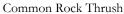
Georgia - Wildlife, Wine & History

Naturetrek Tour Report

28th May - 5th June 2025







Caucasian Agama



Knapweed Fritillary



Jungle Cat

Tour report and photos by John Moseley and George Natsvlishvili



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants: Giorgi Natsvlishvili, Giorgi Zangaladze, John Moseley (leaders) with nine Naturetrek clients

Summary

This was the inaugural, mixed-focus tour to explore the spectacular scenery, wonderful wildlife and fascinating cultural history of Georgia. We visited fabulous local wineries, beautiful churches and monasteries and saw a fantastic range of bird, mammal, reptile and plant species. Highlights included Lammergeier, Montagu's Harrier, Red-fronted Serin, Goitered Gazelle, Levantine Viper and, remarkably, a Jungle Cat.

Day 1

Wednesday 28th May

Our Georgian adventure began with an early afternoon flight for three clients and one UK leader (myself), from London Heathrow, with a three-an-a-half hour layover in Istanbul, before our connecting flight to Tbilisi. Ideas of utilising a sleep pod where quickly dispensed with as the time passed relatively quickly with a combination of a late inbound flight arrival and a good cup of coffee.

Day 2

Thursday 29th May

We arrived in Tbilisi at around 5.30am. Here, we were met by our driver and naturalist guide, the first of several Giorgis, affectionately known as 'George' to his parents and subsequently by the rest of the group too.

Our very comfortable hotel was located up a quiet side street and a stone's throw from the city's popular botanical gardens. After checking-in and some welcome rest, we met up with the rest of the group, and our second Giorgi, who was our cultural guide for the duration of the trip, before heading out for a cultural tour of the city.

Both Giorgi and George proved to be wonderful guides, each equally adept at bringing to life the subject under discussion, whether it be history, politics, geography, food and drink, popular culture or wildlife. It was impossible to be left wanting with the two Giorgis at our side, and we were very lucky to have such kind, considerate, patient and knowledgeable guides, who complimented each other perfectly.

Our cultural tour encompassed meandering streets, hidden chapels, busy restaurant-filled alleyways, sweeping vistas and various artistic points of interest, such as the city's open-air puppetry show at the Gabriadze Theatre, which some guests booked a ticket for that night. Giorgi provided us with an enlightening narrative of the turbulent history of the city, which includes being sacked or partially destroyed no less than twenty-six times. We also learned how to correctly pronounce 'Tbilisi' which is to stress the first 'i', as in T-bi-li-si.

Our first taste of the sensational Georgian cuisine came at a little street café where we stopped for lunch. The week before our visit, a Jamie Oliver programme had aired in the UK, in which he made one of the national dishes, a delicious vegetarian sharing platter called Gobi, at the sister restaurant of the spot we were lunching at. Accordingly, there was a palpable buzz that Georgian food has rightly been put on the international cuisine map and the lunch met with hearty approval.

Once the cultural tour concluded, we were free to make our own arrangements for dinner and catch-up on some much-needed sleep.

Day 3

Friday 30th May

Today was ours to spend entirely at our leisure and further explore our surroundings. I decided to make my way to the nearby Ponichala Reserve, a Ramsar site of pools and ponds dotted alongside the Kura River, bordered by mixed deciduous and coniferous woodland, located on the outskirts of Tbilisi. George kindly agreed to accompany me in his free time and together we set off to explore the site. Shortly after arrival, we heard both Golden Oriole and Common Nightingale singing in the woods, but they remained typically elusive, although a Syrian Woodpecker was spotted.

