

Trip report Azerbaijan

20-25 April 2017

Bird Camp Besh Barmag

youth camp & bird migration counts



with one day in the Greater Caucasus

Tomas Axén Haraldsson

Cover photo; the Bird Camp participants and crew, April 2017. Photo Emin Mammedov/Nature Friends

Since its “discovery” in 2007 the spectacular bird migration bottleneck at Besh Barmag has received growing and much warranted attention. Following the youth trip in October 2015 and the successful Bird Camp in September 2016 we soon decided on a springtime Bird Camp for 2017 and below is the result of 30 young naturalists birding and camping at Besh Barmag during a weekend in late April 2017.

Visible migration this time was rather weak with only a couple of thousand birds recorded of 115 species, including 17 raptor species, during the three field days that were hampered by adverse weather and strong winds. During a 24h visit to Xinaliq in the Greater Caucasus after the camp, only 2.5 hours drive from “Besh”, another 15 species were noted included White-winged (Güldenstädt’s) Redstart, Caucasian Snowcock and bone-crushing Lammergeiers.

The Bird Camp initiative

The idea to bring together young people interested in birds and nature conservation at a spectacular place like Besh Barmag has been successful and is currently building momentum with a widening following of friends and partners. Read more about our work and ambitions at “Besh” and enjoy previous trip reports at www.birdingaze.blogspot.se and www.tomasharaldsson.se

We are enormously grateful for the sponsoring we have received and the funding for the April camp 2017 came from Batumi Birding in Georgia and BirdLife Switzerland.

Enjoy this documentary made by a professional filmmaking team during the camp:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZf6-mPuXD&t=8s>

Arrangements and logistics

Baku-based travel agency Caspian Tour have been helpful in arranging tourist visas (although this procedure has now been even more improved and you can now get your e-visa online) as well as all bus transfers to/from Besh Barmag and the Caucasus. We also reserved a cosy and atmospheric guest house in Xinaliq through them. The cooperation with Caspian Tour is a pillar of stability and trust that I have used during all my trips to the country and almost a precondition for successful birding tours here.

The whole field camp (tents, food, field cook/kitchen etc.) was expertly arranged by Nature Friends Azerbaijan.



The camping spot in the bush land near the Caspian Sea. Photo Nature Friends.

The price level is still low from a Western perspective, mainly so on the countryside and allows for some low-cost trips here, using simple accommodation and buying local food. For a stay only at Besh Barmag there is basically no need for neither rental car nor guide. Return tickets with Turkish Airlines from Scandinavia to Baku via Istanbul at just over 300 euro, we booked this individually online. 2-3 hours convenient transit at Ataturk in Istanbul. Azerbaijan Airlines fly nonstop from Berlin to Baku.

Besh Barmag - bird migration site *extraordinaire*

As the last ten years of regular studies by German ornithologists have shown, the narrow coastal plain below the scared rock of Besh Barmag (visible from the highway, a famous landmark) acts as a "bottle neck" for mainly autumn bird migration but also spring migration. Well over a million birds pass each autumn and less so in spring time. As other migration sites it seems a bit sensitive to weather – a fine spring day can be poor in visible birds but northerly winds and even light drizzle in late autumn can give hundreds of thousands of birds. The place is readily accessible since the main highway runs through here and the site is 90km, or 90min driving time, north of Baku.

The perhaps best observation point is on the low coastal dune ridge just inland from the beach about 5km north of the last café/rest house at the Besh Barmag resting place for motorists and buses. About 600m north of the last café (at the viaduct/road split), turn right off the highway and follow the rough gravel road towards northeast and the coast. After 2 kilometers a fine patch of low grass steppe will appear on your right and across that is the low ridge before the land slopes down to the beach, lagoon and bush land. Dirt tracks are crossing the steppe here the last few hundred meters to the site.

From here observers can cover the migration corridor that seems several kilometers wide, from the foothills inland to far out over the Caspian Sea. From this point the views are great

over the sea and coastline, the steppe that attracts resting larks, pipits and bustards and also for keeping an eye north towards the rubbish dump (carcasses and other waste from a chicken/broiler facility, about 2km north of the observation post) that attracts vultures, eagles, pelicans, kites and much more. It is also easy to walk down into the bush land and lagoon area.

The dirt tracks run down the slope to the bush lands and here is found the camping spot used for the bird camps and other visits.



