

Lake Baikal, taiga, forests and wetlands

This Birdwatching Breaks tour brings us to central Siberia, Lake Baikal and the Buryat Republic on the border with Mongolia. As the vast evergreen forests of Russia's Siberian taiga extend southward toward Mongolia, the ground rises and the terrain becomes more varied. The border between Siberian Russia and Mongolia is a natural divide here, with rugged hills and mountains forming a series of ranges between the sprawling Russian forests to the north and rolling steppes to the south. About midway along this border is Lake Baikal, situated in a region of unsurpassed beauty, its forested shores dominated by the snow-clad peaks of the Khamar-Daban, Sayan, and Barguzin Mountains. Birding in this area of Russia is still relatively unknown and it gives you the opportunity to find and study birds that are major rarities further west in Europe.

■ Igor Fefelov is a prominent birder within the region and has an intimate knowledge of the birds, flora and fauna of this vast area of Russia. This is the third Birdwatching Breaks tour to Lake Baikal.

Day 1: Fly to Ulan-Ude via Moscow where arrival is early on Day 2.

Day 2: Ulan-Ude is the capital and main city of the Buryat Republic and lies on the Selenga River which flows into Lake Baikal. After checking into our hotel, we make an initial exploration of the area. Common birds within the city include wheeling flocks of Pacific Swifts and Baikal Wagtail. The Selenga River has many sandy islands that attract migrant waders in the spring and may include Marsh, Green and Wood Sandpipers and migrant waterfowl, and Azure Tit and Azure-winged Magpies as sedentary species inhabiting scrub. Return to Ulan-Ude for the night.

Day 3: This morning we travel southwest towards the city of Gusinoozersk where we have a two-night stay. En route we stop at a riverside woodland where should find our first Radde's Warblers, Siberian Rubythroat, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and Long-tailed Rosefinches. Another area of fields with bushes should reveal rarer species in Chestnut-eared Bunting and Isabelline Shrike. Our journey takes us to a large wetland surrounded by reeds. This is an important area for birds with the open waters attracting ducks including Asiatic Scoter, Black-necked Grebe and rafts of

Dates

Friday May 24th - Friday June 7th
2019

Leaders: Igor Fefelov and Mark Finn
Group Size: 8
Birds: 160-180

Common Goldeneye. Raptors use the area on a regular basis and include Eastern Marsh, Hen and possibly Pied Harriers. In the stands of reeds we should observe Eastern Water Rail and Oriental Reed, and on occasions Paddyfield Warblers. The dry country surrounding the lake attracts Citrine and Eastern Yellow Wagtails, Asian Short-toed and Greater Short-toed Larks. We end the day by birding along the road towards Beloozersk with Eastern Imperial Eagle, Amur Falcon, Isabelline Wheatear and Rock Petronia all being possible.

Day 4: An early departure today as we explore the two lakes near Beloozersk. The open steppe habitat attracts Demoiselle Crane, Cinereous Vulture, Steppe Eagle, Upland Buzzard, Eurasian Hobby, Blyth's Pipit and displaying Eurasian Skylark, Mongolian and Horned Larks. Our main interest is the lakes that host hundreds of Ruddy Shelduck, Whooper Swan,



Siberian Blue Robin *Photo: Scott Maxwell*

Slavonian and Black-necked Grebes and numerous ducks, which may include Long-tailed Duck and Smew. The lakes occasionally hold the very rare Swan Goose. On the muddy margins of the lake we may find migrant shorebirds including Pacific Golden Plover, Red-necked, Long-toed and Temminck's Stints, Eastern Black-tailed Godwit, Marsh Sandpiper, and summer breeders - Pied Avocet and Little Ringed Plover. We also check riverside woodland with cliffs for migrant passerines, Daurian Partridge, Golden Eagle, Lesser Kestrel, Azure Tit, Meadow and Black-faced Buntings.

Day 5: Revisit areas around Beloozersk or the itinerary on Day 3 before returning to Ulan-Ude for the night.

Days 6-7: Today we travel north towards Vydrino and Teplie Oзера on the shores of Lake Baikal where we stay for two nights. The taiga forest has a plethora of interesting species - Oriental Cuckoo, White-

backed, Three-toed and Grey-headed Woodpeckers, Red-flanked Bluetail, Olive-backed Pipit, Dark-sided, Asian Brown, Mugimaki and Taiga Flycatchers, Radde's, Arctic, Yellow-browed, Pallas's, and Two-barred Greenish Warblers, Siberian Blue and Swinhoe's Robins, and Black-faced Bunting. Uncommon species that are known to occur in the forests near Vydrino include Yellow-browed Bunting, Siberian Jay, White's, Eye-browed and Siberian Thrushes and, above the forest, White-throated Needletails. On the morning of Day 7 we revisit the forest before heading in a westerly direction to the village of Utulik. The gardens here hold the commoner birds plus Daurian and Common Redstarts, Eurasian Nuthatch and Azure-winged Magpie. An area of forest nearby may be productive for the scarce Siberian Bush Warbler, Olive-backed Pipit, Lanceolated Warbler and Common Rosefinch. Stands of silver birch dominate the area where we should locate the attractive Chestnut Bunting, Oriental Turtle Dove,



Demoiselle Crane

Eurasian and Baikal Bullfinches, Hawfinch and various woodpeckers.