A party of Whiskered Tern were seen hovering over the water which was dotted by several Caucasian Terrapin and both Pygmy and Great Cormorant flew past, kindly offering a size comparison as they went, while a Western Marsh Harrier was seen quartering the reed beds. A Common Kingfisher was heard but not seen, as was the robust call of the Great Reed Warbler. However, pairs and threes of European Bee-Eater were both seen and heard repeatedly on what was, after a cool start, rapidly turning into a warm and sunny day. Our first key species for the region were a group of Armenian Gull on the far bank of the river. As we turned our attention to the mixed wood which borders the entrance, we heard and then saw an obliging Middle-spotted Woodpecker. Several resplendently gaudy European Roller were also seen, at varying distances, but always wary of us, their observers. As the heat of the day continued to climb, a number of dragonflies and damselflies were spotted along the path verges, including Keeled Skimmer, Broad Scarlet, Black-tailed Skimmer and Banded Demoiselle. A sizeable Glass Snake, a type of legless lizard of the genus Ophisaurus, was seen lounging under a bush, as was a Caspian Green Lizard. On the way out of the reserve, we spotted a perched Levant Sparrowhawk, giving great views, and found our first Spurthighed Tortoise, one of several on the trip, minding its own business in a patch of long grass.

After returning to Tbilisi, I decided to explore the nearby botanical gardens on foot. Although my walk did not turn up the Krüper's Nuthatch which nest there, I did find a Queen of Spain Fritillary busily visiting the flower beds. The day was concluded with a fabulous meal at a nearby restaurant. This was our first opportunity to sample some of the delicious red, white and amber Georgian wine for which the country is rightly famed, having been the birthplace of viticulture some 8,000 years ago, as well as a bewildering array of courses, including the iconic Khachapuri, a baked flatbread oozing with molten cheese, which was to become a firm favourite throughout the trip. We also learned that is a Georgian tradition that each new glass of wine at a meal is celebrated with a toast on whatever topic is deemed appropriate at the time: family, politics, friendship, love etc. and so we were duly treated to the first of several toasts which again became a regular feature of our tour.

Day 4

Saturday 31st May

Today, we headed east towards our base for the next two nights, the town of Dedoplistskaro, more commonly known as simply 'Dedo'. This enabled us to access the first of two fabulous wildlife hotspots in the region: the semi-arid landscape of the Chachuna Managed Reserve. For our outing, we switched from our comfortable 18-seater minibus to a convoy of 4x4 vehicles, designed to cope with the rugged terrain of the reserve. Although we were unable to access the site of the geological phenomenon known colloquially as 'mud volcanoes', we were nonetheless treated to a full day of transversing the alluringly beautiful steppe landscape, stopping at various viewpoints, judiciously selected by our guides, to soak up the jaw-dropping views, whilst also scanning for wildlife. Black Francolin were heard forcefully repeating their 'Keek, keek, kek-ke-kek' call across the reserve and a Black Stork was seen at a reliable nest site on a cliff face. The rising temperatures were perfect for raptors, which didn't

disappoint, with great views of Egyptian and Griffon Vulture, Short-toed Snake Eagle, Eastern Imperial Eagle, with the tell-tale landing lights along the forewing, another Levant Sparrowhawk and plentiful Montagu's Harrier, a bird which is effectively extirpated in the UK, but which is thankfully still common here. Both Lesser and Common Kestrel were seen, Hoopoe flashed across the road and more European Roller frequented the roadside telegraph wires, as did Woodchat and Lesser Grey Shrikes. The undoubted star sighting of the day, however, came as we were beginning to flag in the dry heat of late afternoon. We'd be joined for the day by a local guide, Temo, who was in the lead vehicle which came to an abrupt stop as there was something on the track approximately 100 yards ahead of us, loitering in the heat haze. It turned out to be a Felix Chaus, or Jungle Cat, also known as Reed Cat or Swamp Cat, and is native to the Eastern Mediterranean region and the Caucasus. The astonishment on Temo's face told its own story and he later speculated that it may have been sick, so rare was such a sighting. Feeling blessed, we returned to our hotel and readied ourselves for dinner, which was taken in Temo's family home with all the usual Georgian conviviality that we were becoming rapidly accustomed to.

