

Georgia's 'Raptor Spectacular!'

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly Batumi

- Day 2** Batumi Botanical Gardens and Raptor Viewpoint in Sakhalvasho

- Day 3** Raptor Viewpoint in Shuamta

- Day 4** Chorokhi delta and Batumi Boulevard

- Day 5** Kolkheti wetlands

- Day 6** Mtirala National Park

- Day 7** Raptor Viewpoint in Shuamta

- Day 8** Fly London

Departs

September

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code GEO02) or brochure

Grading

B - A mix of gentle walks and hill walks.

Focus

Autumn bird migration.

Highlights

- Possible to see hundreds and thousands of raptors on migration!
- Enjoy spectacular Caucasus Mountains
- Experience Georgia's warm hospitality, delicious food and fascinating history



Images from top: Raptors emerging from their roosts, Red-breasted Flycatcher & Broad-billed Sandpiper



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Introduction

The mighty peaks of the Lesser Caucasus Mountains sweep from the Black Sea to the Caspian, forming an imposing natural frontier between the vastness of the Russian Federation to the north and the Republic of Georgia, which, prior to independence in 1991, was also a member State of the former Soviet Union.



Raptor Viewpoint at Sakhalvosh

This natural frontier has resulted in arguable the best place to witness an amazing natural phenomenon; bird migration. Every autumn, over one million birds of prey migrate south from the Russian forests and plains to their wintering grounds in Africa. The Lesser Caucasus Mountains are difficult to cross and birds of prey generally avoid migrating over water as it is energetically more demanding and potentially more dangerous. The solution therefore is to fly over the city of Batumi, through a bottleneck not wider than 10km. This has resulted in a spectacle which can be enjoyed by us all, with the sight of so many raptors passing overhead never failing to impress! With 36 species of raptors having been recorded passing through; the diversity of species alone is remarkable enough and if favourable conditions persist, over 100,000 raptors can be seen passing over in a single day!

Raptor migration in the area typically begins in August and continues through to October, but we have chosen the end of September this tour as this is when peak numbers of Steppe Buzzards can be observed, and traditionally this time provides the greatest chance of seeing migrating eagles.

Migration is notoriously temperamental and weather dependent. We will therefore seek to take advantage of the best conditions for observing the raptor migration, dedicating other times to visiting some of the fabulous birdwatching sites in and around Batumi. The following itinerary seeks to provide information on these sites and the species that we will likely encounter during our visit, but it should be noted that the itinerary will remain flexible and we will likely shuffle things around at short notice, whilst delivering all of the planned excursions over the course of our stay. All changes will be made with the best interests of the group in mind.

Itinerary

Day 1

Fly Batumi

We depart from London on a scheduled service flight to Batumi via Istanbul or Moscow.

Day 2

Batumi Botanical Gardens / Sakhalvasho raptor viewpoint

Arriving in Batumi in the early morning, we quickly transfer to the small coastal town of Chakvi, approximately 30 minutes north of Batumi where we check in to our comfortable hotel and base for the next 7 nights. After settling in and freshening up, we enjoy a late breakfast before venturing to the Batumi Botanical Gardens, approximately 10 minutes' drive away. The gardens offer stunning views across the Black Sea, as well as good chances of seeing one of the area's most prized species, the Krüper's Nuthatch. With an extensive range of habitats on offer, we will spend several hours searching out any migrants that may have dropped in on their journey south, enjoying lunch at the excellent on site café, before venturing a short distance up in to the hills to visit Sakhalvasho raptor viewpoint, the first of two raptor viewing points that we will be using during the duration of our stay.



Krüper's Nuthatch



Greater Spotted Eagle

The Sakhalvasho viewpoint offers stunning views of the western Lesser Caucasus mountain range as well as the Black Sea, and from here we are likely to see large flocks of Dalmatian and Great White Pelicans migrating over the sea. From a raptor perspective nearly anything is possible at this time and we can expect Pallid, Montagu's and Marsh Harrier, Red-Footed Falcon, Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Steppe Buzzard, and Booted, Steppe, Lesser Spotted and Greater Spotted Eagle.

We will spend a few hours in the early to late evening at Sakhalvasho, keeping our eyes peeled for anything passing through. As this is a viewing watch point, most people tend to remain in one place to observe and enjoy the raptors flying overhead. There should therefore be little walking involved whilst at the raptor watch points, but there are walking trails nearby should you wish to stretch your legs and explore.

