Our Best of Central Asia tour combines the best of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, two landlocked countries with spectacular sceneries, interesting historical and cultural sites, wide varieties of exciting habitats, and of course both well-represented with some of the finest Central Asian birds found in this fascinating region. Our tour starts in Uzbekistan where the general topography ranges from desert flatlands to the
fothills of the Tien Shan Mountains in the east. We will drive out into the remote Kyzyl-Kum Desert in search for the desert-loving Pander’s Ground Jay, a unique terrestrial species. Other special birds that we will target over the next few days include Pygmy Cormorant, Saker Falcon, Eastern Imperial Eagle, the striking Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, Streaked Scrub Warbler and Asian Desert Warbler.

From here, we travel to the scenic hills south of Samarkand in search of White-throated Robin, Eastern Rock Nuthatch, Red-headed Bunting, Asian Paradise Flycatcher and Finch’s Wheatear. Our comprehensive tour continues in the remote Taukum Desert: a great start and excellent introduction to Kazakhstan birding! We will search for specialities such as Macqueen’s Bustard and the handsome Caspian Plover. Wells in the area attract Pin-tailed, Black-bellied and the much desired Pallas’s Sandgrouse. Other targets include Saxaul Sparrow, White-winged Woodpecker and the striking Azure Tit.

Later on, we’ll drive up into the Tien Shan Mountain range where the highly sought after Ibisbill occurs (this smart looking bird is the sole representative of its monotypic family). Other specialities in this area include Himalayan Snowcock, Güldenstädt’s and Eversmann’s Redstarts, Wallcreeper and the stunning White-browed (Sveretov’s) Tit-warbler. Flying to the capital, Astana, we will bird the surrounding steppe in search of the enigmatic Demoiselle Crane and the critically endangered Sociable Lapwing at their favoured breeding grounds. Here we will also enjoy sightings of Pallid Harrier and both White-winged and the mythical Black Lark doing their displays over the steppe grasslands!

**THE TOUR AT A GLANCE…**

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Day 1: Tashkent, Chimgan Mountains. Our Best of Central Asia adventure starts with an exciting day trip out of Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. In the morning, we’ll drive up to the Chimgan Mountains located 60km east of the city to enjoy a full day of birding. Specialities that we will seek for include Yellow-breasted, Turkestan and Rufous-naped Tit, White-capped Bunting, White-winged Woodpecker, Hume’s Leaf Warbler, Hume’s Lesser Whitethroat, Blue Whistling Thrush, Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush, Red-rumped Swallow, European Goldfinch (grey-capped subspecies, a potential future split) and much more. We will carefully scan the sky for overhead Eurasian Griffon (Himalayan Griffon is also a possibility) and Cinereous Vulture, Booted Eagle, Long-legged and Common Buzzard, and migrating European and Oriental Honey Buzzards. In the evening we will take a flight to Bukhara.
Day 2: Lake Tudakul & Bukhara. In the morning we’ll visit the wetlands and marshes surrounding Lake Tudakul, located west of Bukhara. The aquatic habitats are home to numerous species, including Pygmy Cormorant, Mute Swan, Greylag Goose, Dalmatian and Great White Pelican, Eurasian Spoonbill, Ferruginous and Red-crested Pochard, Gadwall, Northern Pintail, the scarce Marbled Duck, the elegant White-tailed Plover, Glossy Ibis, Pied Avocet, Temminck’s Stint, Black and Bar-tailed Godwit, Collared Pratincole, Caspian and Slender-billed Gull, Little, Whiskered and Caspian Tern, Moustached and Clamorous Reed Warbler, Citrine, Masked and Black-headed Wagtail, Bearded Reedling and the strikingly plumaged Blue-cheeked Bee-eater. Species like Pied Bush Chat, Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin and Sykes’s Warbler are frequently found in the surrounding scrub. In the afternoon, we will visit the fabled city of Bukhara, with star attractions being the Lyab-i Hauz pool, Nadir Divan-begi Madrasah, and the Poi-Kalyan Ensemble with the Kalyan Mosque and Kalyan Minaret.

Day 3: Kyzyl-Kum Desert. Today we will venture out deep into the Kyzyl-Kum Desert in search of the highly localised Pander’s Ground Jay, a desert specialist that often sings from small bushes proclaiming its territory at this time of year, or else typically seen running across the desert like a miniature courser! Many other exciting birds that we may see in this area include Steppe and Eastern Imperial Eagle, Pied, Desert and Variable Wheatear, the elusive Streaked Scrub Warbler (a monotypic family!), Desert Whitethroat, Asian Desert, Upcher’s and Syke’s Warbler, Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin, Lesser Short-toed Lark, Red-backed Shrike, both Lesser and Steppe Grey Shrike and Brown-necked Raven. Any standing water in the area may attract Desert and Mongolian Finch and possibly also Grey-necked Bunting. In the afternoon, if time permits, some more sightseeing in the old town of Bukhara is amongst the options.