Day 5 Sunday 1st June

Today was undoubtedly the warmest day of our tour and was to be spent exploring the incomparably beautiful Vashlovani National Park. Vashlovani encompasses 35,000 hectares of vast steppe plains and is located in the far eastern corner of Georgia, close to the border with Azerbaijan, which accounts for the high number of eastern specialities to be found here. Indeed, Vashlovani was one of the last recorded sites of Persian Leopard, seen as recently as 2009, that may still be using Georgia as a wildlife corridor, which runs down into West Azerbaijan. In the 4x4s, we ascended to our first viewpoint of the day, a high ridge with panoramic views, stopping, not for the first time, to gently usher a Spur-thighed Tortoise off the track. As the Tortoise spend most of their time in long grass, they are often plagued by ticks and so the guides would take the opportunity to remove the ticks from the animal, giving it some temporary relief. Chukar Partridge and Common Quail were also seen trundling along the track or catapulting up from nearby cover respectively. Montagu's Harriers again gave great views and a Little Owl stared at us defiantly from a farm building. Crested, Short-toed and Calandra Larks were everywhere, as were Isabelline, Pied and Eastern Black-eared Wheatear, as well as Black-headed Bunting.

Given the warm weather, it was unsurprising that there were a number of butterflies on the wing, including Common Swallowtail, Large, Small and Green-veined Whites, Common Orange-tip, Clouded Yellow, Brimstone, Painted Lady and Common Tiger Blue.

The park permits arranged by our guides enabled us to enter a restricted-access area which has been chosen as the location for a programme to reintroduce Goitered Gazelle, and a lone male was duly found.

Later this morning, we entered a gorge where the heat bouncing off the canyon walls encouraged a number of reptiles to show themselves, including Caucasian Agama, Rapid Racerunner and Steppe-runner. A shaded area provided our picnic lunch spot, which also yielded a Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin, before we headed off to explore more of the park, which included a visit to an eerily abandoned Russian airbase, complete with crumbling hangars and rusting MIG fighter jets.

The landscape was every bit as integral to our enjoyment of the day as the wildlife we'd seen, and although we were due to head back to the hotel, our guides encouraged us to take in one last vista, and we duly stood, jaws agape at the magnificently-chiselled slopes of the so-called Vashlovani 'Badlands'. Just for good measure, our

viewpoint also provided our first Western Rock Nuthatch and Rock Bunting. Duly overwhelmed by everything we had seen today, we headed back to our hotel to freshen up and enjoy more unstinting hospitality with Temo and his family.

Day 6

Monday 2nd June

After two days of largely wildlife-focused activity, it was time to leave Depo and head north towards Kakheti, making a number of cultural stops enroute to our base for the next two days in Stepantsminda. The Ikalto Monastery was our first stop, which was undergoing major restorative works to prevent it from crumbling into oblivion, followed by a visit to the Alaverdi Cathedral, complete with its magnificent dome, vaulted ceiling and frescoed walls. Our lunch stop was a local, family-owned winery where we watched enthralled as the mother and daughter deftly crafted Khinkali dumplings of two varieties, one of meat and the other vegetarian, and which were to form part of another banquet-like lunch. Being a winery, we were invited to sample a range of home-grown wines, all of which were delicious, before the owner took us into his cellar and gave us a fascinating insight into the wine-making process using Qvevri clay vessels which are sunken, neck-deep, into the cool earth of the ground. Suitably enlightened, we continued on to the town of Stepantsminda in the north-eastern Khevi province.

Day 7

Tuesday 3rd June

Our plan today was to visit Juta for its superb scenery, wildflowers, butterflies and birds. However, a significant landslide has made this area increasingly inaccessible, so we decided instead to head for the equally appealing Truso Valley. The weather was decidedly overcast with spots of rain but later, sunny spells would occasionally punctuate the day. On our way to Truso, we stopped at a spot to scan the surrounding rock faces for birds and mammals. A healthy degree of patience, skill and squinting yielded three East Caucasian Tur, a species of mountain goat, placidly poised on impossibly vertiginous cliffs. A Red-backed Shrike was seen, as well as our first Common (or Rufoustailed) Rock-Thrush, perched atop a telegraph pole. Somewhat frustratingly, a group of rangers told us we'd missed Bearded Vulture (or Lammergeier) by about twenty minutes.

