

WP Eastern egde in Russia – Around Yekaterinburg and Ural Mountains

June 9-18, 2014

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Introduction and preparations

Since last fall on Corvo we top Finnish WP birders had a plan to make a trip to Yekaterinburg and Ural based on the trip which Pierre-Andre Crocet (PAC) and Eric Didner had made in June 2013. Initially I left out from the group due to some other trip plans. When it did not materialize, I joined the group in March. Markku Santamaa clarified details and site information from PAC and I got the task to start all logistic practicalities with an EKB based company Ural Expeditions and Tours (<http://welcome-ural.ru/>) since end of March. Oleg Demyanenko was my main contact and I got very good support from him and the company. What we agreed, worked very well during the trip. We were actually very positively surprised how well they did arrange all ground logistics.

We were initially six: Markku Santamaa, Mikko Järvinen, Hannu Palojarvi, Petri Kuhno, Heikki Karhu and I. Heikki's role to join the group was crucial. He was speaking Russian which was very essential during our trip. Seppo Haavisto, born in Finland but living in Sweden 40+ years, showed his interest to be part of our group since our Corvo trip. When we agreed to have GAZ66 vehicle to drive to Mt Kvarush from Severouralsk, we estimated that 7th person has space and Seppo was on the group. I had experience of GAZ66 vehicle on our Central Asia four weeks' tour in summer 2005 and knew how many people could have space on top of our gears and luckages.

We all booked Finnair direct flights from Helsinki to Yekaterinburg return (AY151/152) though Seppo had his connection flight from Stockholm. The leaving date, June 8th, was fixed. We all acquired Russian visa from our own country with help of Oleg who provided needed supporting documents. We also paid 10% of the total price as a trip confirmation fee to the company. We had also FSP letter which provided Oleg's company.

We agreed to have a hotel near the southern ring road in EKB for the first night and last one or three nights depending on the leaving date. Petri, Heikki and I decided to stay two additional days in EKB and continue birding there whereas Markku, Mikko, Hannu and Seppo returned home on 16th.

We agreed to go by evening train from EKB to Serov (Ural part) 400km north of EKB, stay the night there and continue next morning in van to Pokrovsk Uralskiy near Severouralsk. Our driver Leonid would be waiting us with his GAZ66. Also our master chef Galina was joining us there. We had agreed that three meals per day are included in the package, also tents and transportation with guiding. We agreed to take our sleeping bags and mats. The mountain part lasted three nights (four days). Our initial plan was to stay two first nights at Mt Kvarush camp and the last night at Ural ridge but in the end we did not change our camp site.

In our return we had a night train from Serov to EKB. Also transportation from/to railway station to hotel was included in the package. Only what we did by our own was car renting from Hertz for the first 1.5 days and last 1/3 days.

Around Yekaterinburg

Early morning on June 9th we arrived EKB 5.45am. I slept hardly at all. Customs and passport checking went smoothly in the new Koltsovo airport. Soon we were out and searched for a while our van driver Alexander. He was a bit late, or we were earlier out than believed. Hertz men with two cars were waiting also us. Soon we filled needed papers and were driving in a queue towards our hotel Izumrud where we arrived 7.50am. In our hotel we managed to get a breakfast which we had to pay. Otherwise breakfast was included in our hotel price. Dinners we had to pay separately as we ate in different places.

We left our luckages to hotel rooms and were ready for our first target site, Monetnyy, which locates

northeastern side of EKB but inside WP. We had got new details from a British & Belgian (later BB) group which had arrived EKB two days earlier than we. They had had problems on Bolshoy Istok marsh site (or airport marsh site). Two their group members were arrested for three hours. Their scopes and big camera lens had caused attention in local people just on the southern side of the airport. When finally an English speaking person was found in the police station, they were released. Birders with big gears are a new appearing in EKB.

We drove to Monetnyy village through the 1.5 million inhabitants city. It was very slow drive and we avoided later driving through the city. We used only ring roads later. When we finally arrived in Monetnyy, we searched for a while the site details of which we had got from BB group. In the end we did not find it but just 1km east from the main road eastern side of Monetnyy was a small village which looked to have promising small river side habitat to search **Long-tailed Rosefinch**. We parked our cars just southwestern side of the village and walked a track near to the river. It took only 10-15 minutes until Markku shouted "URAGUS!" A female flew over him, stopped to a bush and continued a bit later to river side trees disappearing. One person from our group did not see it. However, it showed up few times later shortly and we all saw it.

