

RUSSIA: Birding the Far East!

June 02 – 15, 2018

Price 2018: 3.875USD

With Machiel Valkenburg & Aleksandr Povarintsev as leaders

This new Rubythroat Birding Tours venture beckons the adventurer birder to the Russian Far East. We will visit the oblasts (provinces) of Ussuriland and Amur in the southeast tip of the largest country on earth, amazing Russia! During this journey we will travel through varied habitats, from vast mixed taiga forests dotted with fresh-water lakes and agricultural lands to mighty Amazon-like rivers and a diverse coastline.

The trip starts in the beautiful city of Vladivostok, from where we board our vessel for a two-day pelagic cruise in the Peter the Great Gulf, combined with making some very interesting stops on a few islands in the Gulf. The several large seabird colonies there are spectacular and a true birders' delight. Amongst others, we hope to come across large amounts of Spectacled Guillemot, Rhinoceros Auklet, Black-tailed- and Slaty-backed Gulls, Temminck's- and Pelagic Cormorant. Rarer sightings might include Marbled and Ancient Murrelet, Common Guillemot, Harlequin Ducks, Swinhoe's Storm Petrel and Streaked Shearwater.

We then leave the coast and aim for the higher grounds of the famous Siberian Taiga forests where the transition zones with marshes and extensive agricultural lands are very interesting and are the breeding zones of Pied Harriers, Brown Shrikes, Oriental Storks and Amur Falcons. In the forests many jewels are hidden and Asian Paradise Flycatcher, Japanese Grosbeak, Elegant Bunting and Siberian Rubythroat are amongst their greatest treasures. Exploring the Bikin River, sometimes favorably called the Russian Amazon, will reveal Scaly-sided Mergansers, Mandarin- and Falcated Ducks, and possibly Long-billed Plover and Blakiston's Fish Owl. Amongst these gorgeous birds, the true star is for sure the untouched riverine landscape!

Further north we will explore more forests and a large fascinating lake with breeding Steller's Eagles. These amazing eagles will be the main highlight, along with Black-billed Capercaillie. Other birds might include Siberian Thrush, Mugimaki Flycatcher, Rufous-tailed Robin, Siberian Rubythroat, Red-flanked Bluetail, Arctic Warbler, Two-barred Greenish Warbler and Black-faced Bunting! Here we shall put some extra effort into finding the gorgeous Tristram's Bunting that is now in full breeding plumage. Another highlight is the rare and secretive Siberian Grouse that has a reputation for being very approachable when found...

We are sure that clients will love our new venture into the east of Russia and are happy to add an absolute stunner of a trip to our tour list! This region of Russia has been a dream of Machiel's to explore for many years and he is happy to give many more people the chance to follow their dreams with him!

June 02, Day 01: To Vladivostok

Clients depart from home towards the largest city of eastern Russia, Vladivostok. Clients need to be in Vladivostok before June 03 – 04h00! Please note that it is necessary to be on time, as on June 03 we board our boat at 05h30 for our first pelagic cruise. If you'd like to come earlier please contact the RBT office which will gladly help with extra hotel bookings.

NIGHT: On aircraft

June 03 - 04, Day 02 - 03: Popov Island & Pelagic Cruise of Peter the Great Gulf

We shall arrive early morning at Vladivostok airport from a domestic flight from Moscow. After this we'll drive immediately to the huge harbor of the historic city of Vladivostok. Over the next two days we'll take pelagic trips in the Peter the Great Gulf combined with making some very interesting stops on a few islands in the Gulf. Several large seabird colonies are a super spectacle and a true birders' delight. Amongst others, we hope to come across large amounts of Spectacled Guillemot, Rhinoceros Auklet, Black-tailed- and Slaty-backed Gulls, Temminck's- and Pelagic Cormorant. Rarer sightings might include Marbled and Ancient Murrelet, Common Guillemot, Harlequin Ducks, Swinhoe's Storm Petrel and Streaked Shearwater. Cute Spotted Seals are found sun-bathing on the rocks. As we are in the middle of migration time, we will encounter good waves with passerines. Popov Island offers some great birding in the open grasslands that are full of flowers and butterflies. On the scouting trip in 2017 we came across many Chestnut-eared Buntings, (*stejnegeri*) Japanese Stonechat, Oriental Greenfinch, Grey-backed Thrushes and if we are lucky again we will also bump into Latham's Snipe or Baikal Grasshopper Warbler. The forested parts of the island are full of Yellow-rumped Flycatchers, Pale-legged Leaf Warblers, Eastern Crowned Warblers, Ashy Minivets, Azure-winged Magpies, Japanese Pygmy Woodpeckers and Japanese Tit. Every evening we shall return to Vladivostok where we can enjoy the large groups of foraging Pacific swifts. In our comfortable hotel we will enjoy a delicious dinner.

NIGHT: Slavyanskaya Hotel, Vladivostok.

