# Ethiopia – Wildlife and History

## Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

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### Departs
November

### Focus
Mammals, birds, the historical sites around Lalibela, and other general natural history

### Grading
Grade A/B

### Dates and Prices
Visit [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk) (tour code ETH11)

### Highlights
- Discover Ethiopia’s unique wildlife, with mammals including Ethiopian Wolf, Giant Mole-rat, Mountain Nyala, Menelik’s Bushbuck and Gelada Baboon
- Superlative birding, including 3 nights in the spectacular Bale Mountains – an endemics hotspot
- Visit the famous rock-hewn monolithic churches in the historic town of Lalibela
- Journey along the Great Rift Valley

Images from top: Church of St George, Lalibela, Ethiopian Wolf, Blue-breasted Bee-eaters
Introduction

Ethiopia offers an intoxicating blend of magnificent scenery, fascinating wildlife and an exceedingly rich culture and history. It was perhaps the earliest home of mankind, and later to Prester John – the legendary ruler of the east – and a dynasty of monarchs originating from the Queen of Sheba. It is a land of mixed religion, countless tribes and even more languages. Ethiopia is also one of the very few African countries to have escaped 19th century colonialism, and remains fiercely independent to this day. It is not only the country’s long and rich history that makes Ethiopia such a special place, however, for its wildlife, too, is both exciting and unique. From the high moorlands of the Bale Mountains to the soda and freshwater lakes of the Great Rift Valley, a wonderfully diverse range of habitats is home to over 840 species of birds, around 50 of which are regional endemics or near-endemics, and 80 species of larger mammals, of which 10% are endemic.

Our tour begins with a two-night stay in the capital, Addis Ababa. From here we will take a day trip to Debre Libanos Gorge in search of Wattled Ibis, Abyssinian Longclaw and Blue-winged Goose, plus troops of shaggy Gelada Baboons, all of which are endemic to Ethiopia. Driving south, we will stop to enjoy the birdlife of Lake Awassa, before arriving in the Bale Mountains National Park for a three-night stay, including two nights at the beautiful Bale Mountain Lodge. Approaching the park, the scenery becomes increasingly spectacular and we will hope to see the majestic and endemic Mountain Nyala, plus such avian endemics as Black-headed Siskin, Abyssinian Catbird and Rouget’s Rail. As we cross the Afro-alpine habitat of the Senetti Plateau we will search for the rare Ethiopian Wolf and its prey, the endearing Giant Mole-rat. Serval, the endemic Bale Monkey and Giant Forest Hog are also possible. Returning north through the Great Rift Valley, we will stop to relax for two nights at a comfortable lodge on the shores of Lake Langano where we can enjoy some easy birding and the resident Black-and-White Colobus. Then, for the final section of our tour, we will fly north to Lalibela for a two-night stay in the medieval capital of Ethiopia, home to the monasteries of Yemrehanna Kristos and Asheton Maryam and the 800-year-old monolithic rock-hewn churches that many consider to be an unofficial eighth wonder of the world!

Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and 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

We depart from London Heathrow this evening on an Ethiopian Airlines overnight flight direct to Addis Ababa.

Day 2

Arriving in Addis this morning, we transfer to a comfortable hotel which will be our base for the next two nights, where we can freshen up after the flight and enjoy breakfast or an early lunch. This afternoon we will explore a little of the busy capital and pay a visit to the National Museum where the famous early hominid, Lucy – who is feasibly our universal ancestor – is housed.

Day 3

We will plan an early start this morning for a day’s excursion to the Debre Libanos Gorge. Leaving Addis, we drive up into the eucalyptus-clad Entoto Hills and cross a pass at 8,537 feet to reach the Solulta Plains, a region of grassy uplands and small pools with a fine complement of birdlife. Wattled and Sacred Ibis, Blue-winged and Egyptian Geese, Yellow-billed Ducks, Pallid Harriers, Black-shouldered Kites, Short-crested and Red-capped Larks, Abyssinian Longclaws, Isabelline and Red-breasted Wheatears, Hill Chats, Groundscraper Thrushes, Pied Crows and Cape Rooks are all to be found in the area. Driving on to the Gorge – carved deeply by a tributary of the Blue Nile – we will first explore the forested escarpment above the monastery of Debre Libanos, stopping to look at this impressive building, and will look for the endemic Ruppell’s Chat. We will then walk along the lip of the gorge (a good spot for a picnic with a spectacular view!) where Lammergeiers, Ruppell’s Griffons, Lanner Falcons, Fan-tailed Ravens, Black Kites, and the endemic White-billed Starlings soar.

