

Georgia in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly London to Tbilisi
Day 2	Arrive Tbilisi & drive to Kazbegi
Day 3/4	Kazbegi
Day 5	Tbilisi
Day 6/7	Sighnaghi
Day 8	Vashlovani National Park
Day 9	Depart Tbilisi, arrive London

Departs

April / May

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code GEO03)

Grading

Grade B. Gentle walks with some inclines.

Focus

Birds, with some cultural and historical interests.

Highlights

- Spectacular Caucasus Mountains
- Caucasian Black Grouse, Caucasian Snowcock, Great Rosefinch & Güldenstadt's Redstart
- Fabulous passerine and raptor spring bird migration
- Beautiful rock monasteries of Davit Gareja
- Experience Georgia's warm hospitality, delicious food and fascinating history



From top: Caucasian Snowcock, Gergeti Church & Güldenstadt's Redstart



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Introduction

With several of our tour leaders having returned from personal trips to Georgia praising its fantastic wildlife, scenery, delicious food and warm hospitality, we felt that our original Georgian itinerary was due a revamp. Working with a team of expert local ornithologists, we have designed this new tour that covers both the country's high mountains and lowland steppe and offers a fantastic array of bird species, culture and landscapes.

Arriving in Tbilisi, we journey north to the village of Kazbegi in the heart of the Greater Caucasus Mountains, our base for the next three nights. The village offers easy access to a tantalising variety of high alpine species and it is not unusual to hear the haunting, curlew-like call of Caucasian Snowcock from the comfort of our hotel! Scrubby areas of blackthorn nearby often hold Great Rosefinch and the stunning Güldenstädt's Redstart, whilst a visit to the picturesque 14th



Tbilisi

century Gergeti Trinity Church offers a beautiful setting in which to search for Caucasian Black Grouse, perhaps beneath a soaring Lammergeyer and Griffon Vultures. Nearby cliffs are the haunt of Wallcreeper, whilst riverine vegetation is likely to attract migrants including Semi-collared and Red-breasted Flycatchers. Weather permitting, we will spend an afternoon watching the raptor migration through the gorge, where over 30 species have been observed! A very leisurely drive back to Tbilisi sees us stopping frequently to explore both the spectacular Jvari Pass, where we have a good chance of White-winged Snowfinch, and several other sites where we'll be looking for Green Warbler, Semi-collared Flycatcher and Krüper's Nuthatch.

Next we travel east, venturing out into Georgia's vast open steppes. Here, shallow reed-fringed lakes provide the chance of Dalmatian Pelican, Grey-headed Swamphen and Pygmy Cormorant amongst a variety of waders including Broad-billed Sandpiper. Near the beautiful 6th century rock monasteries of Davit Gareja we will search for Rock Nuthatch, and both Pied and Finch's Wheatears, whilst the historical town of Signaghi — with its breathtaking views of the Greater Caucasus range — is an ideal base for our 2-night stay. Exploring the surrounding steppes and riverine forest bordering the Lori River, we hope to encounter Eastern Imperial Eagle, Black Francolin and even Common Pheasant, a native bird of this region.

Our final full day sees us driving through the vast agricultural plains of Shiarki, an excellent site for resident Saker and migrant Pallid Harriers and Demoiselle Cranes, before visiting the spectacular Vashlovani National Park for a further range of species including Chukar, Lesser Spotted Eagle, Tawny Pipit and Menetries's Warbler.

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

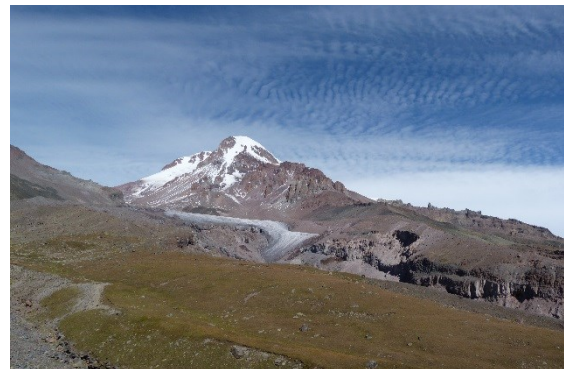
In flight

We depart from London on a scheduled service flight to Tbilisi via Istanbul.