When we waited to see LTR again, we heard a distant **Oriental Cuckoo** calling. What a start! Two target species were immediately in our bag.

We stayed at the site 3+ hours and saw a male and a female LTR flying from the river site to the garden of the most southwestern houses. Birds stayed there maybe 20-30 minutes and then flew back to river site. We understood that birds were searching some food from the garden and their nest was riverside forest trees. Petri managed to get rather good photos when the birds always stopped in the same willow bush between the garden and nesting site but stayed only max 5 seconds until they continued.

By the river was a singing **Siberian Chiffchaff**, photo below. Its song already caused us confusion near the hotel but when seeing this bird, we knew what it was.



On the site was also a singing **Booted Warbler**, photo below.



Other interesting species were a **Siberian Stonechat** male in the village, a singing River Warbler by the meadow bushes, a calling Corncrake and good number of Blyth's Reed as well as Greenish Warblers.



Photo shows Long-tailed Rosefinch site in Monetnyy. It has always dead trees where the birds sit shortly. Sites have always a river or a marsh habitat.

3pm we were ready to return our hotel. This time we drove ring road non-clockwise and arrived our hotel rather smoothly. The traffic was not yet bad though especially southern and eastern part of ring road is very congested.

We were tired after sleepless night flight and day's birding. We had dinner in our hotel and we were ready for the bed and early wake up next morning.

In our second day we had 7am breakfast and 8am we were already driving towards Verhnemakarovo which is a site of around 30km SW of EKB. This site details we got from PAC. We drove southwest until Grosnyy Schcit where we then turned to northwest and drove 17km through the forest until we arrived in the village. Just northwestern end of the village had nice river meadow which we walked within 2 hours. We had to return our hotel by 2pm to return our rented cars and prepare for transportation to EKB railway station.

Those two hours were very productive. We saw few large grey-backed gulls which had caused some confusion already in Monetnyy. We first thought that they are a bit different looking Herring Gulls but not Caspian Gulls. However, when we looked photos I took, they revealed to be Siberian Gulls (lesser Black-backed Gulls, ssp heuglini). See photos of 3cy (or 4cy ?) bird taken in Verhnemakarovo.





Several Grasshopper Warblers sang around the village. One River Warbler was by the river. Also one **Lanceolated Warbler** sang by the road. Several Siberian Stonechats were by the fields. Two **Booted Warblers**, one in each side of the village, were singing and keeping their territory.



2-3 **Oriental Cuckoos** were calling by the river. They were hard to see but their distinct call was easy to distinguish. Also several Common Cuckoos were on the site.

We had few rain showers when we were walking by the river. During one shower I went below trees to protect a bit myself and cameras. Others were several hundred meters behind me. Suddenly I heard that I bird flew over me and I followed it. Its pinkish color with white shoulders revealed immediately that I was watching male **Long-tailed Rosefinch**. It landed 20m from me and I took quickly few photos when last drops were still falling. Light conditions were weak and in five seconds the bird flew on to the other side of the river.



Long-tailed Rosefinch was sitting shortly in front of me only five seconds. Unfortunately in the only sharp photo the bird was looking away from me. When I watched the male flying away, Hannu saw also a female flying other side of the river and following the male. In less than one hour waiting we did not see the birds anymore.

It was time to return our hotel, pack quickly and prepare for our transportation to the EKB railway station. Ural Expedition & Tours representative Julia was waiting us in the hotel and now we paid the remaining part of the trip to the company. She also had brought our tents and other camping gears in the van which transferred us to the train. We said goodbye and thanks to her and started our 7.5 hours trip to Serov. We enjoyed good meal in the train.



Selyanka with Belaja Beriosa vodka (White Birch) was mandatory when we were in Russia. Train cabins per max four persons each had good space for us. Photo: Petri Kuhno.

Ural Mountains – at Europe and Asia border

It's worth to mention that very soon when our train left Yekaterinburg, we crossed WP border. Our train trip and later Serov, Severouralsk and Pokrovsk Uralskiy and further west to Ural ridge are outside of WP area.