Our main goal this afternoon is to look for the splendid Gelada Baboon, which is endemic to Ethiopia, and often seen here in large troops. These magnificent animals are sure to be an early highlight of the tour and we plan to spend some time watching the social interactions amongst the group. The adult males are especially impressive with their long flowing manes and red ‘bleeding heart’. The troops may cover a range of about 3-7 km each day along the borders of the cliffs, where they forage along the edge of the gorge.

Wattled Ibis (Tim Melling)

Gelada Baboon (Tim Melling)
feeding on grasses, seeds and fruits. At the end of a full and exciting day out, we will return Addis ahead of our journey south the next morning.

Day 4  Lake Awassa

This morning we embark on our journey south, driving to the Rift Valley lakes. We will make short stops on the way at Lakes Koka and Zwai, where we should see numerous waterbirds. Lake Koka offers a great variety of waders, herons, spoonbills and egrets, patrolled by overhead harriers and vultures, and Ethiopian and Wire-tailed Swallows. At Lake Zwai, as well as the huge numbers of waterbirds including pelicans and storks, we can look for the endearing Tree Hyrax which is generally uncommon in central Ethiopia.

We stop overnight at Lake Awassa, a beautiful freshwater lake, set amongst hills and luxuriant vegetation, quite unlike the alkaline lakes to the north. We should encounter numerous waterbirds, including Black, Goliath and other herons, Marabou Stork, Hamerkop, Hadada Ibis, a variety of egrets, the dainty African Pygmy Goose, Fulvous and White-faced Whistling Duck, Knob-billed Duck, Black Crane, African Jacana, and both Pied and Malachite Kingfisher. Nearby, in the mature acacia woodland beside the lake, we will look for Eastern Black-and-white Colobus Monkey, Vervet Monkey and Menelik’s Bushbuck. We spend tonight at a comfortable hotel adjacent to the lake shore, and surrounded by plentiful birdlife.

Day 5  Bale Mountains

For those that wish, your leader will be eager to offer an early morning bird walk along the lake shore. Then, after breakfast, we will embark on the scenic drive to the Bale Mountains National Park. Climbing through forests, fields, little villages and banana groves, we reach open grassy uplands where Blue-winged Goose, Rouget’s Rail and Abyssinian Longclaw introduce us to the long list of Ethiopian endemic birds to be found in the area. Approaching the park, the scenery becomes increasingly spectacular. Magnificent forests cling to the sides of deep valleys and high peaks, rocky outcrops, pinnacles and ridges pierce horizons, and moorlands, grasslands and peaty pools sit in plains and hollows.

Around the park headquarters at Dinsho we are likely to see the endemic Mountain Nyala (a magnificent antelope unique to these hills) and Warthog, and Common Duiker, Bohor Reedbuck and Menelik’s Bushbuck may all be seen along the forest margins. We will also make a special effort to find the near-endemic Abyssinian Long-eared Owl, which can often be seen at a daytime roost site here. Then, we will continue to the town of Goba where we overnight in a basic hotel, where we are well positioned for tomorrow’s journey over the splendid Senetti Plateau.
Day 6

The Bale Mountains, lying between 9,500 feet and 14,360 feet, contain the largest tract of high moorland in Africa. Virtually uninhabited, they are entirely unspoilt and were set aside as a national park in order to protect the Mountain Nyala which is found nowhere else in the world. They are green and spacious, decorated with rocky peaks and crags, numerous small lakes, extensive heathland, magnificent cloud forests and bogs, and possess an exceptional beauty and charm which can be likened to that of the Scottish Highlands.

Today we will focus our attention on the Senetti Plateau, beginning our journey by climbing up through the fine Hagenia forest, where we will look out for Chestnut-naped Francolin on the road, and Rufous-breasted Sparrowhawk and Mountain Buzzard in the air. Then, we will ascend onto an open moorland plateau where little lakes, extensive grasslands and the weird spikes of primeval-looking Giant Lobelias and Red-hot Pokers create a wonderful Afro-alpine habitat. Wattled Crane and Montane Francolin are two resident specialities, and amongst an interesting collection of upland birds we are likely to see eleven of Ethiopia’s 29 endemics: Blue-winged Goose, Rouget’s Rail, Spot-breasted Plover, White-collared Pigeon, Black-winged Lovebird, Golden-backed Woodpecker, Abyssinian Longclaw, Abyssinian Catbird, White-backed Tit, Black-headed Siskin and Thick-billed Raven!