Day 4: Bukhara to Samarkand. In the morning, we’ll bird around Bukhara to search for Ménétries’s Warbler or any other species we may still be missing. After lunch in our hotel, we will then drive along the Silk Road to the city of Samarkand. Birding stops en route may produce nesting White Storks on roadside pylons, Pallid and Montague Harrier, Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Shikra, Laughing Dove, Eurasian Collared and Oriental Collared Dove, Eurasian Roller, Eurasian and Indian Golden Oriole, Siberian Chiffchaff, Black Redstart, Turkestan, Daurian and Long-
tailed Shrike, Pied and Variable Wheatear, Spanish Sparrow, and Desert and Mongolian Finch. In the late afternoon, we will arrive at Samarkand in time for some initial exploration of the area.

**Day 5: Samarkand.** Today we’ll drive to the Takhta-Karacha mountain pass south of Samarkand. The scenery will be spectacular within the distance of the snow-capped Pamir Mountains of Tajikistan. The hills and valleys in the area are packed with birdlife, including goodies such as Bearded Vulture, Chukar Partridge, Eastern Orphean, Barred, Upcher’s and Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, Red-headed Bunting and White-throated Robin. We might find the superb Eastern Rock Nuthatch working its way across boulder-strewn hillsides. The area is also home to stunning Rosy Starling and, if we are lucky, we might run into Asian Paradise Flycatcher or Finch’s Wheatear! High plateau grasslands in this area may also hold the localised Hume’s Short-toed Lark and Rock Sparrow. In the afternoon, we might have some spare time to visit the cultural sites of Registan, a famous and beautiful assembly of turquoise-blue domes and towering minarets in the city of Samarkand.

**Day 6: Samarkand to Tashkent.** In the morning, we’ll do some birding around Samarkand and later on probably some more cultural sightseeing in town. Visiting the elaborately decorated mausoleum of Tamerlane and the massive Bibi Khanum Mosque are amongst the options. After lunch, we’ll start our journey back to Tashkent. We will surely make a few road stops in case we see anything of interest along the way.

**Day 7: Tashkent to Almaty.** Today we leave Uzbekistan and fly to Almaty, Kazakhstan’s largest metropolis. On arrival, we will start our drive to the remote Taukum Desert and stop at Lake Sorbulaq along the way. This large lake is a great site for breeding Dalmatian Pelican and migrant waders such as Terek Sandpiper and Lesser Sand Plover. In some years, thousands of Rosy Starling also breed around the dam, but this is dependent on the availability of crickets in the surrounding desert for them to feed on. Other birds we will be on the lookout for include Great White Pelican, Lesser Kestrel, Red-footed Falcon, the scarce White-headed Duck, Ruddy Shelduck, Red-crested and Ferruginous Pochard, Pallas’s and Caspian Gull, Water Rail, stately Black-winged Stilt, Collared Pratincole and, in the surrounding reed beds, Great and Little Bittern, Black-crowned Night Heron and Clamorous Reed Warbler. Arriving at the small
village of Kanshengel in the late afternoon, we will check the nearby wells for anything of interest before settling in at our nearby tented camp in the desert.

**Day 8: Taukum Desert.** In the morning we’ll search for two of Tavakam’s specialities: Macqueen’s Bustard and Caspian Plover, which are sometimes seen right from the camp! We will check the waterholes in the area carefully, which often act as a magnet for birds such as Calandra and Bimaculated Lark, and Greater and Asian Short-toed Lark. At these wells, we also have good chances for sandgrouse species, which may include Black-bellied, Pin-tailed and Pallas’s. There is also the possibility of spotting wolves in the distance when scanning the desert. Other species we will seek include Pallid Harrier, Greater Sand Plover, Temminck’s and Little Stint, and Brown-necked Raven. After breakfast, we will depart to the Ili River delta which is an interesting area with a mosaic of habitats including marshes, pools, sand dunes and stands of Turanga trees. The wetlands and reed beds hold species such as Black and White-winged Tern, Dalmatian and Great White Pelican, Ferruginous Duck, White-headed Duck, Little Bittern, Paddyfield Warbler and the rare Black-headed Penduline Tit. The more forested areas are home to specialities such as White-winged Woodpecker, Yellow-eyed Dove, Striated Scops and Little Owl, Shikra, Turkestan and Azure Tit, Black-throated Thrush and the sought-after Saxaul Sparrow.

