visitor to most of the larger lakes and rivers in northern Mongolia (A. Bräunlich in BirdLife International 2001). On 20 June we observed two birds on the lake by Bulag Springs, from where they flew to the lower Belye Ozero. We subsequently learned that a *Limosa* tour group had also seen the birds on the lake by Bulag Springs on 15 June (M. Crewe *in litt.* 2001).

BAIKAL TEAL *Anas formosa* Vulnerable

The breeding range of the Baikal Teal lies entirely within eastern Siberia, with its southern limit running through northern Baikal. The species was common on spring passage through the Selenga Delta in the 1950s and 1960s, with small numbers of non-breeding birds remaining through the summer (Skryabin 1968), but it has since become extremely rare in Buryatia. We saw a male on the lower Belye Ozero on 20 June and were told that our sighting represented the first record of the species in the republic for several years (V. Ye. Yeshyeyev verbally 2001).

WHITE-TAILED EAGLE *Haliaeetus albicilla* Near Threatened

The White-tailed Eagle has population strongholds in Norway and Russia (BirdLife International 2000) but is not thought to be especially common in Buryatia. Pronin (1988) gives a breeding population in the republic not exceeding 20 pairs while Pavlov *et al.* (2001) state that there are only 12 pairs in the entire Baikal region, including Buryatia. We observed an adult soaring over the steppe by Yekhe Tsagan on 19 June and saw at least two adults in the area to the south of the Selenga Delta (one south of Istomino on 24 and 25 June and a further one near Posolsk on 25 June). Furthermore, a pair had bred in an isolated tree by the Belye Ozero shortly before our visit. There is considerable suitable habitat further north in the republic and we therefore suspect that the White-tailed Eagle population in Buryatia may be more healthy than the figures from Pronin (1988) and Pavlov *et al.* (2001) suggest.

CINEREOUS VULTURE *Aegypius monachus* Near Threatened

No longer thought to breed in the republic. An adult seen by the upper Belye Ozero on 20 June presumably came from the nearby Mongolian population, where the species is still believed to be common (BirdLife International 2000). A *Limosa* tour group also observed a single Cinereous Vulture – possibly the same individual – at the Belye Ozero on 14 June (M. Crewe *in litt.* 2001).

GREATER SPOTTED EAGLE *Aquila clanga* Vulnerable

This species has a wide range but its population seems to be declining as a result of habitat loss and persistent persecution by man (BirdLife International 2000). It is generally rare in Buryatia although it is known to nest in the Tunkinskaya valley west of Lake Baikal (V. V. Ryabtsev in BirdLife International 2001). There are a number of possible breeding records from elsewhere in the republic (summarised in BirdLife International

2001). We are aware of no records from the Dzhidinskiy district, although the species is presumed to breed in northern Mongolia (BirdLife International 2001). Our sighting of two adults on 21 June in the Dzhida valley may represent the first indication that the species breeds in the Dzhidinskiy district. Furthermore, on 25 June an adult of the rare *fulvescens* form flew over the Bol'shaya Rechka on the southern shore of Lake Baikal west of the Selenga Delta.

IMPERIAL EAGLE *Aquila heliaca* Vulnerable

Habitat alteration is thought to be primarily responsible for the decline in the population of the Imperial Eagle (BirdLife International 2000). The species still breeds relatively widely in the Baikal area although the population has recently suffered a dramatic decline, largely due to the ploughing of steppes which has reduced the availability of the Daurian suslik *Citellus dauricus*, the Imperial Eagle's main prey, and due to the removal of the large trees that the species requires for nesting (V. V. Ryabtsev in BirdLife International 2001). We observed one bird in the fourth or fifth calendar year on 20 and 22 June perched on a power line between Petropavlovka and Bulag Springs. On 23 June a subadult was seen near Baikalkudara on the eastern side of the Selenga Delta.