We pushed on towards Truso Valley, the parking area of which is pockmarked with sulphurous outpourings. Crossing a footbridge, we made our way through a small stand of Alder, which marked the beginning of the valley trail, and which held both Green Warbler and Mountain Chiffchaff. The botanists among our group were delighted to see a profusion of wildflowers, including Viper's-bugloss, Cream Scabious, Ground Pine, Burnt-tip Orchid, Spring Gentian and Prophet Flower. These were spotted along the path which led eventually to the ruins of the medieval Zakagori Fortress, which held a pleasingly bold Common (Rufous-tailed) Rock-Thrush. A passing Golden Eagle was seen moving along the ridge line, as were numerous Griffon and Cinerous Vultures. On our way back to the minibus, a small family group of Caucasian Chamois were spotted, impossibly distant but just about discernible in the murk through scopes. We returned to our hotel in Stepantsminda and another ample and delicious evening meal.

Day 8

Thursday 4th June

Our last full day began with a visit to Gergeti Trinity Church, a 14th-century Christian Orthodox church located in the shadow of the snow-capped Mount Kazbek, and which must compete for recognition as one of the most beautifully situated places of worship in the world. Legend has it that the church was erected by a monk named

Gabriel, who was inspired to build it after seeing an image of the Holy Trinity on a nearby rock. The interior of the church is beautifully decorated with frescoes and religious artifacts, including an icon of St. Nino, the patron saint of Georgia. Although much of the exterior was sadly obscured by the inevitable restoration work, it was still a memorable visit in an unsurpassable setting. Soon afterwards, we began our long journey back towards Tbilisi, stopping at the rock-hewn town of Uplistsikhe, which translates as 'the Lord's fortress', dating back to the 6th Century BC. The town was an important way point along the Silk Road, which connected Eastern Asia with the Middle East and Europe and enabled the trade of spices, silk, cotton, paper, gunpowder and horses as well as the spread of religious ideologies such as Buddhism and Islam. On what was an incredibly blustery day, we followed our guides on a cultural tour of the town, before the gusting winds forced us back to the minibus.

Our next stop on the way back to Tbilisi was at the Peace Monument near Gudauri, a pseudo-political statement to celebrate a supposed alliance between Russia and Georgia, although the truth is somewhat more nebulous. Whatever the motivation for erecting it, it is an impressive artwork of murals depicting typical scenes from Russian and Georgian life, and commands spectacular views up and down the valley wall it clings to. As we boarded the bus and continued wending our way down the valley, a Bearded Vulture (or Lammergeier), a bird we had been assiduously scanning for all week, floated effortlessly past us at eye level and continued to the very spot we had just vacated.

We made another stop for a delicious lunch at a Bavarian-style restaurant, followed by a visit to the late medieval Ananuri Fortress Complex, which stands on the banks of the Zhinvali Reservoir.

Afterwards, we continued to our overnight stop, the Ateni Winery, and adjoining guesthouse run by the Vacheishvili family. At dinner, we were once again treated to an array of traditional fare, more wine and speeches of farewell and thanks. With some of our group leaving early the following morning for our return flights home, we said our goodbyes and so ended a fabulous, inaugural trip to a wonderful country which has so much to offer. Gagimarjos, the two Giorgis and Naturetrek!