**Day 9: Kanshengel to Almaty.** After two nights of camping in the desert, we will travel back to Almaty for the night. The morning will be dedicated to looking for species that we might have missed in the camp area. On our way back we’ll stop for anything of interest. Lake Sorbulaq will be scanned again carefully for new arrivals and birds that might have eluded us before.

**Day 10: Almaty to Charyn.** This morning we will depart to the Charyn region which lies 250km east of Almaty. We will have several birding stops en route to look for species such as Richard’s Pipit, Long-tailed Shrike, European Roller and Eurasian Hoopoe. It will be another scenic drive passing by deserts plains, spectacular gorges and distant snow-capped mountains. At a highland pass, we have chances for Himalayan Vulture gliding overhead, along with Cinereous Vulture and maybe even a Bearded Vulture. Other species possible in this area include Chukar Partridge, White-winged Woodpecker, Blue Whistling Thrush, Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush, Eurasian Bee-eater, Citrine and Black-headed Wagtail, White-capped, Pine, Meadow and Red-headed Bunting, Hume’s Lesser Whitethroat and Pied Wheatear.

The further east we drive the less vegetated the landscape becomes and in this habitat we will be on the lookout for Horned
Lark, Desert Lesser Whitethroat, Rock Sparrow and the impressive Steppe Eagle. Artesian wells in the area might produce goodies such as Grey-necked Bunting, Desert, Mongolian and Asian Crimson-winged Finch.

**Day 11: Sogety Valley.** We will start early with a visit to the Sogety Plains to search for the sought-after Pallas’s Sandgrouse. This is possibly our best chance for this nomadic species and we’ll devote time to finding it in case we still need it. Other species that we will look for include Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Desert Wheatear, Asian Desert Warbler, Steppe Grey Shrike, Pale Sand Martin and Asian Crimson-winged Finch. Later in the morning we then visit the Charyn Canyon, where we have an excellent chance of finding Saker Falcon. After an exciting day of birding in the Charyn region, we will return to Almaty for the night.

**Day 12: Almaty to Tien-Shan Mountains.** Today we drive up into the amazing Tien Shan Mountains passing through exciting habitats with mountain streams, alpine meadows and pristine spruce forests along the way. During the drive up we will make several stops and look for specialities such as Brown Dipper, Blue Whistling Thrush, Blue-capped Redstart, Red-fronted Serin, Songar Tit, Spotted Nutcracker, Three-toed Woodpecker and if we are very lucky, the fabulous Wallcreeper. We’ll certainly stop at a scenic lake and scan along the boulder-strewn lakeshore for the cryptically coloured Ibisbill, the sole representative of this monotypic family. The juniper scrub above the treeline will be searched for targets such as White-tailed Rubythroat, Red-mantled and Common Rosefinch, Hume’s Leaf and Sulphur-bellied Warbler, Black-throated Accentor, White-winged Grosbeak, Eversmann’s Redstart and the delightful White-browed Tit-warbler!

**Day 13: Tien-Shan Mountains.** Weather dependent, we will move further up in altitude to look for species such as the lovely Güldenstädt’s Redstart, Red-billed and Alpine Chough, Altai and Brown Accentor, Water Pipit, and Brandt’s Mountain Finch. We will carefully scan the boulder-strewn hillsides for another mountain speciality: the Himalayan Snowcock. These birds can be heard calling in the early morning and often “freeze” for long periods to avoid detection, so we will have to count ourselves lucky to find this enigmatic species!

**Day 14: Tien-Shan Mountains to Astana.** This morning we will continue birding for any birds we have missed, along with another opportunity to scan for Himalayan Snowcock.
if we were unsuccessful the previous day. After lunch, we will drive down to Almaty and catch an early evening flight to Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan.

**Day 15 & 16: Astana area.** We will have two full days to explore the rich and extensive steppe grasslands out of Astana. The area is home to the striking Black Lark as well as the critically endangered Sociable Lapwing. Both species breed here at this time of year, so we have a very good chance of seeing them. The splendid White-winged Lark also occurs here and birds are often seen displaying over the grasslands. Other species that we will carefully scan for include Saker and Red-footed Falcon, Pallid Harrier and the spectacular Demoiselle Crane. Freshwater lakes and wetlands in this area hold a good variety of species that may include Black-throated Diver, Red-necked, Black-necked, Great and Horned Grebe, White-headed Duck, Great Bittern, Pallas’s and Slender-billed Gull, Gull-billed, White-winged, Whiskered and Caspian Tern, Dalmatian Pelican, the stately Greater Flamingo, twirling Red-necked Phalarope in their smart breeding plumage, Marsh, Green and Curlew Sandpiper, Spotted Redshank, Ruff, Collared Pratincole, Barred, Booted, Blyth’s and Paddyfield Warbler, the stunning Bluethroat, Eastern Yellow and Citrine Wagtail and Common Reed Bunting.