We arrived late on June 10th close to midnight in Serov. The train we used was continuing up to the river Ob to a place called Probiye. Our driver Stanislav was waiting us at the train station. We carried all camping

gears and personal luckages to the van and drove directly to the hotel for a night sleep. The hotel looked ugly grey old Soviet style building but it was very well renovated inside. Good bed was offering good sleep.

Early wake up and to breakfast 7am on June 11th. It was a bit raining outside. 8am we were already on our way towards Severouralsk. It took a bit over an hour on a good road. By the railroad and also this road we saw several large mining and metallurgic towns and cities.



Rather dull looking city of Severouralsk where we did a short shopping stop prior to heading to Ural Mountain.

We arrived in Severouralsk and did some shopping until we continued to Pokrovsk Uralskiy. There our driver Leonid was already waiting us. Some light rain showers disturbed a bit. We loaded our GAZ66. We were still waiting Galina who had got information that we would arrive at noon. She was still baking us last pie. When she arrived with her son, we got immediately warm trout pie as a lunch which was very delicious.



Our car was loaded and we are ready to go ahead as soon as Galina arrives.

While waiting we did some walking on streets in the village. A **Booted Warbler** and a **Siberian Chiffchaff** was singing, few Hawfinches flew over, a pair of **Siberian Stonechat** was on nearby fields.





It was time to leave towards Ural Mountain. After one hour drive towards west we did our first stop. On the river was a pair of Dipper, Arctic Warbler was singing a bit further, Nuthatch pair was calling in the nearby tree and a pair of Nutcracker was calling.



We continued one hour to our next stop. Now we saw first time Ural ridge but we were still outside of WP borders.



This stop had a singing **Olive-backed Pipit** and an **Oriental Cuckoo** was calling further away. However, the view to the west towards Ural ridge and WP border area was already very fascinating when at the same time weather was improving.



One hour later we had to pass this broken bridge. A workaround was to set those heavy logs to the correct width to drive our vehicle over.

In less than one hour later we passed Europa - Asia border but we did not stop there. Half an hour later we had next stop. Very soon we had to pass a river which was ok with our high car. Our driver drove the latter part in a different road whereas other trekkers had used another road. We did not know why Leonid selected that road. A female **Capergaillie** was walking on the road and flew off.

We arrived around 6pm to the area where we were looking suitable camping site. Few trekker groups had already selected their camping sites. We returned a bit and drove then 300m up. There was a good place to us. The road had several cars and groups driving in the coming days. Actually it was surprising busy area for trekkers.



We set up tents when Galina was preparing our first excellent dinner. Two **Oriental Cuckoos** were calling, **Red-flanked Bluetails**, **Greenish** and **Arctic Warblers** as well as **Siberian Chiffchaffs** were singing...

After dinner I did one hour walk return backward the road. When I returned, all the other ones from our birding group were already in tents. It was around 10.30pm when I started to hear familiar whistle not far away. I recognized it immediately to the same which I had listened in Kalajoki June 2009. A **White's Thrush** was singing! I woke up Seppo who was already sleeping. The species was missing from his list. All others had twitched it from Kalajoki. Only Hannu was so deeply sleeping with his earplugs that he did not hear when the others were up and listened the thrush. Several tried to see the bird but in vain. It flew further away.

After short sleep we were up after 4am and Galina was already preparing our breakfast. Our plan was to leave the camp 5am walking up to the tundra level. White's Thrush was still singing when we woke up but it stopped until we finished our breakfast.



Walking the rocky track up took 45 minutes. Our camp was at the level of 550-600m when the tundra level was at 900m.



Track up to Mt Kvarkush on June 12. Greenish Warblers were singing and the higher we walked, the more we heard Arctic Warblers.



Spruce level is already behind. Two Yellow-browed Warblers and a Little Bunting were singing by the track.



View towards east to the Ural ridge when the sun was rising. Sunny morning made the climb very memorable and beautiful.



Snow covered still large part of tundra level but such birds like Bluethroats, Little Buntings, Black-throated Thrushes were numerous; few photos below.





Then on 7.10am walkie-talkie brought a message that Petri had found **SIBERIAN RUBYTHROAT**! He had walked low willow bush area to the right whereas most of us were further left. I was 500m from Petri as well as Markku and Hannu. It took some 30 minutes until we all were at the site. However, the bird was quiet over an hour until 8.20am it started to sing and soon we all saw the bird. What a relief. It was the most important target species at this site.