Day 3

Shuamta Raptor Viewpoint

For those that wish to, there will be some early morning birding around the hotel grounds available that should reveal a variety of migrating passerine species with numerous warblers, flycatchers and redstarts all likely and the added excitement of something much rarer.

After breakfast we will make our way to the second raptor viewpoint in Shuamta, a drive of approximately 30 minutes. The journey takes us to a tiny village located amongst the forested hills, from where we walk uphill for a further 10-15 minutes, before emerging from the trees at a ridge located above the village. Choosing our seating carefully and making ourselves as comfortable as possible, we will settle in and wait to see what passes through, likely enjoying a picnic lunch in the field.



Steppe Buzzard

Historically Shuamta viewpoint offers the better sightings at this time of year, with most eagle species inclined to take a more easterly route. In fact, this viewpoint is occasionally referred to as 'Eagle Mountain', with many species seen, including Lesser Spotted, Greater Spotted, Booted, Steppe, Short-toed and Imperial Eagle, not to mention much rarer species such as Egyptian Vulture.



Black Kite and Black Stork

The end of September is the peak time for Steppe Buzzard migration, and if we time our visits well, we may well witness a 100,000+ Steppe Buzzard day. It's common to see these raptors form 'kettles', which is a term used to describe groups of migrating raptors. These kettles usually consist of the larger raptors, but smaller birds of prey such as falcons and hawks may be spotted in amongst the flocks alongside species such as Black Storks and Black Kites.

If the migration slows or we fancy a walk/change of scenery, we can explore the surrounding forests with likely species including White-backed, Syrian, Lesser, Middle and Great Spotted Woodpecker. Although the chances are slim, Brown Bears also inhabit the area and whilst we may not see the actual animal, there is a good chance that we will see signs of their presence.

Day 4

Chorokhi Delta and Batumi Boulevard

Depending on weather conditions, on at least one of the days we will travel the short distance to the Chorokhi Delta, which offers some of the best birdwatching in the region, thanks to the wide variety of habitats on offer. With a mosaic of marshes, ponds, gravel beaches, mudflats and reedbeds we can expect to see a wide variety of both migrant and resident species.

Species such as Great Reed Warbler, Purple Swamphen, Spotted, Little and Baillon's Crake, Water Rail, White-winged and Whiskered Tern may all be seen around the marshy areas, whilst Citrine Wagtail, Lesser Grey Shrike and Tawny Pipit are just a few of the birds that can be spotted regularly on the delta's plains.



Citrine Wagtail

Around the gravel beaches and coastline, Little, Gull-billed and Caspian Terns can be seen, along with several gull species, including Heuglin's, Slender-billed and Armenian, with Arctic Skua and Black-winged Pratincole also visiting the delta regularly. This area also attracts a fabulous array of wader species, with Greenshank, Curlew and Wood Sandpiper, Sanderling, Temminck's and Little Stint all frequently seen and good chances of Terek and Broad-billed Sandpiper. If we are really lucky, we may even spot Harbour Porpoise, Common or Bottlenose Dolphins in the surrounding waters.



Caspian Tern

Once we have finished exploring the delta, we will move on to the Batumi Boulevard to see which passerines we may find in this rather quirky-looking urban environment. This stop provides us with a great opportunity to sit down and relax with a Turkish coffee at one of the many cafés on offer, whilst continuing to look for birds from the comfort of our seats. Red-breasted Flycatcher and Thrush Nightingale may provide us with good views, whilst other birds frequently encountered include Green Warbler, Spotted Flycatcher, Common Redstart,

Caucasian Chiffchaff and even Wryneck! Further afield in Batumi's many parks and gardens we may spot Turtle Dove, Black-headed and Ortolan Bunting, Bluethroat and Barred Warbler, amongst many others. If one looks hard enough, Batumi really can be full of surprises!

Day 5

Kolkheti wetlands

A slightly longer journey time of approximately one hour will see us experience the delights of the Kolkheti wetlands, an area of vast open water bodies, fens, creeks, water-logged forests and rivers, including the river Rioni, one of only two rivers in the world where the critically endangered European Sea Sturgeon still spawn, a giant of the depths that can live for up to 100 years!