Day 9 Friday 5th June

Arrival back in the UK



Lesser Grey Shrike



Spur-thighed Tortoise



Rapid Racerunner



Western Rock Nuthatch

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name				N	/lay-Ju	ne 202	5		
	Scientific name	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5
Black Francolin	Francolinus francolinus			Н					
Common Quail	Coturnix coturnix				✓		Н		
Chukar Partridge	Alectoris chukar				✓				
European Nightjar	Caprimulgus europaeus							Н	
Alpine Swift	Tachymarptis melba				✓		✓		
Common Swift	Apus apus	✓	√	√					
Common Cuckoo	Cuculus canorus		Н	Н	Н		Н	√	
Rock Dove	Columba livia	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
Common Wood Pigeon	Columba palumbus	✓	√	√	✓				
European Turtle Dove	Streptopelia turtur				✓				
Laughing Dove	Spilopelia senegalensis	✓	√						
Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis		√						
Common Sandpiper	Actitis hypoleucos		✓				✓		
Armenian Gull	Larus armenicus		✓	✓					
Whiskered Tern	Chlidonias hybrida		✓						
Black Stork	Ciconia nigra			√	√				
Pygmy Cormorant	Microcarbo pygmaeus		√						
Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo		√	√					
Black-crowned Night Heron	Nycticorax nycticorax	✓	√						
Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea				√				
Little Egret	Egretta garzetta	√	√						
Bearded Vulture	Gypaetus barbatus							√	
Egyptian Vulture	Neophron percnopterus			√					
Griffon Vulture	Gyps fulvus			√	√		√		
Cinereous Vulture	Aegypius monachus			√			√		
Short-toed Snake Eagle	Circaetus gallicus				√				
Eastern Imperial Eagle	Aquila heliaca			√					
Golden Eagle	Aquila chrysaetos						/		
Levant Sparrowhawk	Accipiter brevipes		√	√					
Western Marsh Harrier	Circus aeruginosus		/	√					
Montagu's Harrier	Circus pygargus			√	√			√	
Long-legged Buzzard	Buteo rufinus				√				
Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo		√		√				
Little Owl	Athene noctua			√	· √				
Eurasian Hoopoe	Upupa epops			· √	√	√		√	√
European Roller	Coracias garrulus		√	√	· √			•	_
Common Kingfisher	Alcedo atthis		Н	•	•				
European Bee-eater	Merops apiaster		√	√	√				
Middle Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocoptes medius		√	•	•				
Syrian Woodpecker	Dendrocopos syriacus		√						
Great Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocopos major		Н						
European Green Woodpecker	Picus viridis		Н						
Lesser Kestrel	Falco naumanni			√			/		
Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus			✓ ✓	√		✓ ✓		
Peregrine Falcon	Falco peregrinus			V			V		
i cicgilile i alcoll	i alco peregillus				✓				