LESSER KESTREL *Falco naumanni* Vulnerable

The Lesser Kestrel is known to be a widely distributed and fairly common breeding visitor to Mongolia. All records from eastern Russia stem from the extreme south, close to the Mongolian border (Pavlov *et al.* 2001, BirdLife International 2001). Although BirdLife International (2001) provides no indication of records from Buryatia since 1908, the species was known to be comparatively common in the steppe areas of southern Russia until the latter half of the 1950s (Pavlov *et al.* 2001). In Buryatia, it was described as common in the area around Kyata near the Mongolian border and was found in the valley of the Tyemnik river and around Gusinoe Ozero, occasionally breeding as far north as the Selenga Delta (Pronin 1988 and references therein). The population has subsequently undergone a dramatic decline and now only isolated pairs are found in appropriate habitat in the far south of the republic. There are indications that these are gradually disappearing, although precise population figures are lacking (Pronin 1988, Pavlov *et al.* 2001). The factors responsible for the decline in the Buryatian population of Lesser Kestrel have not been thoroughly investigated but it is thought that a drop in the number of insects following increased use of pesticides, especially in the wintering areas and on migration routes, has played a part, together with a gradual disappearance of potential nesting sites (Pronin 1988, Pavlov *et al.* 2001). The species is undergoing a rapid population decline worldwide, primarily as a result of habitat loss and degradation due to agricultural intensification (BirdLife International 2000). In this context, it is notable that there is a heavy level of agricultural activity around the towns and villages in southern Buryatia and in many places the natural vegetation has been pushed back to the tops of hills. We regularly encountered small numbers (generally single birds but occasionally groups of up to three) of Lesser Kestrels in the steppe areas in the south

of Buryatia and observed a small breeding colony in the hills by Tashir (two pairs and an immature male were present on 19 June).

GREAT BUSTARD *Otis tarda* Vulnerable

The Great Bustard once bred commonly in the steppe areas of Buryatia but its population declined dramatically in the twentieth century, mainly as a result of habitat loss due to agriculture. It is now known to occur in only two areas, the Barguzin valley and the Seleginskoye plateau, and the total population in the republic is estimated at no more than 90 individuals (E. N. Yelayev in BirdLife International 2001). The species is thus probably facing imminent extirpation. We observed a single adult male in the steppe by Borgoy on 22 June. The Great Bustard was formerly present in fairly large numbers in this area, both regularly breeding and overwintering (Ponomareva 1986). Ponomareva proposed creating a sanctuary in the Borgoyanskaya steppe to protect the Great Bustard (and the Demoiselle Crane *Grus virgo*, which also breeds there); if our information from the local ornithologists (V. Ye. Yeshyeyev verbally 2001) is correct, her advice was not followed and the species has now essentially disappeared from the area.

BLACK-WINGED STILT *Himantopus himantopus*

Not previously reported from Buryatia (Flint *et al.* 1984, Hayman *et al.* 1986, del Hoyo *et al.* 1996, Dorzhiev 1997). Glutz von Blotzheim *et al.* (1977) describe the northernmost limit of the range as running from the Balkhash and Alakol basins in south-eastern Kazakhstan via the Dzungarian Basin in China through to the major west bend of the Huang He (Yellow River) at approximately 40°N 105°E. Since the 1970s the Black-winged Stilt has been expanding its range throughout the former Soviet Union (Tomkovich 1992) and in 1976 it was found nesting in the south of Chita region, near the border with Mongolia (Zubakin 1979). We found the species to be common on the steppe lakes by Petropavlovka and the local ornithologists were aware that it occurs there. Our observations provide further evidence that the Black-winged Stilt is expanding its range to the north.

PIED AVOCET *Recurvirostra avosetta*

Thus far this species has been listed only as a 'probable breeder' in Buryatia (Dorzhiev 1997) and reports of breeding in the Selenga Delta are considered doubtful although the species is known to breed in Chita region to the east of Buryatia (Pavlov *et al.* 2001). We observed several on various steppe lakes, and some on the Belyye Oзера were clearly incubating.