Days 2

Kazbegi

Our arrival in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi will be in the early morning and after an opportunity to freshen up after the overnight flight, we will leave the city behind and drive north towards the mountains. As the road climbs steadily higher through an impressively rugged terrain our progress will be slow but it will give a chance to look out for any roadside birds which are likely to include Black Redstarts, Water Pipits and possibly a few other hardy species such as Rock Thrush and



Mount Kazbek

Red-billed Chough. The weather in early May is difficult to predict, and whilst the landscape may be bathed in spring sunshine with bird song all around, it could also be bitterly cold with snow covering the ground so the style and content of the birding will be dictated by conditions. In some respects the snow would be preferable as it will be helpful in keeping the montane species around Kazbegi from ascending to the higher elevations. After several hours of travelling, the road traverses the 2395 metre Cross Pass and it is here that we will pause for a while to scan the surrounding area for the first of the special Georgian birds, the Caucasian Black Grouse. These rare and shy grouse are regularly seen here but finding them could demand a careful search as they are not as demonstrative as their commoner relative and may be discreetly feeding some distance from the road. Although the main display period is earlier in the year, the presence of females or a rival male may encourage one of the males to perform his display and this would certainly help us locate the birds as well as provide a superb spectacle.

From the Pass the road begins to snake down towards a wide valley in which is situated our final destination, the village of Kazbegi. Grassy roadside meadows mark a change of habitat as we draw closer to the village and doubtless we will have further stops along the way as migrants such as Red-backed Shrikes or Rollers put in an appearance. At length we will reach the hotel which will serve as our base for the next three nights, and after sorting out our rooms and taking lunch, there will be a first birding excursion into the valley in search of the special birds that have brought us to this remote mountainous region.

Day 3 / 4

Kazbegi

We have two full days in which to thoroughly explore the range of habitats in the countryside surrounding the village. Each of our target birds has a particular habitat preference and depending upon the weather conditions we will methodically visit the key sites in turn. Perhaps one of the first birds we might see is the Great Rosefinch. These large, pink seed-eaters are a true mountain species which mostly occurs over 3,000 metres in the Himalayas, but here in Georgia there is a small relict population mostly confined to the Caucasus which has recently been separated taxonomically from the eastern form. We might encounter them in almost any patch of open weedy ground in the vicinity of the village, or on the lower slopes of the mountain, and reasonably sized flocks may congregate as they await the clearance of snow from the higher elevations. Almost Starling size, these are powerful, robust finches accustomed to the harsh demands of high altitude life but they seem content to enjoy this somewhat easier lifestyle for a few weeks and some of the males may begin singing as if rehearsing for the serious business of establishing territories when they return to the peaks.



Great Rosefinch



Guldenstadt's Redstart

If the Great Rosefinch is veritably a Goliath among its other Palearctic congeners, so too is the exquisite Guldenstadt's Redstart. They are four centimetres larger than the more familiar Common Redstart, and are no frequenter of sylvan glades, preferring instead the wild boulder strewn slopes near the summit of Mount Kazbeg. Like the Rosefinch, this is also a species with a primarily Himalayan distribution but the high Caucasus provide an equivalent Palearctic habitat

for these hardy birds. Later in the season it will require a demanding uphill trek to reach their summer domain, but we will be hoping that like the other montane dwellers they will be temporarily biding time in the Kazbeg valley where we hope to come upon spectacularly beautiful males and their more soberly plumaged companions quietly chasing insects amid the riverside scrub. Arguably, this is the most brightly coloured of all the redstarts and the male is a stunning creature indeed, his plumage a blend of black and deep rufous emphasised by a pure white crown and eye-catching broad white wing-bars.