Clouds had already covered the sky and the light was not anymore good when we photographed Rubythroat. It was anyhow the star of the trip.

We saw few **Great Snipes** and even heard once it calling. Petri found a nest just between the bushes where Rubythroat was singing. A Merlin and adult male Hen Harrier flew over open tundra ridges.

It was around 10am when we enjoyed our snacks and some bread for the success of the morning. We started gradually return our camp as we had agreed to be at lunch at noon. If the climb up was hard, it was even harder to descend. At least I felt that my legs were rather exhausted when I arrived in the camp. Galina's excellent lunch was waiting us after a short rest. We all were before noon in our camp.

A bit after our lunch BB group arrived in our camp. They had just spent two days at Ural ridge and had seen all target species there. They took our Rubythroat message with a joy. They left immediately up but low clouds were waiting them. They heard the bird singing but could not see it. The visibility was only few tens of meters. Occasional light rain started later in the afternoon and made birding less pleasant.

We spent most of the afternoon and evening in our camp. An **Olive-backed Pipit** was singing just by the camp.

Some Russian family drama we saw and heard in the evening of June 12th near our camp .

The next day, June 13th, was the same: low clouds and occasional rain. When the photographing conditions were bad, I did not take my camera with. I counted between the road and high on the mountain 25-30 singing Greenish and Arctic Warblers. The latter was much more numerous high up in birch and tundra level bushes. Total number of **Black-throated Thrushes** was over 20 and they were mainly on the high elevation. Further on left I heard a Corncrake calling and when I reached snow level and pair of **Rock Ptarmigan** flew off. I passed its information to walkie-talkie. Certainly David in BB group had interest to see it because it was missing in his WP list. Interestingly both male and female looked a bit different than they are in Finnish Lapland. I suppose it's ssp *comensis* which should be in Ural. Nordic subspecies is ssp *muta*. Fortunately Petri and David got photos from both birds though photographing conditions were weak due to fog and low clouds.

Birding on snow level was challenging because visibility was only 100-200m due to low clouds. Good news was later in the afternoon that Kris from BB group found two Siberian Rubythroats few hundred meters left from our finding place. The whole morning BB group had searched the bird without finding it from the site. Wind and wet clouds made birding rather harsh. However, the whole BB group saw the species well in the afternoon after Kris has passed the information to the rest of their team who was already in the camp ready to leave Mt Kvarkush. Their next destination was Ural southern part near Kazakstan.

Heikki brought also interesting news when he had heard once very clear **Swinhoe's Snipe** call near the site where Corncrake was calling. BB group had seen a female **Dotterel** and part of our group saw **Willow Ptarmigan** near the Rubythroat site.

I walked once again up in hope to find **Black-throated Accentor**. We had seen once a Dunnock but another accentor bird remained unidentified until it disappeared. When the weather continued the same, I accepted that we stay until Saturday (June 14) in our Mt Kvarkush camp instead of changing to Ural ridge camp where BB group had seen shortly a singing **Black-throated Accentor**. They had done hours of work to find it. Similarly the species could be found also in Mt Kvarkush forests. I was the only one who was missing Black-throated Accentor in WP list. Others from our group had seen several birds in Finland or Sweden. I have missed it several times for various reasons.

Last night we heard two White's Thrushes near our camp, one was singing further north by the road and a pair was seen near the site where Corncrake was singing. So at least 4 males were in the area where we explored.

It was a bit raining when we were packing our camp and ready to return to Pokrovsk Uralskiy. Last morning did not produce anything new but several of us managed to see White's Thrush in the morning when they made special effort.



This Olive-backed Pipit was daily singing by our camp. Additionally we saw few other birds during those days. Below high at birch level a singing bird in thick fog.



Both Common and Oriental Cuckoos were in the area. There were less than 5 Oriental Cuckoos whereas Common Cuckoo was more numerous. Our finding was that Oriental was very hard to see. If someone saw a bird sitting and tried to lift bins, the bird took off immediately. Common ones were much tamer. Below is one Common Cuckoo in thick fog in the upper birch forest.



Notice brown-yellow vent which is more typical to Oriental Cuckoo but can have also Common Cuckoo. However, dark breast bands are not uniform and wide enough for Oriental.



