KAZAKHSTAN
Flora & Fauna of the Altai
Best Time: June - August
*With RBT Leader as leader*

This new tour brings us to a very unknown and isolated part of Kazakhstan, the Altai Mountains. For many years we have been running a tour into the Russian and Mongolian side of the Altai, with lots of success. It is located in the far northeast of the country, bordering both superpowers China and Russia. Amongst Kazakhs the Altai is regarded as the best natural environment the country beholds. Natural products from Altai such a jam, honey and horse milk are sold widely throughout the country. People are drawn from all over to the Altaian health resorts in the high mountains for its clean air. However, to a foreign public the Altai remains very unknown with only several western tourists visiting each year.

We start this tour in the capital Astana, this new city was completely created from scratch in only 30 years. The oil and gas benefits of the land made this all possible. It gives a very surreal feel when walking the broad streets of Astana. Just 200km the west we find the grassland steppes of the Korgalzhyn NP where Wolves and Saiga play a catch a mouse game. In the air the semi-endemic Black Larks and White-winged Larks dart like butterflies while Pallid Harriers and Short-eared Owls patrol for mice and lemmings.

A domestic flight takes us to Oskemen, the largest city in east Kazakhstan oblast. From the plane we already have good views over the green hills and mountains of the wonderful Altai. Around Oskemen the natural delights start, we have a chance on witnessing the spring migration of Great Veined Whites. Literally millions of large white butterflies are on the move, this is a phenomenal occurrence. Large numbers of butterflies occur in the Altai, over 800 species are recorded, many are mainly small blues, colorful fritillaries and large swallowtails. Birds are all around with White-winged Scoter, Brandt’s Mountain Finch, Asian Rosy Finch, Eversmann’s Redstart, Brown Shrike, Siberian Meadow Bunting, Pallas’s Bunting, Altai Accentor and the superb Güldenstädt’s Redstart being the most attractive ones. In recent years Black-faced Bunting, Great Rosefinch and Altai Snowcock were found as well, although in small numbers. The mountain flowers are amazingly beautiful and varied. We come across a blue carpet of lovely gentians, of the ‘grandiflora’ species. More common plants are Siberian Dogs-tooth Violet, Altai Foxtail Lily, and a rich variety of Saxifrages, Gentians and Irises.

RBT operated its first and highly successful tour in 2007 and since we established ourselves as the main ground operator of several of the largest tour companies in the world. We are sure that participants will be delighted with this extraordinary Central Asian experience!
**June 00, Day 1: To Kazakhstan**

Clients depart from home towards the capital of Kazakhstan, Astana. This new futuristic city resembles a lot to the oil states of Dubai and the United Emirates. In 20 years, a whole new city was built. The wealth of Kazakhstan is acquired by the country’s vast reserves of oil and gas but also minerals like uranium and sink.

**NIGHT:** Day 1, on aircraft.

**June 00, Day 2: Astana surroundings** In the morning we start our tour with excursions around Astana. Here we are in search of the many waterfowl that are migrating north and use the lakes around the city as stopover. Our top targets here will be the Pine Bunting, which shall be accompanied by several Red-footed Falcons and many Pallid Harrier. In the evening, we check-in to our comfortable Astana hotel!

**NIGHT:** Comfortable tourist hotel, Astana.

**June 00, Day 3: Korgazhyn Nature Reserve** An early morning rise will see us depart at 5am for the Korgalzhyn State Nature Reserve. After 2.5 hours’ drive from Astana brings us to Korgalzhyn State Nature Reserve, its possesses a collection of birdlife that has recently attracted a nomination for UNESCO World Heritage Site status, the Korgalzhyn area remains surprisingly unknown, even within Kazakhstan. The vast wetland area, a combination of virgin steppe and lakes, is home to Wolves, Marmots and Saiga. However, it is the birds that are the real attraction. Located at the crossroads of two migration routes, the wetlands act as a giant motorway junction service station for birds (Lake Tengiz alone has the capacity to feed 15 million birds).

