

# Armenia in Spring Bargain Birdwatching Tour

## Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

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### Outline itinerary

<b>Day 1</b>	Fly Yerevan
<b>Day 2</b>	Mount Aragats, from Yerevan
<b>Day 3</b>	Armash Fish Ponds; overnight Yeghegnadzor
<b>Day 4</b>	Mount Gndasar; overnight Yeghegnadzor
<b>Day 5</b>	Lake Sevan
<b>Day 6</b>	Dilijan
<b>Day 7</b>	Dilijan/Yerevan
<b>Day 8</b>	Garni and Geghard
<b>Day 9</b>	Fly London

### Departs

May

### Dates and Prices

See website (tour code ARM01) or brochure

### Grading

B. Slow-paced day walks but in this mountainous country some of the walking will inevitably be on paths of varying steepness.

### Focus

Birds



Images from top: Rosy Starlings, Garni and Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters



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## Introduction

Nestling in the snow-capped Caucasian Mountains and overlooked by Mount Ararat just over the border in Turkey, Armenia is one of Europe's best kept birding secrets. Despite its small size, not much bigger than Wales, and the fact that it is landlocked, this former Soviet Republic is home to over two-thirds of Europe's regularly occurring bird species including many that are rare or difficult to find elsewhere.

Caucasian Grouse and Caspian Snowcock are found in the high mountains as well as a very good selection of more widespread alpine species such as White-winged Snowfinch, Asian Crimson-winged Finch, Alpine Accentor and Rock Thrush. Juniper scrub below the snowline holds Radde's Accentor, Ring Ouzel and Bluethroat, (the latter two like many other species in the Caucasus, a very distinctive local subspecies). Broadleaf woodland further north resounds to the song of Caucasian Mountain Chiffchaff, Green Warbler and both Semi-collared and Red-breasted Flycatchers while the gorges and mountain steppe landscape nearer the Turkish border provide habitats for White-throated Robin, Finsch's Wheatear, Menetries's and Upcher's Warblers plus many other predominantly Middle Eastern species which reach their northern limit here. The fishpond complex at Armash is renowned for its breeding populations of White-headed, Marbled and Ferruginous Ducks plus Pygmy Cormorant, White-tailed Lapwing and many other species; this area is also a magnet for migrants and is also home to a small colony of Blue-cheeked Bee-eater.

Throughout this largely unspoilt and sparsely populated country, birds of prey populations remain healthy with several species of eagle to be expected and we have a good chance of encountering Lammergeier (Bearded Vulture) and Levant Sparrowhawk. Our nine-day tour covers each of the country's main habitat types but being such a small country, with generally good infrastructure, travelling times between areas are short allowing us to maximise the amount of time spent in the field. While our primary focus is on the regional specialities of the Armenian Caucasus we are sure to see a very good cross section of more widespread European species too

## Itinerary

*Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.*

### Day 1

### In flight

We depart London on a flight to the Armenian capital Yerevan. The flights are via one of the European airports.

### Day 2

### Mount Aragats

An hour northwest of Yerevan lies Mount Aragats and we will spend the whole day in the area exploring different altitudinal zones, all of which are accessible by road. Below the treeline may be found breeding White-throated Robin, Siberian Stonechat (of the distinctive race *variegatus*) Woodlark and others and this is an excellent area for birds of prey with chances of European Honey

Buzzard, Common Buzzard (of the distinctive endemic Caucasian subspecies *menetriesi*) Lesser spotted, Booted and Short-toed Snake Eagles. A little higher up we enter the juniper zone where Radde's Accentor, Bluethroat (of the distinctive race *magna*) and Ring Ouzels are our main targets before we drive higher still into the snowfields. This high alpine zone holds abundant Horned Lark (subspecies *peniciliata*), and Water Pipit (subspecies *coutelli*) while a little searching should reveal Black Redstart, White-winged Snowfinch, Common Rock Thrush and Alpine Accentor. At any time in these high mountains we have a chance of coming across a soaring Lammergeier or a busy flock of Asian Crimson-winged Finch. After an action-packed first day we return to Yerevan for the night.

## Day 3

## Yeghegnadzor

Today we head east towards our next base at Yeghegnadzor but after an hour or so we'll reach the excellent Armash Fish Ponds where we will have an extended visit.