Yellow-browed Warblers were only in upper birch area and at least 6 males I counted on 13th June.



Arctic Warblers were very actively responding to the tape (as well as Yellow-browed Warblers) whereas Greenish Warblers did not react at all. Two photos from the same Arctic Warbler is above.



Adult male Black-throated Thrush was sitting openly in thick fog.



Our driver Leonid and our master chef Galina (her son sitting) took excellent care of us in our camp. Galina's very delicious meals caused some jealous comments from our BB group members when they saw what we were eating.



In our return on June 14 Galina's son took a group photo from us at the border of Europe and Asia. Once more big thanks to Galina and Leonid. You made our Ural trip very memorable.

We drove in 5 hours from the Mt Kvar Kush camp to Pokrovsk Uralskiy and unloaded our gears. Stanislav was coming to pick up us 8pm and drive us to Serov railway station. It was an emotional farewell when we left Galina and Leonid. I think they enjoyed the trip as much as we did.

We had two hours in Serov to wait night train to Yekaterinburg. However, we could this time have some sleep until arriving Yekaterinburg.

Airport marsh, Monetnyy and Verhnemakarovo days

We arrived Yekaterinburg railway station 8.20 am on June 15. Ural Expedition & Tours personnel were waiting us to pick up tents and other camping gears. We were transported to our old hotel Izumrud where we had a breakfast. Also Hertz cars and people arrived and quickly we wrote needed papers. Then we headed towards airport marsh (marsh on the western side of Bolshoy Istok village). Our aim was to try to see **Yellow-breasted Bunting** and **Azure Tit** but only Heikki saw the bunting shortly sitting on top of a large bush.

Several **Lanceolated Warblers** were singing as well as two River and Grasshopper Warblers. Seppo saw shortly female **Long-tailed Rosefinch** flying and soon disappearing. We continued further closer to the airport. There we quickly found two males and a female **Long-tailed Rosefinches**. Part of our group heard shortly Little Crake as well as Spotted Crake in the marsh vegetation.

One **Citrine Wagtail** male and a female were in different places around the march. Nice finding was a **Paddyfield Warbler** which most of us saw well. Additionally, two males were singing in the marsh area.



Airport marsh view is towards east and airport direction. It's rather wet and required rubber boots to explore.



This airport marsh view is towards west.

After three hours walk there we moved on and tried to look another marsh which was supposed to be just western side of Bolshoy Istok village. When we arrived there, we saw that we had entered to a nice meadow area which was just western side of Bolshoy Istok. We followed the track leading to the most western new houses. We walked around the meadow and it offered good selection of birds for photographing, photos below (**Citrine Wagtail** male, **Booted Warbler**, **Siberian Stonechat** two females and a male).





This meadow had also around 10 Yellow Wagtails. They looked mainly ssp *flava* but second male's pale head color may have some sign of ssp *beema*. Comments are welcome.



We had last dinner together with the whole group because Markku, Mikko, Hannu and Seppo were leaving on early flight of June 16 to Finland. We with Heikki and Petri continued two additional days. First day we

explored again around Monetnyy village Rosefinch site but we did not spent there long time when frequent rain showers scared us off. However, Heuglin's (or Siberian) Gull adult bird flew over, so a photo attached below.



We found a map from which we took few photos to have some more detailed site information.



Our Rosefinch site was SW side of the village below "117". We tried to find track leading to the eastern side pools and marches but no luck. All tracks we tried to drive were in such a bad shape that we could not drive forward. NW side of Monetnyy we saw interesting looking pools and with a help of local man we managed to drive there through a rather bad track. Those pools had several duck and grebe species, like Red-necked and **Horned**. We found a nest building **Penduline Tit** but best of all was to find again a new male **Long-tailed Rosefinch** on the track between the pools. It showed itself every time so shortly that we did not get any photos. It flew in few seconds behind bushes which indicated possible breeding site.

We were already approaching our car when a **Eurasian Bittern** flew over us. Frequent showers made birding a bit challenging, so we returned our hotel already before 6pm.

On our last morning June 17 we wanted again drive to Verhnemakarovo river meadows, photo below.