The harrier migration at Besh Barmag is spectacular with tens of Montagues (in the pic) and Pallid Harriers sweeping by on a good day. Photo Emil Lundahl.

More from the trip!

- * Guest blogging with a trip summary and pics at THE website for birdwatching in Azerbaijan www.birdingaze.blogspot.se also from previous trips here.
- * Migration counts from Besh Barmag and other “bottlenecks” at www.trektellen.org
- * Lots of photos and updates at the profile pages of many participants on www.facebook.com and search for hashtag #birdcampbesh2017
- * Photo gallery from the trip at the web site of Emil Lundahl <http://www.kungsfiskare.se/>
- * video clips from this and other birding tours to Azerbaijan and the Middle East at the YouTube site of Tomas Axén Haraldsson <https://www.youtube.com/user/Tomas06560656>
- * more trip reports from Azerbaijan and the Middle East at the personal web of Tomas Axén Haraldsson www.tomasharaldsson.se



The Greater Caucasus with its Lammergeiers is a mere 2.5hr drive from Besh Barmag. Photo Emil Lundahl

Itinerary

- 20 April evening departure around 6 pm from Scandinavia, meeting up and transit in Istanbul for 2.5 hours then on to Baku at 2am.
- 21 April arrival at 5:30 am in Baku, picking up Azeri participants, driving for Besh Barmag (90 min drive from Baku), rest of the day there
- 22 April full day at Besh Barmag
- 23 April until 2pm at Besh Barmag, then transfer back to Baku or to Xinaliq.
- 24 April hiking and birding at Xinaliq from 6am till 3pm, dinner in Baku, departure for Germany/Scandinavia after midnight.
- 25 April arrival late morning in Germany/Scandinavia



Tough hike; legendary reward. White-winged Redstart at nearly 3.000m a.s.l. at Xinaliq. Photo Matthias Feldhoff

Species list

All records from Besh Barmag 21-23/4 and Xinaliq 23-24/4 2017. All migration counts taken from respective day summary at www.trektellen.org with slight moderations in some cases. All migration records are regarding northwards flying birds unless stated otherwise.

1. Ruddy Shelduck Rostand *Tadorna ferruginea*

10 migrating 22/4.

2. Mallard Gräsand *Anas platyrhynchos*

2 migrating 22/4.

3. Northern Pintail Stjärtand *Anas acuta*

3+5 resting at sea 21/4.

4. Garganey Årta *Anas querquedula*

2 resting 21/4 and 3 migrating 22/4.

5. Eurasian Teal Kricka *Anas crecca*

4 resting 21/4 and 2 migrating 23/4.

6. Chukar Berghöna *Alectoris chukar*

1 at Xinaliq 23/4.

7. Caucasian Snowcock Kaukasisk snöhöna *Tetraogallus caucasicus*

At least 4 calling and also seen briefly at 3.000m in Xinaliq 24/4.

8. Common Quail Vaktel *Coturnix coturnix*

At least 3 birds flushed and also calling 21-23/4.

9. Great Cormorant Storskarv *Phalacrocorax carbo*

3 seen 23/4.

10. Pygmy Cormorant Dvärgskarv *Microcarbo pygmaeus*

1 migrating 21/4.

11. Dalmatian Pelican Krushuvad pelican *Pelecanus crispus*

4 migrating 21/4.



Dalmatian Pelicans migrating along the Caspian Sea shoreline. Photo Matthias Feldhoff

12. Grey Heron Gråhäger *Ardea cinerea*

2 seen 21/4.

13. Purple Heron Purpurhäger *Ardea purpurea*

1 migrating 22/4.

14. Little Egret Silkeshäger *Egretta garzetta*

2 seen 21/4.

15. Cattle Egret Kohäger *Bubulcus ibis*

1 seen 21/4.

16. Black-crowned Night Heron Natthäger *Nycticorax nycticorax*

Heard at night and also 2 migrating 22/4.

17. Bearded Vulture (Lammergeier) Lammgam *Gypaetus barbatus*

At least 3 different birds around Xinaliq 24/4. A pair together and a lone bird displaying the famous habit of dropping a large animal bone on rocks to crush it and reach the bone marrow.

18. Egyptian Vulture Smutsgam *Neophron percnopterus*

1 adult seen briefly 22/4.