ASIAN DOWITCHER *Limnodromus semipalmatus*

Near Threatened

There were occasional records of the Asian Dowitcher from around Lake Baikal from as early as the 1920s but observations remained extremely unusual and as late as the 1960s the species was considered a vagrant to the area (Skryabin 1967). Whether it was simply overlooked or subsequently colonised Buryatia is not clear. At any rate, it became evident from about 1970 that there was a substantial breeding population in the Selenga Delta, which was estimated in 1977-1978 at 4,000-4,500 birds. The population suffered a sharp

decline through the 1980s and in 1991 there were only about 100 individuals present (Liedel 2001 and references therein). Nevertheless, the Selenga Delta remains an important breeding site for the species (Schuster and Handke 2001). In addition, several pairs breed or have bred near the northern end of Lake Baikal; on the Svyatoy Nos peninsula on the eastern shore of Lake Baikal (in Barguzinskiy district); in east Buryatia on the Bol'shoye Yeravnoye Lake (in Yeravinskiy district, c.150 km NW of Chita); and in northern Mongolia (Liedel 2001 and references therein). The Asian Dowitcher also breeds or has bred on the so-called Steppoye Ozero (Steppe Lake) near Orongoy in Ivolsk district south-west of Ulan-Ude (Liedel 2001 and references therein), although we failed to find the species when we visited this site on 19 June. To our knowledge, however, our observation of a clearly agitated pair on the lower Belyye Ozero on 20 June represents the first indication that Asian Dowitcher may also breed there.

SLENDER-BILLED GULL *Larus genei*

An adult in breeding plumage in a flock of Black-headed Gulls *L. ridibundus* on the north bank of the upper Belyye Ozero on 20 June represented the first record of the species from Buryatia and was well away from the known wintering and breeding areas (Glutz von Blotzheim and Bauer 1982, Grant 1986, Ilyichev and Zubakin 1988, del Hoyo *et al.* 1996). The following field marks were noted at the time of observation: slightly larger than the accompanying Black-headed Gulls, with clearly longer legs; long-necked appearance with a prominent, sloping forehead and a relatively long, slightly decurved bill that looked very dark (black?) and gave an effect of a pronounced 'snout' on the bird, which looked rather front-heavy as a result; head all white with a small but prominent eye; underparts suffused pink. The primary extension and wing length were not recorded, and the bird was not seen in flight. V. A. Zubakin (in Ilyichev and Zubakin 1988) gave no indication of any records in the former Soviet Union from east of c.80°E and our sighting thus represents the easternmost documented occurrence of the species in mainland Russia. Nevertheless, there are a few historical records from further east, for example a specimen was collected from Mednyi Island in the Commander Islands in October 1912 (Sokolnikov in Hartert 1920) and Rothschild (1926) reports two specimens from Yunnan in south-west China, one dating from March 1902 and one from February 1906.

SNOWY OWL *Nyctea scandiaca*

An immature bird on the bank of the lower Belyye Ozero on 20 June was unusually late in the spring. The species is known to winter in the area (Dorzhiev 1997) but has normally departed well before mid-June, when the temperatures frequently exceed 40°C. The bird was repeatedly mobbed by a group of Citrine Wagtails *Motacilla citreola*, an unusual combination of species.

HOUSE MARTIN *Delichon urbica*

This species was widespread and was seen on most days. The two subspecies *D. urbica urbica* and *D. urbica lagopoda* both occur: Buryatia represents the north-eastern limit of the distribution of *urbica*, which is found