The weather looked better and in the end was. Quite strong wind and cooler temperature made the day a bit chilly. We soon found **Long-tailed Rosefinch** at the same place as I saw a week earlier. Petri was waiting it for several hours in aim to get better photos. I walked the river meadow around 1km forward until a smaller side river cut my walking. Anyhow, I saw there also one female **Long-tailed Rosefinch** which soon flew over the river and disappeared.

In sunshine I managed to photograph also day butterflies and saw over 10 species. I returned to the site where Petri was chasing LTR pair and soon I managed to get few photos when the bird sat in a dead birch.



*Around these bushes under the powerline a pair of **Long-tailed Rosefinch** was frequently visiting indicating that its nest was somewhere there. It was interesting to learn that LTR was calling Crossbill type call but softer which could be described "dip-dip" or "dip-dip-dip". Later on we knew that hearing that call the bird is nearby but hiding inside bushes.*



*A beautiful male **Long-tailed Rosefinch** sitting on top of a dead tree as they usually do.*

Heikki managed record bird's call when it was sitting nearby us. So in the near future that call will be available in xeno-canto or other birding call library. One **Oriental Cuckoo** was still active until noon and then it stopped calling. The bird landed near to Heikki when he was hiding behind a thick pine tree. He got 5+ minutes recording of calling and it will be available later as well.

Heikki noticed the same as we with Petri that at least this bird was clearly smaller than compared to Common Cuckoos we have seen. Additionally Heikki saw well stronger uniform stripes in Oriental Cuckoo's breast. We saw with Petri when the bird passed us nearby but towards the sun made photographing impossible.

Below are few photos of new butterfly species to me.



Scarce Heath has never recorded in Finland but appears in Estonia. Here is a female.



Violet Copper has small areas in Finland where it can be found: in Kuusamo and Tornio area.



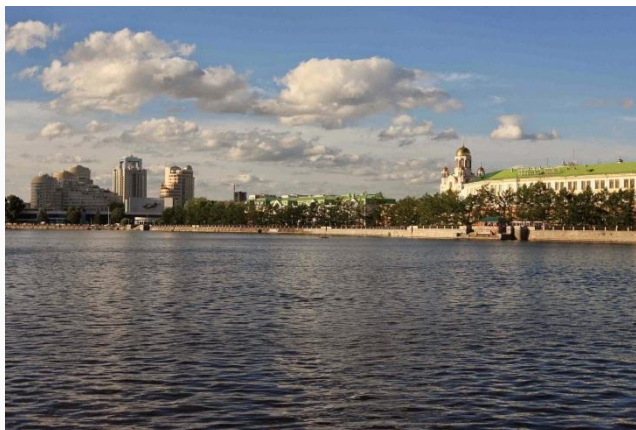
*This I expect to be **Assmann's Fritillary** which also appears in Estonia but has never been recorded in Finland.*

Additionally I saw one Common Glider type butterfly just flying on, so the id left a bit open. Other butterflies were familiar to me in Finland. If the sun is shining, those meadows seem to be good place for day butterflies but other butterflies were there as well.

We returned our hotel 4pm and decided to spend few hours in EKB center when the weather was fine. Good number of people was walking and the center itself looked very interesting to spend even more time. It was well renovated. Old churches and buildings were telling about old history of the city but new skyscrapers are telling about city's business center of eastern Ural area.



Lenin statue is still standing firmly in a square middle of the city.



View over the city lake. The church behind is "All Saints Church" which has been built to the site where Russian last tsar family was killed in a house.



Heikki and Petri are in the walking street which had nice statues and young urban feeling with restaurants and people walking around.

Late Monday evening (June 16) we got a message that BB group had found **Red-headed Bunting** and **White-winged Lark** in southern Ural (close to Kazakhstan border but inside WP area) where they headed from northern Ural. I take hat off to those people who did totally pioneer work to explore the area where to my understanding no western WP birders have explored before.

This trip gave good feeling to all of us. Additional news from BB group is absolutely increasing appetite of new WP birders to cover more thoroughly this **WP eastern edge** habitat for new ticks. Though they did not find **Black Lark**, who knows what else could be found there. Next summer will tell more...

We returned our rented car 9pm to Hertz and after a short night sleep we were already on a way towards Koltsovo airport 3.15am in the van as agreed. Our return flight was leaving 6.55am, so we had long time to wait at the airport until our flight left home.