One of our main aims for today will be a sighting (or sightings) of the endangered Ethiopian Wolf and its prey: Grass Rats, Swamp Rats and the bizarre and endemic Giant Mole-Rat. These rodents also attract many birds of prey, include wintering Spotted, Imperial and other Aquila eagles, as well as almost all of Ethiopia’s vulture species. The beautiful Ethiopian Wolf is endemic to Ethiopia and this plateau is its stronghold; they roam the park in small groups and we will hope to spot one as we drive slowly over the plateau. We should also keep our eyes peeled for Klippspringer, the endemic Stark’s Hare and Rock Hyrax which are all common in this area.

During the latter part of the day we will continue across the plateau and descend down the magnificent Harenna Escarpment. We will arrive later this afternoon at the beautiful Bale Mountain Lodge, deep in the Harenna Forest, for a two night stay. Bale Mountain Lodge is one of very few boutique lodges found in Ethiopia, and each of the spacious, comfortable guest rooms has a wood burning stove and stunning views towards the ridgeline of the plateau.

Day 7

We have a further full day today to explore the Bale Mountains at our leisure, from our comfortable base at Bale Mountain Lodge. There are a number of marked trails that spill out from the vicinity of the lodge, giving us opportunity to search for any of the special birds and mammals we might have missed yesterday. In
addition, in the area around the lodge we have a good chance of finding the endemic Bale Monkey, and driving along the edge of the forest as dusk falls we may be lucky enough to spot a Serval or the rare Giant Forest Hog. Tonight, we will enjoy a second night at Bale Mountain Lodge.

Day 8

Today we retrace our route, back up the Harenna escarpment and over the Senetti Plateau, with a second opportunity to try for Ethiopian Wolf should we have been unlucky previously, or indeed if we are keen for another sighting! Making a few stops as we go, we will slowly make our way to Lake Langano, arriving in the late afternoon with time to explore a little of our surroundings before dinner. We spend the next two nights at the delightful Hara Langano Lodge, where the individual rooms, or "gojos" as they are known locally, are set in amongst the trees or on the shores of the lake.

Day 9

Today we have a full day to relax and enjoy Lake Langano. An early morning walk around the grounds of Hara will yield a kaleidoscope of colourful birdlife, including a variety of sunbirds, woodpeckers, Silvery-cheeked Hornbills, White-browed Robin Chats, Double-toothed Barbets, African Firefinches and a host of other bird species. Hippos are a frequent sight in the lake's shallows and there is usually a population of Olive Baboons and Black and White Colobus Monkeys in residence around the lodge.

Later in the day we'll explore some of the woodland further back from the lake shore. Whilst the lake's waters are deep and sterile, and largely devoid of water birds, this woodland makes fine amends! Dark Chanting Goshawks, African Fish Eagles, Hemprich's and Von der Decken's Hornbills, Cardinal Woodpeckers, White-bellied Go-away Birds, Red-billed and White-headed Buffalo Weavers, Northern White-crowned Shrikes, Blue-naped Mousebirds, Blue-breasted and Little Bee-eaters, White-cheeked Turaco, Mariqua Sunbirds and a variety of colourful finches are all to be found in this dry and thorny habitat.

Day 10

There is no rush to get underway today, and so we can enjoy a leisurely breakfast and morning birdwalk before setting off for Addis Ababa. Heading back north, we will pay a visit to Lake Abiata, which is widely regarded as Ethiopia’s Nakuru. Shallow and saline, it is an enormous lake with huge numbers of birds and
we will enjoy this spectacle of colour, looking carefully amongst the flamingos, pelicans, cormorants, storks, herons and waders for any unusual vagrants. We aim to arrive back in Addis Ababa in the late afternoon and overnight at a city hotel.

Days 11 – 12

Lalibela

We will transfer to the airport early this morning in time to take our flight to Lalibela (which is usually direct, but occasionally via Bahir Dar). Lalibela is perched at an altitude of 2,630m, with stunning views of wild craggy peaks and vast rocky escarpments, and is famed for its 13 rock-hewn monolithic churches, built in the early 12th century on the order of the Saint and King Lalibela. Set in two clusters either side of the river that dissects the town, the churches and chapels were inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1978, and are often cited as the unofficial eighth wonder of the world. Several of the churches are in excess of 10m high, many are meticulously sculpted and decorated, and each is surrounded by trenches and courtyards and connected through little tunnels and passages to the next. We’ll spend the rest of the day marvelling at their splendor, then, the following day, we will travel a little further afield to visit two of the most spectacular monasteries, Asheton Mariam and Yemrehanna Kristos.

