

Breeding birds of the Lower Caucasus Mountains

Armenia is located in the Lower Caucasus Mountain range situated between the Black and Caspian Seas. It is an extremely important area for migratory and breeding species of high mountains and sub-desert habitats. Our tour covers the main birdwatching areas of Armenia, a country slightly smaller than Belgium. Armenia is a fascinating country with its own language and culture going back many centuries. It is also an outstanding place for birds and other aspects of natural history seen amongst some of the most beautiful scenery in extreme south-eastern Europe. Birdwatching Breaks has visited Armenia since 1999 and has an extensive knowledge of the Caucasus region and its bird life.

Day 1: Fly from London to Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, where we spend the night.

Day 2: Transfer to Dilijan. The hotel at Dilijan is situated in a beech and oak forest. This is a fascinating region for breeding woodland species. A walk around the grounds may reveal the local races of Green, Great-spotted, Middle-spotted and Lesser-spotted Woodpeckers, Coal Tit and Hawfinch. Our main area of interest is the mature woodland with Black Woodpecker, Semi-collared and Red-breasted Flycatchers and the constant singing of Green Warblers.

Day 3: Before breakfast, we can check the grounds of the composer's house which often have the *samamiscus* subspecies of Common Redstart and other woodland birds. High in the alpine meadows, we should see displaying Caucasian Grouse and hunting Lesser Spotted Eagles. On our descent from Dilijan, we may locate Corncrake, Common Quail and Grey Partridge. We can also check a degraded marsh and adjacent industrial area where Booted Eagles appear on a regular basis. Later, we visit Lake Sevan, standing at 1,916 metres above sea level, where hundreds of Armenian Gulls nest with lesser numbers of Black-necked Grebe, Common Tern and Ruddy Shelduck. Stands of birch and sea buckthorn may yield Barred and Marsh Warblers and, in the marshy areas, Citrine Wagtail and the local race of Reed Bunting. From Lake Sevan we journey along the recently refurbished Selim Pass to Chiva where we stay the night with local families.

Dates

Friday May 25th - Sunday June 3rd
2018

Leader: Chris Bradshaw

Group size: 8

Birds: 160-190

Stops along the way for Red-backed Shrike, Whinchat, Black-headed and Ortolan Buntings.

Day 4: Today we head south towards Meghri situated on the Araks River and the border with Iran. A short diversion to Zenada should provide us with sightings of Persian Nuthatch, Eastern Orphean, Eastern Olivaceous and Upcher's Warblers, colourful White-throated Robins, Blue and Rufous-tailed rock Thrushes and Woodlark. A stop at an abandoned building en route should reveal the presence of Lesser Kestrels. The road passes through a high plateau area with Eurasian Black and Egyptian Vultures, Long-legged Buzzard and the *brookei* race of Peregrine Falcon. Fallow fields attract colourful flocks of Rose-coloured Starlings. Before reaching the town of Goris, we may see Bimaculated Lark and the rare Crimson-winged Finch. A rocky gorge with a wooded gully has several interesting species including Common Nightingale and Eurasian Golden Oriole. The road between Goris and Meghri snakes over wooded hillsides with Common Buzzard and other raptors including Eurasian Griffon Vulture and Lammergeier. We have three nights staying with local fami-

lies in the vicinity of Meghri.

Days 5-6: Meghri has a dry sub-tropical climate with wilted vegetation, rocky gorges, deciduous woodlands and arid open juniper woodlands side by side. At our first stop we can check a traditional area for Levant Sparrowhawks. A rocky gorge may have Chukar, Rock and Persian Nuthatches, Lesser Whitethroat, Upcher's Warbler, Red-fronted Serin and Sombre Tit. Just past Megri, an abandoned railway dominates the border area with Iran. Our main interest is a dry rocky gorge with the localised Persian Wheatear in residence. A pomegranate orchard further up the valley attracts Eastern Orphee, and Menetries's Warbler and Woodchat Shrike. On one morning we start early in order to find Caspian Snowcock in the high mountains above Meghri. Other species of this high altitude habitat include Chukar, Alpine Swift, Alpine Accentor, Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush and Rock Bunting.

Day 7: We check the gardens for Lesser Grey Shrike and European Golden Oriole before travelling north to Goris, with a stop at the gorges for vultures and birds of prey. After lunch we can revisit the valley at Zenada again for European Turtle Dove and flocks of Rosy Starlings. Transfer to Chiva where we spend the night.

Day 8: We start today by visiting Armash Fishponds overlooked by biblical, snow-capped Mount Ararat. Armash is simply outstanding for wetland species, attracting Pygmy Cormorant, Little Bittern, Purple and Squacco Herons, Black-crowned Night Herons, White-headed and Ferruginous Ducks. The stands of reeds at Armash resound with the calls of Great Reed, Reed, Moustached and Paddyfield Warblers and Bearded Reedlings. Open waters have Marbled and Ferruginous Ducks and Red-crested Pochards. Whiskered, White-winged, Black and Little Terns hawk over the pools for insects. Water meadows and muddy areas have Glossy Ibis, Collared and, on occasions, Black-winged Pratincoles, White-tailed Lapwing and Kentish Plover. Armash regularly holds migrant Terek and Curlew Sandpipers and spinning Red-necked Phalaropes. Armash is surrounded by sub-desert with

tamarisk, camels thorn and sagebrush bushes. This unique habitat lures White-throated Robin, Finsch's and Eastern Black-eared Wheatears, Eastern Olivaceous, Menetries's and Upcher's Warblers Vedi, nearby, is an extremely arid region noted for Pallid Harrier, Long-legged Buzzard, Isabelline and Finsch's Wheatears, Upcher's Warbler, Trumpeter Finch and Grey-necked Bunting and irregular species such as Trumpeter and Mongolian Finches and Pale Rockfinch. Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, situated in the Lower Caucasian Mountains, is a picturesque city with a pleasant main square.

Day 9: Mount Aragats is our final birdwatching destination. The lower valleys are dominated by juniper scrub adjacent to fast-flowing mountain streams. This unusual habitat attracts Bluethroat, Siberian Stonechat, White-throated Robin, Radde's Accentor and Ring Ouzel. Further up the valley, we can study nesting Rock Petronia and Rock Bunting. The road terminates at a scenic watch-point overlooking a ruined castle and church. Raptors occurring on a regular basis include Steppe and Long-legged Buzzards, Booted and Lesser-spotted Eagles. At the summit, we pass alpine meadows and rock-strewn slopes and have a final opportunity to observe Horned Lark, White-winged Snowfinch and Alpine Accentors.

Day 10: Fly to London where the tour ends.

Prices

Ground Price: £2,195
Single room: £200
Deposit: £200
*Air Fare: £350

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

Not included: drinks, insurance, items of a personal nature and any relevant fuel surcharges.

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