Day 8: Kultuk is on the shores of Lake Baikal and is a noted migration hotspot with recent visits recording Grey-tailed Tattler and Green Sandpiper and the near endemic Mongolian Gull. The grass edges of the lake sometimes attract Pallas's Reed and Lapland Buntings. Off-shore, large flocks of Asiatic Scoter, Goosander and Common Goldeneye are often present. The habitat starts to open up into farmland dotted with seasonal lakes that are attractive to Garganey, Wood, Marsh and Green Sandpipers and displaying Common Snipe. The large lakes near Arshan lure Demoiselle and Common Cranes along with Imperial Eagle and Black-eared Kites. Two-night stay at Arshan.

Day 9: Today we visit the Tunka marshes, an area dominated by snow-capped peaks, patches of woodland, grass meadows and several small lakes with reedy margins. Before reaching Tunka, the bushes are worth checking for Siberian Rubythroat,

Tree Pipit and Pine Bunting. In the meadows Richard's Pipits are common whilst stands of trees and scrub hold Eurasian Wryneck, Northern and Brown Shrikes and perhaps a returning Thick-billed Warbler. A walk around Tunka Marshes may reveal Eurasian Bittern, Common Pochard, Greater Spotted Eagle, White-winged Tern, Siberian Stonechat and singing Yellow-breasted Buntings. Tunka is also reliable for calling Japanese Quails, although our chances of seeing one are slim. Scarcer birds occurring at Tunka include Black Grouse, White-tailed Eagle, Eastern Buzzard and Little Gull.

Day 10: A morning visit to the birch forest and river habitats at Arshan. The leaf cover should be minimal giving us a good chance of Pallas's, Dusky and Radde's Warblers, Red-flanked Bluetail, Siberian Blue Robin, Willow, Coal and Long-tailed Tits and Eurasian Nutcrackers. High above us in the forest we should locate White-throated Rock Thrushes giving their distinctive songs. In the village itself we may find the highly localised Taiga Flycatcher. After

lunch we travel to Irkutsk, one of the largest cities of Siberia and also known as an open museum with its authentic wooden houses. The city is built on the shores of the Angara River, a tributary of the Yenisey River. Two-night stay in the old city by the river.

Day 11: Irkutsk is blessed with a wide range of habitats from forests to marshes and several river systems. Our first birding spot is the extensive marshes of Novo-Leninsky within the city boundary. This is a truly wonderful place for birds with the willow scrub and birch attracting Bluethroat, Yellow-breasted and Eastern Reed Buntings and Siberian Stonechats. In the marshy grasses we have excellent chances of locating Pallas's Grasshopper and Lanceolated Warblers giving their distinctive songs. On the shallow pools wildfowl abound and may include the scarce Falcatied Duck. The drier meadows here give us the opportunity to find Eurasian Bitterns in the open with Northern Lapwings and possibly migrant waders. In the poplars Fieldfares occasionally breed whilst the pylons sometimes attract Ospreys on migration. Over the lakes Common Tern of the race *longipennis* (sometimes split as Siberian Tern) occur with colourful White-winged Terns. Depending on time, we may have an opportunity to visit other areas of the city.

Day 12: Today we travel east to Bolshoye Goloustnoye, a remote village on the northern shores of Lake Baikal. Our first stop is in the meadows at Ushakovka River, a regular haunt of Swinhoe's Snipe, which gives its aerial display flight above the fields. In the longer grasses Corncrakes give their distinctive calls. Mature trees attract Black Woodpecker. Along the river we have a chance of Azure Tit, Siberian Chiffchaff, Tree Pipit, Oriental Crow and the extraordinary songs of Swinhoe's Robins that are delivered from the tops of pine trees. Our journey takes us through mature forest holding Eastern Buzzard, Oriental Honey Buzzard and cliff-nesting Peregrine Falcons. Transfer to the village of Bolshoye Goloustnoye where our base is in an attractive guesthouse for two nights.

Day 13: The village attracts Hill Pigeon, Barn Swallow of the race *tytleri*, Lesser Whitethroat, Thick-billed Warbler, Blyth's Pipit and a colony of Daurian Jackdaws. On the shores of Lake Baikal we may find Red-breasted Merganser and Mongolian Gull. In the short-cropped grasses Northern and rarer Pied Wheatears occur. To the north of the village an open steppe-like habitat attracts Booted and Imperial Eagles, Isabelline Wheatear and Richard's Pipits. A careful scan of the rocky outcrops may reveal the highly localised Godlewski's Bunting giving its distinctive song.

Day 14: After breakfast we head back towards Irkutsk. An open area with high cliffs is good for Golden Eagles but our main interest is in the taiga forests that border the road. These undisturbed forests are home to a wide range of birds and, with luck, we should connect with Hazel Grouse, Oriental and Common Cuckoos, Mugimaki, Asian Brown and Dark-sided Flycatchers, Siberian Rubythroat, Siberian Blue and Swinhoe's Robins, Eurasian Nutcracker and many others. Return to Irkutsk for our last night in Siberia.

Day 15: Fly to London via Moscow with arrival later the same day.

Prices

Ground Price: £3,495 *provisional
Single room: £200
Deposit: £350
*Air Fare: £600

This holiday is fully inclusive of flights, accommodation and meals, transport and permit fees, guidance, tips and taxes.

Not included: drinks, insurance and items of a personal nature. Visa required for Russia.

**Please refer to our terms and conditions relating to flights*