Days 13 – 14

Fly Addis and onwards to London

After a final morning in Lalibela, at around lunchtime today we return to the airport to take the flight back to Addis Ababa. We’ll have day rooms booked at a convenient hotel, giving us the opportunity to freshen up, re-pack and enjoy a farewell dinner before returning to the airport for our flight home, which typically departs in the early hours of the morning, arriving into London at around 0630 hours. (NB: occasionally this flight is scheduled to depart at around 0800 hours in the morning, arriving into London at around 1330 hours. If this is the case, we will instead book full overnight rooms in Addis with a transfer back to the airport early the next morning.)

Extra expenses

All food and accommodation is included in the price of this holiday. Please note that we do not include the following in the cost of this holiday:

- Entry visa (currently US$50) – this can be purchased online in advance or on arrival in Addis
- All items of a personal nature such as drinks, laundry, souvenirs
- Discretionary tips
Tour grading

We have graded this tour A/B, with a combination of walking and wildlife viewing from our vehicle. There are some long road journeys, though this tour is designed to allow a more leisurely pace than some of our other itineraries! We will often be at altitudes of over 2000m, and sometimes over 3000m in the Bale Mountains, but the walking for the most part of the tour is not difficult, nor does it ever cover any great distance, and is always taken at a leisurely pace.

Around Lalibela the walking is a little more difficult at times and we have graded this portion of the tour ‘B’. Many of the churches around Lalibela have large, uneven steps, and both monasteries that we intend to visit have a walk of between 400m and 1km of slow ascent, with occasional short but steep sections. The walking will be fine for anyone with a reasonable level of fitness, but would be difficult for someone with mobility issues, or with breathing issues given the high altitude (over 2000m).

It is worth stressing that whilst the tourist infrastructure in Ethiopia is improving, accommodation does not compare with the well-appointed lodges and camps of other East African destinations such as Kenya and Tanzania. Although this itinerary uses some of the best available accommodation in the country, it still isn’t unusual to experience problems with electricity and plumbing, or lack of maintenance. You should come prepared for basic en suite accommodation and a few problems like leaky plumbing, power cuts, lack of hot water, lights not working, slow service in the restaurant, etc... and hope to be pleasantly surprised. The road infrastructure is improving all the time, however, thanks to a massive road building programme funded by the Chinese, and many (though not all!) roads across the country are now in excellent condition.

Entry requirements

UK citizens require a visa to enter Ethiopia. You can apply and pay for an e-Visa in advance of travel by visiting the Ethiopian e-Visa website: https://www.evisa.gov.et/#/home. The process is fairly quick and easy and saves a little time on arrival in Addis Ababa as you will join a separate e-Visa queue and won’t then need to join a second queue to pay for your visa. You can, however, also obtain and pay for your visa on arrival at Addis Ababa Bole Airport at a cost of US$50 (or the equivalent amount in British pounds, Euros, Ethiopian Birr and numerous other major currencies which are all accepted). Citizens of other countries should check requirements with their nearest Ethiopian embassy.

You should also take malaria prophylactics and some vaccinations are recommended. Details will be sent with pre-departure information, but you should visit your GP or local travel clinic to discuss your travel plans and ask their advice.
Regional departures

Connecting flights to and from Heathrow with British Airways (currently from Manchester, Newcastle, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen, Belfast, Dublin and Jersey) are available at a cost of around £185 return. Ethiopian Airlines has also introduced a new route from Manchester to Addis Ababa (with a touch down in Brussels), which may well coordinate with the timings for this tour. Please contact the Naturetrek office for further information.

Your safety & security

You have chosen to travel to Ethiopia. Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice regularly prior to travel.

Weather

The rainy season in Ethiopia usually runs from June until early October. Therefore, dry and sunny weather should be expected during our tours, as they all take place during the dry season. The tours in October and November are likely to encounter a greener countryside than those in February and March. Daytime temperatures range from 20°C to the low 30s°C (though sometimes much cooler in the mountains), so the climate is comfortably warm. Cloud is likely in the afternoons and although the lowlands are usually dry at this time of year, it can rain in the mountains and be cold at night.

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, 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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