19. Cinereous Vulture Grågam *Aegypius monachus*

Up to some 15 resident in the area 21-23/4, often soaring the rubbish dump.

20. Eurasian Griffon Vulture Gåsgam *Gyps fulvus*

At least 2 seen 22-23/4 and also 5 at Xinaliq 23-24/4.



Griffon Vultures were regularly on the sky around Xinaliq. Photo Matthias Feldhoff

21. Imperial Eagle Kejsarörn *Aquila heliaca*

At least 2 different immature birds seen 21-23/4.

22. Steppe Eagle Stäppörn *Aquila nipalensis*

At least 2 different immature birds seen 21-23/4.

23. Golden Eagle Kungsörn *Aquila chrysaetos*

1 bird seen at Xinaliq 24/4.

24. Eurasian Marsh Harrier Brun kärrhök *Circus aeruginosus*

At least 20 migrating 21-23/4.

25. Montagues Harrier Ängshök *Circus pygarrus*

At least 15 migrating 21-23/4.

26. Pallid Harrier Stäpphök *Circus macrourus*

At least 8 (mainly immatures) migrating 21-23/4.



Migrating Pallid Harrier – always a joy! Photo Michael Heiss

(Unidentified Montagues/Pallid Harriers)

(At least 10 migrating 21-23/4.)

27. Eurasian Sparrowhawk Sparvhök *Accipiter nisus*

A total of 4 migrating 21-23/4.

28. Black Kite Brun glada *Milvus migrans*

Up to 75 resident in the area 21-23/4.

29. White-tailed Eagle Havsörn *Haliaeetus albicilla*

One adult and one immature in the area 21-23/4.

30. “Steppe Buzzard” Stäppvråk (Ormvråk) *Buteo buteo vulpinus*

2 migrating 21-23/4.

31. Little Bustard Småtrapp *Tetrax tetrax*

1 adult male resting on the steppe near the watch point 23/4.

32. Water Rail Vattenrall *Rallus aquaticus*

Heard during night time from the camp 22/4.

33. Spotted Crake Småfläckig sumphöna *Porzana porzana*

One bird, possibly the same, flushed twice just next to the camp 22-23/4.

34. Black-winged Stilt Stytlöpare *Himantopus himantopus*

3 resting at the rubbish dump pools and also singles in pools along the roads 21-24/4.

35. Collared Pratincole Rödvingad vadarsvala *Glareola pratincola*

A total of 37 migrating 22-23/4.

36. Black-winged Pratincole Svartvingad vadarsvala *Glaerola nordmanni*

At least 3 birds migrating 21/4 and some unidentified pratincoles heading north as well.

37. Ringed Plover Större strandpipare *Charadrius hiaticula*

1 seen 22/4.

38. Little Ringed Plover Mindre strandpipare *Charadrius dubius*

4 at the rubbish dump pools 22/4.

39. Kentish Plover Svartbent strandpipare *Charadrius alexandrinus*

2-3 resting on the beach 22-23/4.



Kentish Plover. Photo Emil Lundahl

40. Grey (Black-bellied) Plover Kustpipare *Pluvialis squatarola*

1 resting on the beach 22-23/4.

41. Northern Lapwing Tofsvipa *Vanellus vanellus*

2 residents 21/4 and 5 migrating 22/4.

42. Common Sandpiper Drillsnäppa *Actitis hypoleucos*

1 seen 21/4 and 1 migrating 22/4.

43. Greenshank Gluttsnäppa *Tringa nebularia*

1 seen 21/4 and 1 migrating 22/4.

44. Green Sandpiper Skogssnäppa *Tringa ochropus*

About 10 birds resting in the area 21-23/4.

45. Wood Sandpiper Grönbena *Tringa glareola*

About 10 birds in the area 21-23/4.

46. Ruff Brushane *Philomachus pugnax*

Resting flocks on the beach with at least 250 birds 21-23/4. Also 55 migrating 23/4.

47. Whimbrel Småspov *Numenius phaeopus*

At least 25 birds together with the Ruffs on the beach 21-23/4.

48. Common Snipe Enkelbeckasin *Gallinago gallinago*

Singles flying by 21-23/4.

49. Slender-billed Gull Långnäbbad mås *Larus genei*

At least 3-4 birds seen 21-23/4.



Slender-billed Gull. Photo Emil Lundahl

50. Black-headed Gull Skrattmås *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*

20+ seen 21-23/4.

