

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	Dedoplistkaro
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 & Gldenstadt'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

Lesser Spotted Eagle



Gergeti Church



Common Rosefinch



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Introduction

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 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 direct to Tbilisi. Occasionally we may have to use an indirect route via Istanbul, however this will be avoided where possible.

Days 2

Kazbegi

Our arrival in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi will be in the early morning and, after an opportunity to freshen up following the overnight flight, we leave the city behind and drive north towards the mountains. As the road climbs through rugged scenery, we'll keep watch for roadside birds such as



Caucasian Black Grouse

Black Redstarts, Water Pipits, Rock Thrush and Red-billed Chough. Early May weather can be unpredictable, ranging from spring sunshine to snow, and the conditions will help shape our birding throughout the day. At Cross Pass, we pause to search for our first major target, the elusive 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. From there the road descends into the valley at Kazbegi, where 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 to explore the varied habitats around Kazbegi, visiting the key sites according to weather and bird activity. Among the first specialities we hope to see is Great Rosefinch, which may appear in open ground around the village or on the lower slopes, sometimes in good-sized flocks. We will also look for the stunning Guldenstadt's Redstart on rocky slopes and riverbank scrub, and the hardy Caucasian Snowcock on the crags above the valley.

An early morning visit to Gergeti Church offers another chance for Caucasian Black Grouse, while the surrounding slopes may produce Golden Eagle, Lammergeyer and other raptors passing overhead. We will also keep an eye out for Red-fronted Serin, Mountain Chiffchaff, Wallcreeper, Shorelark, Snowfinch, Alpine Accentor, Twite and East Caucasian Tur. The valley can also be lively with migrants, and in May we may encounter species such as Roller, Red-backed Shrike, White-throated Robin, Green Warbler, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Ortolan Bunting and Common Rosefinch. We will also make time for raptor watching if conditions are favourable.



Great Rosefinch

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



Krüper's Nuthatch

After a final morning's birding in Kazbegi, we travel back to Tbilisi at a leisurely pace, with stops en route for roadside birds and key sites such as Jvari Pass. The journey south may also bring chances for White-winged Snowfinch, Green Warbler, Semi-collared Flycatcher and Krüper's Nuthatch. We arrive back in the capital in time to check into our hotel, freshen up and enjoy a relaxed Georgian dinner.

Day 6 / 7

Dedoplistkaro

Today we continue journey east to Dedoplistkaro, 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. This is prime territory for steppe birds and migrants, with chances of Roller, Hoopoe, European Bee-eater, Calandra Lark, wheatears, buntings and a fine selection of raptors.

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



Barred Warbler

into 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, Orphean, Menetries's, Green and Olivaceous Warblers.

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.



Whiskered Tern

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 takes us through the agricultural plains of Shiraki to Vashlovani National Park, one of Georgia's wildest landscapes. The area's desert and semi-desert habitats can hold Demoiselle Crane, Pallid Harrier, Saker and a strong cast of steppe species, along with Cinereous and Griffon Vultures. 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.



Pallid Harrier

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 direct to London. Although, again, we may occasionally have to use an indirect route 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.

Vehicles

During our time in Dedoplistkaro and Vashlovani National Park, we will be travelling by 4×4 vehicles on unpaved roads.

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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