The area, most of which is protected as a ‘Zapovednik’ (national nature reserve), is home to the world’s most northerly population of Greater Flamingo, one of over 300 species of birds, which includes one of the largest wildfowl population in Asia. Other notable residents include pelicans, cranes and a variety of birds of prey.

Our main targets here are nesting groups of the globally endangered Sociable Lapwing, which we have “staked-out” for you’. There are many other fine attractions in this vast landscape. Roadside colonies of Black-winged Pratincoles and White-winged Black Terns in glorious breeding plumage should be dotted with migrant shorebirds such as Red-necked Phalaropes, Spotted Redshank, Terek Sandpiper, Ruffs displaying in all their finery, Little- and Temminck’s Stints. These enumerable wetlands and lakes should also produce breeding Dalmatian Pelican, Great Bittern, White-headed Duck, Red-necked and Eared grebes, Whooper Swan, Greylag Goose, Red-crested Pochard and Caspian Terns. More special still are often close colonies of splendid Great Black-headed Gulls, with a supporting cast of Steppe and Slender-billed gulls!

The damp grassy steppe contain elegant Demoiselle Cranes while scattered scrub, bush should hold Booted Warbler, Pallid Harrier and gorgeous little Red-footed Falcons. Two other very special birds we should find today are Black and White-winged Larks, often numerous along the roadside, both species confined to the Central Asian steppes. In the evening, we return to Astana where we will enjoy a lovely dinner.

**NIGHT:** Comfortable tourist hotel Astana.
NIGHTS: June 16-17, Day 2-3 Comfortable Tourist Hotel, Astana

**June 00, Day 4: Korgalzhyn to Oskemen**
After a final morning’s birding in Korgalzhyn State Nature Reserve for missed species, we will drive back to Astana where we will board our domestic flight to Oskemen. If time permits we will enjoy a city tour to this futuristic completely newly build city in the middle of the steppe! After Arrival in Oskemen we will transfer to our hotel which is located 20km outside of the city. The hotel is beautiful located at the Gorny Ulbinka river where birds like Common Kingfisher, Goosander and Black Stork breed.

NIGHT: Hotel Gagarin, Oskemen. (no singles available)

**June 00, Day 5: Gorny Ulbinka**
Today we explore the vicinity of our hotel on foot. In the morning we will explore the hill sides for birds like Siberian Meadow Bunting, Barred Warbler and a patrolling Booted Eagle. Here also we will find many butterflies, mainly blues and fritillaries. During the scouting trip in 2016 we came across the extraordinary migration of Great Veined Whites, a constant stream of millions of butterflies passed us! After a siesta during the warmest part of the day (the fanatics amongst us can still continue around the hotel!!) we visit the village which is named after the river. Here we find White-backed Woodpeckers in the riverine forests and Nutcracker, Wryneck and maybe a Black Grouse in the coniferous forests.
June 00, Day 6: Oskemen to Katon Karagay
After some morning birding around the hotel we will transfer to the region of Katon-Karagay. We will make several stops along the way to stretch our legs on this day of transfer. We expect to arrive in the late afternoon which gives us a good option to explore the outskirts of the village where birds such as Pine Bunting, Common Redstart and Eastern Black Kite are common in this little picturesque village.

NIGHT: Hotel Katon, Katon Karagay

The very picturesque Katon-Karagay village by Ed Michels

June 00, Day 7: Maymir
Today we visit the pass of Maymir, here we will reach above the treeline and in this high-altitude habitat we are in search of goodies like Ptarmigan, Willow Grouse and Dotterel. In the dwarf birch we find Bluethroats and possible as well the Siberian Rubythroat. Grey Marmots are calling in the valley and in the rocky slopes we find Altai Pikas while a Lapland Fritillary flies by. Around Katon Karagay we explore the forest where Oriental Cuckoos are identified on their call and droppings of Brown Bear reveal their presence. In these lower elevations around Katon flowers and butterflies are present en mass.