Here we will enjoy a leisurely boat trip across Lake Paliastomi, exploring the many small channels that weave their way through the reedbeds and fens, taking in several heronies on our way. With luck we may be fortunate enough to see Osprey and White-tailed Eagle fishing, alongside flocks of Dalmatian and Great White Pelicans.



Black-necked Grebe

After lunch we will spend the rest of the day exploring the rest of the Kolkheti wetlands and we will likely encounter a range of waterbirds including Black Stork, Common Crane, Great White Egret, Squacco Heron, Glossy Ibis, Great Snipe, and Great Crested, Red-necked and Black-necked Grebe. Notable mammal species that inhabit the swamps and wetland forests of the park include Roe Deer, Wild Boar, and Otter. This is a particularly good area for reptiles and amphibians, with Southern Banded Newt, Southern Crested Newt, Slow Worm, Ring Snake, Dice Snake, the Aesculapian Snake, the Caucasian subspecies of Common Tree Frog and the endemic Artwin Wood Lizard all in attendance.

Day 6

Mtiral National Park



Middle-Spotted Woodpecker

As with the previous site, we will also endeavor to include a visit the Mtiral National Park during our stay, a journey of about 30 minutes from our hotel. This area is known for its high levels of rainfall, and as a consequence, it is one of the most humid areas in Georgia. The forests are teeming with Chestnut and Beech trees, and the area is rich in biodiversity. Roe Deer, Wild Boar, Eurasian Lynx and Brown Bear are all known inhabitants of this area. Several reptiles and amphibians can also be seen, including Caucasian Salamander, Caucasian Toad, Eurasian Marsh Frog and Caucasus Viper.

As usual, we will keep our eyes peeled and ears tuned, hoping to find representatives of the many woodpeckers that live here including Lesser, Middle and Great Spotted, Black, Syrian, White-backed and Green.

There is a beautiful waterfall in the park, and there are opportunities to take a dip in the water if you so wish, being sure to keep an eye out for the Dippers and Grey Wagtails that frequent these areas!

Day 7

We will be returning to the Shuamta viewpoint to get our last fix of this incredible natural phenomenon.

As this is our last evening in Georgia, we will enjoy a meal out in a restaurant in Batumi, sampling the local chacha (Georgian brandy) and experiencing the dancing fountains show in the city.

Raptor Viewpoint in Shuamta



Raptor Migration

Day 8

We have packed a lot of birding into the tour but sadly it will be time to leave this extraordinary country and make our own migration journey home, back to the rather less dramatic scenery of Heathrow!

Fly London

Hunting

One point that needs flagging up is the issue of hunting; the abundance of birds has also inspired a local tradition of illegal killing and there is a chance that you may witness this during your time in Georgia. Naturetrek do not believe that this is a reason to avoid visiting Batumi, and if anything, more people need to visit the area to show that these birds are valued alive, and trips like ours will help to provide an important source of income for the local businesses.

Georgia is famed for its hospitality, and this also applies to the bird hunters and trappers. If you do come across a hunter, please do not be rude or confront them. This holiday is being run in partnership with SABUKO and their approach to monitoring the hunting is based on being on friendly terms with the hunters, which is showing to be effective in terms of education and cooperation. The good work of SABUKO can only continue if the hunters are not antagonised and our intention is to assist SABUKO in the excellent work that they undertake.

Raptor Viewpoints

It should be noted that the facilities at the respective viewpoints are relatively basic. There is a shelter and toilet available, but it is advisable to bring plenty of water and snacks if desired (these can be purchased earlier on in the day). It would also be essential to have a seat or cushion to sit on.

Weather

The weather in Batumi at the end of September tends to be warm and humid. The temperatures will generally reach around 22°C during the day, with little wind, so it should feel quite comfortable. However, please be careful of spending too long in the sun when at the raptor viewpoints.

Thunderstorms in September are quite common, as is a moderate amount of rain and we therefore advise bringing waterproofs. Whilst this may inconvenience us slightly, from a birding perspective, a short sharp shower or storm is never a bad thing and more often than not, helps to make some species more visible.

Food & accommodation included in the price

Comfortable hotel, all rooms with private facilities. All meals are included.

Your safety & security

You have chosen to travel to Georgia. 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 – www.fco.gov.uk/travel regularly prior to travel.

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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