This huge area of ponds is home to important breeding populations of globally threatened species such as Marbled, White-headed and Ferruginous Ducks. Pygmy Cormorants and Glossy Ibises are also to be found and drier areas nearby hold small number of White-tailed Lapwings. Moustached, Great Reed and Paddyfield Warblers sing from the reed-beds where Bearded Reeding are common and we have a good chance of seeing Little Bitterns. Adjacent scrubby patches hold Menetries's and Upcher's Warblers plus Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin and a small colony of Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters add a splash of colour. Spring migration brings good numbers of northbound migrants to the area with White-winged and Whiskered Terns particularly prominent and a range of waders likely, especially if one of the ponds has been recently drained.

Continuing east we will spend the early evening exploring a large arid gorge where we have chances to see White-throated Robins, Blue Rock Thrushes, Western Rock Nuthatches, Rock Bunting, Golden Eagle and Lammergeier as well as Black-headed Buntings and Eastern Black-eared Wheatears. From here it is a short drive to our guest house accommodation in the town of Yeghegnadzor.

## Day 4

## Mount Gndasar

Today we will swap our comfortable tour bus for sturdier transport to enable us to ascend into the surrounding high mountains where we will be in pursuit of the localised Caspian Snowcock. While the vehicles will get us as close as possible to our quarry a short uphill hike will be required to give us our best chances of these elusive birds. A host of other alpine species should ensure that even if the Snowcocks are uncooperative there will still be plenty to see; this is a good area for Red-billed Choughs, Red-fronted Serins and Asian Crimson-winged Finches. Lammergeier is always a possibility and there is even a chance of Wallcreeper in this spectacular landscape.

## Day 5

## Lake Sevan

After some final local birding we will move on today. Travelling north towards Lake Sevan we will make a stop en route to look for upland species at the Selim Pass where Twites of the very distinctive local race *brevirostris* and Rock Sparrows should be found and we also have a good chance of Long-legged Buzzard which breeds in this area. Lake Sevan is by far the largest water body in

Armenia and one of the largest high-altitude lakes in the world, it is home too to the largest breeding colony of the localised Armenian Gulls in the world. We will make a couple of extended stops along the southern shore to look for migrants and local breeding species such as Penduline Tits as we travel westwards towards our next base in the wooded hills around Dilijan.

## Day 6

## Dilijan

We have a full day to explore the rich deciduous woodlands around Dilijan as we go in search of local specialities such as Green Warblers and Semi-collared Flycatchers. These woodlands are home to many other species too with numerous Common Redstarts of the distinctive white-winged race *samamisticus* and Common Rosefinches Hawfinches, Middle and Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers and Red-breasted Flycatchers all possible. Birds of prey overhead could include Northern Goshawk, Lesser Spotted and Booted Eagles.

## Day 7

## Dilijan

An early start, and a change of vehicle, will be required to get us into position to look for Caucasian Grouse in the hills south of Dilijan. Other birds we might come across in the upland meadows and scattered woodland include Red-fronted Serin, Red-backed Shrike and Whinchat with the ever-present possibility of overhead raptors. The rest of the day will be spent on a leisurely return to Yerevan with stops to look at anything of interest en route.

## Day 8

## Geghard Gorges

Our final day will be spent exploring the mountain steppe and gorges to the east of Yerevan where we hope to pick up any species of these habitats not seen previously. This is the best area for the localised Eastern Rock Nuthatch and Finsch's Wheatear while Lesser Grey Shrike, European Roller and Little Owl are all possible. Black-headed Buntings are a common sight in the rolling wildflower meadows here and we also have a good chance of Isabelline Wheatears, Bimaculated Lark, Rosy Starlings and many other species. The spectacular Geghard Gorges is home to Alpine Swifts and Crag Martins while raptors there include Egyptian Vulture and Long-legged Buzzard.

## Day 9

## Yerevan

An early breakfast before our departure to the airport and our flight back to London.

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## Tour grading

The tour is graded B with day walks only but in this mountainous country some of the walking will inevitably be on paths of varying steepness.

## Weather

At this transition season between winter and summer conditions can vary from pleasantly warm or even hot by day to very cold, particularly in the mountains. Snow is a possibility at higher elevations

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and night temperatures can fall to low levels. Precipitation is possible and may fall as snow in the mountains. Despite these extreme possibilities we hope for settled warm conditions during our visit but must be prepared for colder interludes.

## Food & accommodation included in the price

All food is included in the tour from breakfast on Day 2 to breakfast on Day 9. Any meals eaten in transit at the airports are not included. A limited number of single rooms will be available.

## Additional Expenditure

The cost of the holiday does not include items of personal expenditure such as drinks or laundry, nor does it include cost of optional tipping for local drivers and guides (allow approximately £60).

## How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk), or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

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