Caucasian Snowcock

The third member of our Caucasus trio is supremely adapted for mountain life and is less deterred by the prevailing conditions, but fortunately the natural range of the resident Caucasian Snowcock includes rocky crags not too far from our village base. The strangely Curlew-like calls of the Snowcock echo over the mountain slopes and are frustratingly difficult to pin down, but by following the road to a convenient locality and carefully telescoping the rock formations, we should locate a pair or two of these large specialist gamebirds, scuttling across the rocks or the male throwing out his challenge from a top a prominent crag. Even the worst of blizzards will not make the Snowcocks forsake the mountain slopes, but they will retreat to lower levels and meetings between rival males at this time of year are likely to result in outbursts of calling which will aid our efforts to find them.

The montane slopes surrounding Gergeti Church provide a spectacular setting to look for Caucasian Black Grouse and we shall enjoy an early morning visit to this exquisite location. Although our initial priority will be to see the 'Caucasian specialities' we will not neglect the many other interesting birds likely to be encountered around Kazbegi. Golden Eagles and the occasional Lammergeyer may be glimpsed sailing over the ridges and crags of the mountains but other migrant raptors such as Honey Buzzard, Black Kite or Montagu's Harrier could also drift overhead if conditions are favourable. In some of the passes, over 30 species of raptor have been recorded passing through on migration and if the weather allows we shall spend an exciting afternoon raptor watching.



Wallcreeper

Delightful little Red-fronted Serins are a common, and conspicuous resident whilst patches of woodland resound to the repetitive song of numerous Mountain Chiffchaffs. If we are fortunate we may have our attention caught by a Wallcreeper shuffling its crimson wings as it explores rock crevices for spiders, but other more predictable mountain residents likely to be observed include Shorelark, Rock Thrush, Snowfinch and Alpine Accentor. Best known in

Britain as a winter visitor in small numbers and a decreasing moorland nesting species, the Twite is another upland bird which occurs in the vicinity of Kazbegi, often frequenting waste areas at the very edge of the village, alongside Corncrakes, Rock Buntings and East Caucasian Tur.

Whilst many of the birds in the valley will be preparing to breed in Georgia, their numbers will be augmented daily by variable numbers of north-bound travellers seeking to cross the mountains and continue onward to more distant nesting places in Russia or beyond. The numbers of such migrants, and the range of species, will depend upon the prevailing weather conditions but on days that are not conducive for movement, the trees and bushes in the Kazbeg valley may be filled with an interesting diversity of birds seeking food and rest before continuing their long flight. In early May the blend of familiar and exotic could include; Turtle Dove, Wryneck, Cuckoo,

Roller, Red-backed Shrike, Whinchat, Wheatear, Ring Ouzel, White-throated Robin, Great Reed Warbler, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Ortolan Bunting and Common Rosefinch. One little *Phylloscopus* warbler we will be particularly hoping to discover is the very local Green Warbler, recently split as a separate species from Greenish. Later in the summer this is a numerous inhabitant of woodlands in this part of Georgia but the majority will not return until after our visit so we can only anticipate finding the first few early arrivals.

One of the delights of being on a migration route is that no two days are the same and every excursion we make will be filled with exciting possibilities, even though we may be visiting the same areas on numerous occasions. Not all the temporary visitors are passerines and we could also find Wood Sandpipers, Ruff or other waders taking advantage of roadside pools for a quick feed.

Day 5

Tbilisi

At the end of our exciting, and eventful stay at Kazbegi we enjoy a leisurely journey back to Tbilisi, but not before one final morning of mountain birding to take a last look at the local birdlife and to see whether any new migrants have arrived overnight. The drive back to the capital will be a leisurely affair, and no doubt will be punctuated by stops for roadside birding and a visit to the spectacular Jvari Pass for White-winged Snowfinch. Our journey south will also see us visit a site for Green Warbler and Semi-collared Flycatcher, as well as a visit to one of the easternmost breeding sites of Kruper's Nuthatch. Arriving in Tbilisi, we have an opportunity to check in to our comfortable hotel and freshen up, before enjoying some fabulous Georgian cuisine in a nearby restaurant.