as far west as Europe, while *lagopoda* occurs in central and eastern Siberia and ranges as far south-west as northern Mongolia. The two races are easy to distinguish in the field: *urbica* has black uppertail coverts, while in *lagopoda* the uppertail-coverts are white, making the white rump appear considerably larger. In addition, the tail of *lagopoda* is much less strongly forked. In Ulan-Ude and in the steppe region around Petropavlovka we observed exclusively *urbica*, while on the south bank of Lake Baikal we saw only *lagopoda* (which was breeding on bridges over the many small rivers that run to Lake Baikal and in a large colony on the water tower at Tankhoy railway station). The observation so close together of two distinct forms without any evidence of interbreeding or of co-occurrence suggests that the forms are parapatrically separated. In addition, a closely related species, the Asian Martin *D. dasyptus*, is also found in the area but appears to be confined to rocky areas above the timberline, and thus separated ecologically (Stepanyan 1983, Dorzhiev 1997, Tebb and Ranner in press). J. Haffer (in Glutz von Blotzheim and Bauer 1985) and C. S. Roselaar (in Cramp 1988) both cited Sushkin (in Hartert 1910) as saying that forms intermediate between *D. urbica urbica* and *D. urbica lagopoda* have been reported from the Yenisey basin. Stepanyan (1990) also reported that the two forms intergrade, although without giving details of his source. In fact, Sushkin wrote exactly the opposite, claiming that the two forms occur in close proximity without any evidence of interbreeding. His statement concurs with our observations in Buryatia. We believe the distinction between *D. urbica urbica* and *D. (urbica) lagopoda* merits further investigation.

YELLOWHAMMER *Emberiza citrinella*

Several singing males were observed on 21 June in the Dzhida valley. The species regularly winters in northern Mongolia and has been recorded breeding there at 49°N 108°E, but the south-western end of Lake Baikal represents the easterly limit of the normal breeding range (Glutz von Blotzheim and Bauer 1997 and references therein). Our observations were at least 80 km further to the east. The Yellowhammer thus seems to be expanding its range eastwards. We also observed a few Yellowhammer x Pine Bunting hybrids in the Dzhida valley.

YELLOW-BROWED BUNTING *Emberiza chrysophrys*

Three singing males and a single female were observed in the Bol'shoy Mamay valley in the lower foothills of the Khamar Daban range on 27 and 28 June. Our observations were in optimal breeding habitat: the edges of clearings in dense, old stands of mixed forest near rivers – and this, coupled with the relatively late date, suggests that the birds were on their breeding territories. The species is known to breed on both the southern and northern borders of Lake Baikal but the Bol'shoy Mamay valley is about 200 km south of the breeding range that Byers *et al.* (1995) indicate for the southern shore (although a question mark is placed further south on the distribution map). Our findings do not constitute the first breeding record from the Khamar-Daban range however: in 1977 two pairs were observed feeding young only 30 km to the north in the Pereymnaya valley (Vasil'chenko 1982) and the Yellow-browed Bunting has

subsequently been shown to breed, at least irregularly, in several other valleys in the area (Dorzhiev and Yumov 1991).

PALLAS'S BUNTING *Emberiza pallasi*

In Buryatia, Pallas's Bunting is known to breed only in mountains (Dorzhiev and Yumov 1991). The southernmost site for the species in the republic is the Khamar-Daban range south of Lake Baikal, where it breeds sporadically around and above the timberline (Vasil'chenko 1982, 1987). The other known breeding sites are both well to the north, in the Barguzinskiy Protected Area (Zharov 1967) and in the Cynnyr range (Dorzhiev and Yumov 1991). The species normally arrives on its breeding grounds from early April to the end of May. Further south in its range, Pallas's Bunting is known to breed also in steppe areas (Byers *et al.* 1995). On 22 June we observed a pair and two additional males in stands of rushes *Juncus* sp. in damp depressions in the steppe by Borgoy. The pair was behaving very shyly as though nesting nearby. One of the other males was singing and all three males were fairly well separated. These observations, together with the late date, suggest that the birds were on breeding territories. We thus have the first indication that Pallas's Bunting may breed also in the steppe areas of southern Buryatia. Interestingly, Dorzhiev and Yumov (1991) report twice flushing a pair in the Borgoykaya steppe on 10–11 June 1989. The birds were in tangles of chee grass *Stipa splendens* located close to a small spring, around which irises *Iris* sp. were growing. Because they did not seem at all shy, Dorzhiev and Yumov concluded that they were not breeding. In the light of our observations, this conclusion appears questionable.

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