**Day 17: Final departures.** Today our Best of Central Asia adventure concludes. We will be transferred to the Astana Airport to catch our connections and international flights back home.

**FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS:**
Tour dates, prices, single supplement rates, approximate flight costs and spaces available for this tour are displayed on our website. Please see under IMPORTANT NOTES below.

**The tour fee includes:**
- All meals from breakfast on day 1 to breakfast on day 17;
- Bottled drinking water;
- All lodgings;
- Airport transfers;
- Ground transportation;
- Reserve entrance fees;
- All guiding services (including tips for local guides and services).

**The tour fee does not include:**
- Visa fees;
- Any flights;
- Any drinks;
- Camera fees in national parks;
• Telephone calls; and
• Laundry and other items of a personal nature.

**Single Supplement:**
The single supplement cost for this tour will be charged if you wish to have single accommodation. If RBL cannot provide you with a rooming partner for these nights although you choose to share, the single supplement will become applicable. We will make all reasonable efforts to ensure that a rooming partner is found if you do wish to share.

**IMPORTANT NOTES:**
a) Due to constantly fluctuating exchange rates, we quote our tours in 4 currencies. The tour price is however fixed only in the currency printed in bold, and the actual cost in the other currencies listed will be adjusted according to prevailing exchange rates at the time of final invoicing (usually 4 months before the tour.) The same applies to approximate flight and single supplement rates, which are also quoted in the respective fixed currency.
b) Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the tour does not have sufficient registration a small party supplement will have to be charged.
c) Furthermore, these costs are subject to unforeseen increases in tour related costs and may have to be adjusted as a result.
d) Lastly, we may be forced to change or alter the itinerary and / or the designated Rockjumper leader/s at short or no notice due to unforeseen circumstances; please be aware that we will attempt to adhere as close to the original program as possible.

**Tipping:**
As noted above, gratuities (drivers, hotel staff, restaurants etc.) are included on this tour. However, this does NOT include your Rockjumper leader/s. If, therefore, you feel that he/they have given you excellent service, it is entirely appropriate to tip them.

**Special Notes:**
• It is important for the comfort of your fellow travellers that you do not over-pack. Kindly stick to 20kg (44lb) for check-in luggage and 8kg (+-18lb) for hand luggage.
• We will spend two nights camping in the Taukum Desert. The camp is comfortable with reasonably sized tents, each containing a camp bed and foam mattress. A sleeping bag is provided, but you may bring your own should you wish. It is perhaps more convenient to bring a sleeping bag liner rather. The camp has a separate kitchen and food tent where meals are served. Washing facilities while camping will be basic. Toilets are simplistic, with conventional toilet seats.
• Much of the tour will be in remote areas with limited medical facilities or hospitals. Please ensure that you have all the necessary medication that you require for the duration of the tour.
• Although it will be late spring/early summer, the temperatures can vary greatly, from warm day temperatures of 25 to 30 degrees Celsius in the deserts (but cool in the mornings), to cold with rain and even snow possible at any time in the mountains.
• Warm clothes, including gloves, woollen hat, raingear, hiking boots and thermals will come in handy for the cooler nights and mornings.
• Fitness: In general this tour does not require a high level of fitness, but participants should be in good general health as most of the birding will be done on foot, and may require walking for
several hours at a time. Some of the walks in the mountains will, however, be more strenuous. Should you have any physical limitations, please notify us in advance of departure.

- Central Asian cuisine is relatively limited in variety, but usually, salad, soup and meat form the primary basis of all meals. We will have opportunities to try regional specialities at various locations on the tour.

ARRIVAL & DEPARTURE DETAILS:
This tour does not include ANY airfares. The main tour will commence in Tashkent (Uzbekistan) on day 1. As we depart Tashkent very early on this day, you are required to be present in Uzbekistan the night before the tour starts. The tour will conclude with a transfer to Astana International Airport (Kazakhstan) after breakfast on day 17.

The above information in respect of arrivals and departures is a guide only. Precise arrival and departure information will be sent to you in your Tour Confirmation package once the tour has been officially confirmed. If you wish to arrive early and/or depart late and would like assistance in this regard, kindly contact the Rockjumper office.

FLIGHTS:
Tashkent International Airport, Tashkent (IATA: TAS) is the main port of entry into Uzbekistan for this tour, while Astana International Airport (IATA: TSE) is the main port of exit. Both airports are reliably serviced by a few international carriers, including Turkish Airlines, Aeroflot, Etihad and Lufthansa. Please DO NOT book any flights until you have consulted the Rockjumper office for confirmation on the status of the tour.

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