White-winged Snowfinch

Day 6 / 7

Sighnaghi

Today we continue journey east to the historical town of Sighnaghi, with its stunning views of the Greater Caucasus range. Our journey will take us through Georgia's vast steppe, with its reed fringed lakes and rocky outcrops.

Once again the vagaries of migration will add an element of surprise to the birdwatching and suitable thickets of shrub might contain a splendid medley of species. The birds typical of this area in early May include Roller, Hoopoe, European Bee-eater, Calandra Lark, Pied and Isabelline Wheatears, Tawny Pipit, Black-headed and Corn Buntings. The development of thermals as the morning begins to warm might encourage numerous Montagu's Harriers to continue their journeys after an overnight rest whilst other raptors such as Short-toed Eagle, Honey Buzzard, Griffon and Egyptian Vultures are likely to be observed in this area. A stop at the very shallow

Jandari Lake, presents us with the chance to scan for Dalmatian Pelican, Grey-headed Swamphen and Pygmy Cormorants, whilst on the shoreline we may find all manner of waders, including Broad-billed Sandpiper.

The highlight of the journey will undoubtedly be the beautiful rock monasteries of Davit Gareja, which have been carved in to the cliffs from the 6th century onwards. This fantastic cultural setting offers with some fine birding, and we are likely to find Blue Rock Thrush, Rock Nuthatch, Pied and Finsch's Wheatears and even the occasional Wallcreeper. The quality of the birding is further enhanced by the long list of regular migrants which includes; Lesser Grey, Red-backed and Woodchat Shrikes, Nightingale, Golden Oriole, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Barred, Orphee, Menetries's, Green and Olivaceous Warblers.



Davit Gareja

Please note that the optional walk to the top of the hill at David-Gareja is steep and requires a greater level of mobility than other walks on this tour.

The steppes in the east of Georgia are crossed by the Lori River, which has retained much of its natural character and is bordered by some excellent riverine forest. We shall spend a full day exploring this fabulous habitat and we can expect to find a tantalising array of species. It is here that we find some of the highest densities of Imperial Eagle anywhere in the world, with on average, a nest every 5km along the river! In the undergrowth Black Francolin and Common Pheasant occur, whilst Pygmy Cormorants, egrets, White-tailed Eagle, Whiskered and White-winged Black Terns congregate around the wetlands. Crossing the river near the Dali Reservoir, we will pass a small gorge where Rollers, Lesser Kestrel and Bee-eaters breed commonly.

Day 8

Vashlovani National Park

Our final full day in Georgia sees us driving through the agricultural plains of Shiraki to Vashlovani National Park. The plains are an important stop-over for migrant Demoiselle Cranes and Pallid Harriers, as well as providing excellent habitat for resident Saker. Vashlovani National Park is a wonderfully wild area stretching all the way to the Azeri border. The park is notable for its unique, bad-land-like landscapes of desert, semi-desert steppe vegetation and arid and deciduous forests, supporting a wide range of birds, mammals and plants. Although difficult to see, mammal species include, Wolf, Lynx, Persian Gazelle, Porcupine and even Caucasian Leopard. From an avian perspective we are likely to encounter a range of steppe species, as well as good numbers of Black and Griffon Vultures.

Returning to Tbilisi for our final night, we are able to enjoy an excellent farewell dinner, reflecting on the many happy memories that we will have of this fascinating country.

Day 9

Fly London

We leave Tbilisi on an early morning flight to London, via Istanbul.

Weather

This is a tour of contrasting weather conditions and participants should be prepared for a range of temperatures. In the mountains snow can fall and blizzard conditions occur on occasions but with the advance of spring it is also possible to experience warm, sunny days with no precipitation. Kazbegi does however lie at an altitude of 1700 metres and the cooler mountain air is likely to temper even the warmest of days. Further south any precipitation will fall as rain, not snow, and hot daytime temperatures can be anticipated.

Accommodation & Food

Accommodation will be in a simple, but comfortable hotel at Kazbegi and a standard tourist hotel in Tbilisi. Rooms will have private facilities. All meals are included in the tour cost from arrival in Georgia to departure although any snacks or meals eaten in transit at the airports are not included.

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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