51. Mediterranean Gull Svarthuvad mås *Ichthyaeetus melanocephalus*

3-4 adult birds seen 21-22/4.

52. Caspian Gull Kaspisk trut *Larus cachinnans*

At least 150+ resident in the area 21-23/4.

53. Sandwich Tern Kentsk tärna *Sterna sandwichensis*

1 migrating 21/4.

54. Gull-billed Tern Sandtärna *Sterna nilotica*

2 migrating 22/4.

55. White-winged Black Tern Vitvingad tärna *Chlidonias leucopterus*

A total of 60 migrating 21-23/4.

56. Whiskered Tern Skäggtärna *Chlidonias hybridus*

A total of 110 migrating 21-23/4.

57. Black-bellied Sandgrouse Svartbukig flyghöna *Pterocles orientalis*

1 bird migrating 21/4. Surprising!

58. Wood Pigeon Ringduva *Columba palumbus*

Singles recorded 21-23/4.

59. Eurasian Collared Dove Turkduva *Streptopelia decaocto*

Singles recorded 21-23/4.

60. Eurasian Scops Owl Dvärguv *Otus scops*

2 calling by the camp 21-22/4.

61. Long-eared Owl Hornuggla *Asio otus*

Begging call of chicks heard by the camp 21-22/4.

62. Common Swift Tornseglare *Apus apus*

A total of 5 migrating 21-23/4.

63. Common Kingfisher Kungsfiskare *Alcedo atthis*

1 at the rubbish dump pools 21/4.

64. Hoopoe Härfågel *Upupa epops*

Regularly seen with 5-6 birds in the area 21-23/4.

65. Blue-cheeked Bee-eater Grön biätare *Merops persicus*

1 lone bird migrating 21/4.

66. Eurasian Bee-eater Biätare *Merops apiaster*

At least 75+ in small flocks migrating 21-23/4.



Eurasian Bee-eater briefly resting. Photo Emil Lundahl.

67. Eurasian Wryneck Göktyta *Jynx torquilla*

1 seen and heard 21 and 23/4.

68. Great Spotted Woodpecker Större hackspett *Dendrocopos major*

1 in the forest driving down from Xinaliq 24/4.

69. Lesser Kestrel Rödfalk *Falco naumanni*

Common in the area and often hawking in loose groups. 50+ seen 21-23/4.

70. Eurasian Kestrel Tornfalk *Falco tinnunculus*

A few singles seen 21-23/4.

71. Eurasian Hobby Lärkfalk *Falco subbuteo*

At least 8 migrating birds 21-23/4.

72. Merlin Stenfalk *Falco columbarius*

A total of 9 migrating 21-23/4.

73. Woodchat Shrike Rödhuvad törnskata *Lanius senator*

One resting bird 21/4.



The only shrike during the visit, Woodchat Shrike. April is still a bit early for these insect feeders. Photo Michael Heiss

74. Eurasian Magpie Skata *Pica pica*

Common.

75. Red-billed Chough Alpkråka *Pyrrhonorax pyrrhonorax*

About 25 at Xinaliq 23-24/4.

76. Alpine Chough Alpkaja *Pyrrhonorax graculus*

4-5 at Xinaliq 24/4.

77. Rook Råka *Corvus frugilegus*

Common.

78. Hooded Crow Kråka *Corvus corone*

Common.

79. Common Raven Korp *Corvus corax*

A pair seen temporarily in the area 21-23/4.

80. Greater Short-toed Lark Korttålråka *Calandrella brachydactyla*

At least 40 migrating 21-23/4.

81. Lesser Short-toed Lark Dvärglårka *Calandrella rufescens*

At least 1 migrating 21/4.

82. Crested Lark Tofslårka *Galerida cristata*

Several records of singles along roads and near towns 21-24/4.

83. Skylark Sånglärka *Alauda arvensis*

1 in song at Xinaliq 24/4.

84. Caucasian Horned Lark Berglärka *Eremophila alpestris pennicilata*

Common at Xinaliq with 20-25 birds seen 23-24/4.



Neighbors at Xinaliq; Horned Lark and a female Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush. Photo Emil Lundahl

85. Crag Martin Klippsvala *Ptyonoprogne rupestris*

1 at Xinaliq 23/4.

86. Barn Swallow Ladusvala *Hirundo rustica*

Common migrant but in low numbers 21-23/4.