NIGHT: Hotel Katon, Katon Karagay

June 00, Day 8: Katon Karagay to Rakhmanovskiy Klyuchi
This drive takes us to maybe the most beautiful mountain lake of Central Asia, the Rakhmanovskiy lakes. The long and bumpy road will take us up to the pass to an elevation of around 2000m. During our way up we will cross several forest types where we search birds like the greyish form of Eurasian Bullfinch, Pine Grosbeak and maybe also a Dark-sided Flycatcher is
found. With luck we find the gorgeous Brown Shrike perched in the top of a thorny bush. In the afternoon we arrive at our luxurious lodge high in the mountains.

NIGHT: Resort Rakhmanovskiy Lake

**June 00-00, Day 9-10: Rakhmanovskiy Klyuchi**

We have to full days to explore this wonderful place high up in the Altai Mountains. At the lake itself we should be getting close views of the interesting White-winged Scoter. Sometimes we are lucky to find a pair of Black-throated Divers joining the scoters. More Siberian Rubythroats are singing from their posts along the lake while Black-throated Thrushes, Siberian- and Willow Tits are finding food for their just hatched chicks. Inside of the scrub we find Greenish-, Hume’s- and Dusky Warblers. In some open patched of the forest we go looking for Eversmann’s Redstarts, Siberian Nuthatches and Three-toed Woodpeckers. In the air Pacific Swifts and Red-billed Choughs are the rulers which are foraging in large flocks. The heavy walk up the slopes through flower filled alpine meadows will guarantee fantastic scenery. Here we are in the habitat of Plain- and Brandt’s Mountain Finches, Güldenstädt’s Redstart, Asian Rosy Finch and Altai Accentor. We found a breeding pair of Pallas’s Bunting here as well in 2013.

NIGHT: Resort Rakhmanovskiy Lake

**June 00, Day 11: Rakhmanovskiy to Oskemen**

Today we leave the gorgeous lake behind us and a long full day driving will bring us back to Oskemen. In the early evening we arrive back to our hotel located in the woods.

NIGHT: Hotel Gagarin, Oskemen. (no singles available)

**June 00, Day 12: Oskemen to Ridder**

Through glowing agricultural fields we drive to the north towards the border with Russia (2.5 hour drive) where will be lodging in a cabin in the forest. Firstly we visit the wet fields around the city of Ridder where Pallas’s Grasshopper Warbler and Long-tailed Rosefinch are our main objectives. In the hedges Red-backed Shrikes are common while Azure Tits are foraging nearby. Here more water defined species like the White-crowned Penduline Tit and in less extent the Blyth’s Reed Warbler are hopefully added to our list of sightings. In the early evening we arrive in our lodge.

NIGHT: lodge Ridder

**June 00-00, Day 13-14: West Altai Nature Reserve**

For the coming two full days we explore the forests near the West-Altai Nature Reserve. We might enter the park but most of the birding will be done on the edges as here we are less restricted to the regulations in the park. The reserve is the largest of Kazakhstan with 56.000 hectares. We start birding around our lodge where we have a good hope to find Ural Owl, Taiga Flycatcher and Olive-backed Pipits. Sometimes the Siberian Jay appears on one of the feeders! In the deep dark coniferous forests we are sure to hear the call of the White’s Thrush, when using...
playback we sometimes are lucky to lure in a bird which shows itself shortly. Commoner birds include Red-flanked Bluetail, Black-throated Thrushes and Hawfinch. Botanist also will have a good time with the thousands of species of plants where Siberian Adder’s Tongue and Pink Rhodiola are the most interesting while the threatened Altai Weasel is having a stronghold in the reserve. Siberian Chipmunks and Common Shrew are also possible to be sighted.

NIGHT: lodge Ridder

June 00, Day 15: Ridder to Oskemen
During the morning we make our last walks before checking out and driving back to Oskemen. We will board our domestic flight at 8pm which will bring us back to Astana.

NIGHT: T.B.A., Astana

June 00, Day 16: Astana to home
After a splendid holiday in Central Asia it is time for us to say goodbye. We say our farewells on the Astana Airport from where we board our international flight back to home.