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Common name	Scientific name	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5	
Eurasian Golden Oriole	Oriolus oriolus		✓		Н	Н				
Lesser Grey Shrike	Lanius minor			✓	✓					
Woodchat Shrike	Lanius senator			✓	✓					
Red-backed Shrike	Lanius collurio				✓	✓	✓			
Eurasian Jay	Garrulus glandarius		✓	✓		✓				
Eurasian Magpie	Pica pica		√	✓	√	√				
Red-billed Chough	Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax			✓			√			
Western Jackdaw	Coloeus monedula			√						
Hooded Crow	Corvus cornix	√	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Northern Raven	Corvus corax					✓	✓			
Great Tit	Parus major		Н		Н					
Eurasian Skylark	Alauda arvensis			√	√		Н			
Crested Lark	Galerida cristata			√	√					
Calandra Lark	Melanocorypha calandra			√	√					
Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica	√	√	√	√	√	√			
Western House Martin	Delichon urbicum			√	√		√			
Long-tailed Tit	Aegithalos caudatus		√							
Mountain Chiffchaff	Phylloscopus sindianus						√			
Green Warbler	Phylloscopus nitidus						√			
Great Reed Warbler	Acrocephalus arundinaceus		Н							
Eurasian Blackcap	Sylvia atricapilla		Н		Н					
Common Whitethroat	Curruca communis						√			
Western Rock Nuthatch	Sitta neumayer			√	√		•	√		
Rosy Starling	Pastor roseus			•	√			•		
Common Starling	Sturnus vulgaris	√	√	√	•		√			
Song Thrush	Turdus philomelos	Н	V	•		/	V			
Common Blackbird	Turdus merula	√	√	√		√	√			
Ring Ouzel	Turdus torquatus	V	V	•		V	√			
Common Nightingale	Luscinia megarhynchos		Н	√	Н	Н	V			
Black Redstart	Phoenicurus ochruros			V		✓	√			
Common Redstart	Phoenicurus phoenicurus					√	V			
Common Rock Thrush	Monticola saxatilis					V	√			
Blue Rock Thrush	Monticola solitarius				√		V			
Whinchat	Saxicola rubetra						,			
European Stonechat	Saxicola rubicola				√		✓			
Northern Wheatear	Oenanthe oenanthe				√		,			
Isabelline Wheatear	Oenanthe isabellina				√		√			
Pied Wheatear	Oenanthe pleschanka			√	√		√			
Eastern Black-eared	Oenanthe melanoleuca			√	√		,			
Wheatear	Oerianine meianoleuca			✓	✓		✓			
Spanish Sparrow	Passer hispaniolensis			√	√					
House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	√	√	√	√		√			
Grey Wagtail	Motacilla cinerea						√	√		
White Wagtail	Motacilla alba	√	√		√	√	✓			
Water Pipit	Anthus spinoletta						√			
Common Rosefinch	Carpodacus erythrinus						√			
European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris		Н		√		•			
European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis	Н			•	√	√			
Red-fronted Serin	Serinus pusillus	+					√		-	

Common name				N	May-Ju	ne 202	5			
	Scientific name	May-June 2025 29 30 31 1 2 3		4	5					
Corn Bunting	Emberiza calandra			✓	√					
Rock Bunting	Emberiza cia				✓					
Black-headed Bunting	Emberiza melanocephala			√	√					
Rufous-tailed Scrub-Robin	Cercotrichas galactotes				√					

Other vertebrates

Common name		May-June 2025							
	Scientific name	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5
Mammals									
East Caucasian Tur	Capra cylindricornis						✓		
Goitered Gazelle	Gazella subgutturosa				✓				
Caucasian Chamois	Rupicapra rupicapra caucasica						√		
Eurasian Red Squirrel	Sciurus vulgaris							✓	
Jungle Cat	Felis Chaus			✓					
Reptiles									
Caucasian Agama	Paralaudakia caucasia				✓				
European Glass Lizard	Pseudopus apodus		✓		✓				
Snake-eyed Lizard	Ophisops elegans				✓				
Rapid Racerunner	Eremias velox				✓				
Levantine Viper	Macrovipera lebetinus				√				
Spur-thighed Tortoise	Testudo graeca				√			√	

Invertebrates

Common name			May-June 2025						
	Scientific name	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5
Butterflies									
Common Swallowtail	Papilio machaon			√	√				
Dingy Skipper	Erynnis tages				√				
Large White	Pieris brassicae			√	√				
Small White	Pieris rapae			√	√				
Green-veined White	Pieris napi				√				
Common Orange-tip	Anthocharis cardamines				√				
Clouded Yellow	Colias crocea			√	√				
Common Brimstone	Gonepteryx rhamni				√				
Common Tiger Blue	Tarucus Theophrastus				√				
Painted Lady	Vanessa cardui			√	√				
Queen of Spain Fritillary	Issoria lathonia		√						
Caucasian Spotted Fritillary	Melitaea interrupta			√					
Knapweed Fritillary	Melitaea phoebe				√				
Invertebrates									
Nine-spotted Moth	Amata phegea						√		
Broad-bordered Bee Hawkmoth	Hemaris fuciformis		√						
Hummingbird Hawkmoth	Macroglossum stellatarum						√		
Wart-biter	Decticus verrucivorus						√		