87. Sand Martin Backsvala *Riparia riparia*

25 migrating 22-23/4.

88. House Martin Hussvala *Delichon urbicum*

A few migrating 21-23/4.

89. Great Tit Talgoxe *Parus major*

1 in song along the road to Xinaliq 23/4.

90. Eurasian Penduline Tit Pungmes *Remiz pendulinus*

3 migrating 21/4.

91. Wallcreeper Murkrypare *Tichodroma muraria*

2 at the narrow gorge along the road to Xinaliq 23/4.

92. Menetries Warbler Östlig sammetshatta *Sylvia mystacea*

Several records during 21-23/4, at least 5-6 birds in the area.

93. Lesser Whitethroat Ärtsångare *Sylvia curruca*

Singles seen 21-23/4.

94. Common Whitethroat Törnsångare *Sylvia communis*

1 seen 22/4.

95. Blackcap Svarthätta *Sylvia atricapilla*

1 seen 21/4.

96. Willow Warbler Lövsångare *Phylloscopus trochilus*

Fairly common but in small numbers in the bushland 21-23/4.

97. Green Warbler Kaukasisk lundsångare *Phylloscopus nitidus*

One resting bird, both heard and seen well, near the camp 21/4.

98. Chiffchaff Gransångare *Phylloscopus collybita*

Fairly common in the bushland 21-23/4.

99. European Robin Rödhake *Erithacus rubecula*

1 singing 22/4.

100. Common Nightingale Sydäktergal *Luscinia megarhynchos*

At least 2 birds singing by the camp 21-23/4.

101. Eurasian Wren Gärdsmyg *Troglodytes troglodytes*

2 in song in beech forest coming down from Xinaliq 24/4.

102. Red-breasted Flycatcher Mindre flugsnappare *Ficedula parva*

Several records of resting birds in the bushland around the camp 21-23/4.



Male Red-breasted Flycatcher trapped during ringing demonstration. Photo Abdin Abbasov.

103. Pied Flycatcher Svartvit flugsnappare *Ficedula hypoleuca*

1 seen 22/4.

104. Common Redstart Rödstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*

Several resting birds around the camp 21-23/4.

105. Black Redstart Svart röstjart *Phoenicurus ochruros*

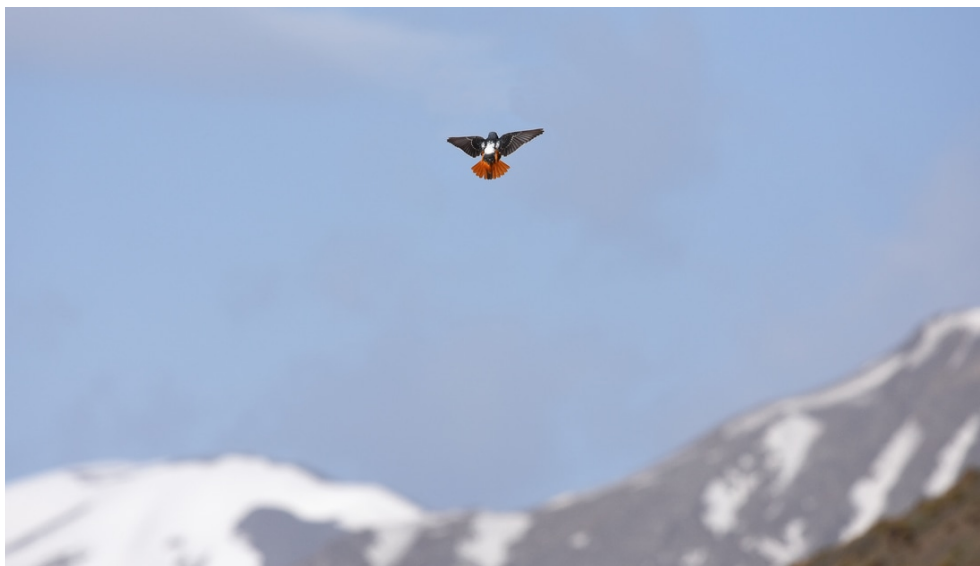
At least 3-4 birds around Xinaliq 23-24/4.

106. White-winged (Güldenstädt's) Redstart Bergrödstart *Phoenicurus erythrogastus*

2 pairs at 3.000m on the mountain Gizilgaya in Xinaliq 24/4.

107. Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush Stentrast *Monticola saxatilis*

At least 2 m and 1 f at Xinaliq 23-24/4.



Displaying Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush with a nice backdrop. Photo Emil Lundahl

108. Whinchat Buskskvätta *Saxicola rubetra*

2 seen 21-22/4.

109. Northern Wheatear Stenskvätta *Oenanthe oenanthe*

Singles at the beach 21-23/4.

110. Isabelline Wheatear Isabellastenskvätta *Oenanthe isabellina*

2 resting birds 22/4.

111. Common Blackbird Koltrast *Turdus merula*

Seen along the road to/from Xinaliq 23-24/4.

112. Song Thrush Taltrast *Turdus philomelos*

2 seen 22/4 and 2 in song in beech forest coming down from Xinaliq 24/4.

113. Rosy Starling Rosenstare *Pastor roseus*

1 seen 22/4.

114. Starling Stare *Sturnus vulgaris*

Common.

115. Dunnock Järnsparv *Prunella modularis*

1 in song in beech forest coming down from Xinaliq 24/4.

116. Alpine Accentor Alpjärnsparv *Prunella collaris*

3-4 birds seen at nearly 3.000m on Gizilgaya, Xinaliq 24/4.

117. Yellow Wagtail Gulärta *Motacilla flava*

Common migrant with 500+ and smaller flocks resting, mainly *flava*, *feldegg* and *beema* subspecies.



Yellow Wagtails *feldegg* and *beema* at the rubbish tip. Photo: Abdin Abbasov

118. Citrine Wagtail Citronärä *Motacilla citreola*

A total of 4 migrating and at least 2 resting in the area 21-23/4. Here is a short clip of one of the resting individuals: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FvXp5s6Fflw>

119. White Wagtail Sädesärä *Motacilla alba*

Common.

120. Tawny Pipit Fältpiplärka *Anthus campestris*

A total of 6 migrating 21-23/4.

121. Meadow Pipit Ängspiplärka *Anthus pratensis*

2 migrating 22/4.

122. Tree Pipit Trädpiplärka *Anthus trivialis*

At least 5 migrating 22/4.

123. Red-throated Pipit Rödstrupig pipilärka *Anthus cervinus*

A total of 15 migrating 21-23/4.

124. Water Pipit Vattenpiplärka *Anthus spinoletta*

Fairly common around Xinaliq 23-24/4.

125. Reed Bunting Sävsparv *Emberiza schoeniclus*

2 birds seen 22/4.

126. Rock Bunting Klippspurv *Emberiza cia*

Some 10 seen around Xinaliq 23-24/4.

127. Ortolan Bunting Ortolansparv *Emberiza hortulana*

6 migrating 22/4 and also 2 resting.

128. Corn Bunting Kornspurv *Emberiza calandra*

Several records during the camp days 21-23/4 and also along the roads.

129. Chaffinch Bofink *Fringilla coelebs*

1 seen 21/4 and 2 along the road 24/4.

130. European Greenfinch Grönfink *Chloris chloris*

1 along the road 24/4.

131. Eurasian Siskin Grönsiska *Spinus spinus*

3 seen 23-24/4.

132. European Goldfinch Steglits *Carduelis carduelis*

Singles seen 22 and 24/4.

133. "Asia Minor" Twite Vinterhämpling *Carduelis flavirostris*

6 birds at Xinaliq 24/4 of ssp. *brevirostris*.

134. Linnet Hämpling *Carduelis cannabina*

Singles seen 21-22/4.

135. Red-fronted Serin Rödpannad gulhämpling *Serinus pusillus*

1 migrating over the camp 21/4.

136. Hawfinch Stenknäck *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*

1 singing in beech forest coming down from Xinaliq 24/4.

137. House Sparrow Gråspurv *Passer domesticus*

Common.

138. Spanish Sparrow Spansk spurv *Passer hispaniolensis*

A total of 15 migrating 21-23/4.

139. Rock Sparrow Stensparv *Petronia petronia*

3+4 birds, seen both along the road to and near the village Xinaliq 23-24/4.



A delightful Rock Bunting at Xinaliq. Photo Emil Lundahl

140. White-winged Snowfinch Snöfink *Montifringilla nivalis*

Fairly common around Xinaliq with 20-25 birds seen 23-24/4.