June 05, Day 04: Vladivostok to Khanka Lake

After breakfast we leave Vladivostok and we will head towards the region of Khanka Lake, north of the city. We leave the coastal habitats and exchange them for some very interesting extensive agricultural landscapes with taiga forests as far as the eye can see. In the open areas, large numbers of the mythical Pied Harrier are foraging, with Brown Shrikes hunting from a treetop. Enigmatic Siberian buntings like Elegant Bunting and Black-faced Bunting are found in some darker regions of the forests. In the evening we will check out the wetlands of Khanka Lake in the hope of discovering Falcated and wild Mandarin Ducks, the latter probably being one of the most attractive duck species in the world.

NIGHT: Hotel Voyage, Spassyk-Dalniy

June 06, Day 05: Khanka Lake and surroundings

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As usual on this tour we will have a very early start to go birding in the nearby forests where many gems are on the menu. We will do our best to show you Asian Stubtail, Black-naped Oriole, Asian Paradise Flycatcher, Japanese Grosbeak and Azure Tit. Around noon there will be a significant dip in bird activity, we will use this time for an extended lunch and to drive back towards the Khanka Lake where in the evening we will explore its vicinity once more in the hope of seeing the aforementioned duck species plus more sightings of Oriental Stork, Amur Falcon and curious Black-browed Reed Warbler. In the evening we will drive to the village of Luchegorsk where we will lodge for the next two nights.

NIGHT: Tourist hotel, Luchegorsk.

June 07, Day 06: Bikin River

We will leave early and make our way towards a small authentic Siberian village where we will board our three-person boats and explore the Bikin River, sometimes called the Russian Amazon! This river is a best place for Scaly-sided Mergansers, Mandarin Duck and Long-billed Plover. In the adjacent marshes we hope to come across amongst others Far Eastern Curlew. This is also a good spot for the illusive Forest Wagtail. In the village, Daurian Redstart, White-cheeked Starling and Oriental Reed Warbler are present. In the evening - we will bird the marshes on our way back to Luchegorsk, where Eastern Marsh Harriers are seen, hopefully with more Falcated Ducks.

NIGHT: Tourist hotel, Luchogursk.

June 08, Day 07: Bikin River to Komsomolsk

Today will be mostly a travel day (700km/9 hours) but we have some hours in the morning for birding around the village and near some of the marshes we visited the day before. We have staked out one stop with hopefully a very obliging Gray's Grasshopper Warbler and Grey-backed Thrush. In the late evening, we will arrive at our tourist hotel in Komsomolsk-na-Amur.

NIGHT: Tourist hotel, Komsomolsk-na-Amur.

June 09-12, Day 08-11: Lake Udyl

Today we set sail for the Lake Udyl where we will make some round trips over the lake to find the breeding (and hopefully some hunting) pairs of Steller's Sea Eagle! Here we also hope to see the strange Swan Goose. In the nearby forests, Yellow-rumped Flycatcher, Dusky Warbler, Pallas's Leaf Warbler, Oriental Greenfinch and Grey-bellied Bullfinch are common. On the third day we will head back towards Komsomolsk-na-Amur and are expected to arrive in the early evening.

NIGHT: Day 08-10, Lake Udyl basic lodge.

NIGHT: Day 11, Tourist hotel, Komsomolsk-na-Amur.

June 13, Day 12: Komsomolsk State Nature Reserve & transfer to Khabarovsk

In this State Nature Reserve we are after one of the most sought-after grouses of the northern hemisphere; the Siberian Grouse! In this taiga forest the endangered Black-billed Capercaillie is also one of the main targets. Other birds might include Siberian Thrush, Mugimaki Flycatcher, Rufous-tailed Robin, Siberian Rubythroat, Red-flanked Bluetail, Arctic Warbler, Two-barred Greenish Warbler and Black-faced Bunting! Here we shall put some extra effort into finding the

gorgeous Tristram's Bunting that is now in full breeding plumage. In the evening we will have a lovely dinner in the city of Komsomolsk-na-Amur and then board our night train to Khabarovsk.

NIGHT: Night train to Khabarovsk

June 14, Day 13: Khabarovsk marshes

In the morning we will arrive in Khabarovsk for our final day of birding. In the extensive marshes near Khabarovsk we have a whole new set of birds to discover-. In the open areas, Lanceolated Warbler and Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler are commonly found singing. The gorgeous and declining Yellow-breasted Bunting might be found nearby while a couple of Long-tailed Rosefinches are calling loudly. Thick-billed Warbler might be one of the rare sightings of the day. In the evening, we will reach Khabarovsk where we will enjoy a large final dinner with a few shots of vodka

NIGHT: Tourist hotel, Khabarovsk.

June 15, Day 14: Khabarovsk to home

We have use of a day room until 11am in our tourist hotel in Khabarovsk before we fly back towards home.