

Armenia - Spring Birds & Flowers

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly Yerevan
Day 2	Mount Aragats, from Yerevan
Day 3	Armash Fish Ponds; overnight Yeghegnadzor
Day 4	Mount Gdnasar; overnight Yeghegnadzor
Day 5/6	Lake Sevan; overnight Dilijan
Day 7/8	Yerevan
Day 9	Fly London

Departs

May/June

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code ARM02) or brochure

Grading

A/B. Slow-paced day walks, but in this mountainous country some of the walking will inevitably be on paths of varying steepness.

Focus

Birds and botany



Images from top: White-tailed Lapwing, Garni and White Storks



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NB. 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 the best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Introduction

Nestling in the snow-capped Caucasian Mountains and overlooked by Mount Ararat just over the border in Turkey, Armenia is one of Europe's best kept birding secrets. Despite its small size (not much bigger than Wales) and the fact that it is landlocked, this former Soviet Republic is home to over two-thirds of Europe's regularly occurring bird species, including many that are rare or difficult to find elsewhere.

Caucasian Black Grouse and Caspian Snowcock are found in the high mountains as well as a very good selection of more widespread alpine species such as White-winged Snowfinch, Eurasian Crimson-winged Finch, Alpine Accentor and Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush. Juniper scrub below the snowline holds Radde's Accentor, Ring Ousel and Bluethroat, (the latter like many other species in the Caucasus, a very distinctive local subspecies). Broadleaf woodland further north resounds to the song of Caucasian Chiffchaff, Green Warbler and both Semi-collared and Red-breasted Flycatchers while the gorges and mountain steppe landscape nearer the Turkish border provide habitats for White-throated Robin, Finsch's Wheatear, Menetries' and Upchers Warblers, plus many other predominantly Middle Eastern species which reach their northern limit here. The fishpond complex at Armarsh is renowned for its breeding populations of White-headed, Marbled and Ferruginous Ducks, plus Pygmy Cormorant, White-tailed Lapwing and many others species. This area is a magnet for migrants and is also home to a small colony of Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters.

Throughout this largely unspoilt and sparsely populated country, bird of prey populations remain healthy, making sightings of several species of eagle likely, as well as there being a good chance of encountering Lammergeyer and Levant Sparrowhawks. Our nine day tour covers each of the country's main habitat types and, being such a small country, with generally good infrastructure, travelling times between areas are short, allowing us to maximise the amount of time spent in the field. While our primary focus is on the regional specialities of the Armenian Caucasus we are sure to see a very good cross section of more widespread European species too.

Botanically, Armenia's outstanding flora comprises some 3,500 species, of which 106 are endemic. The main reason for the diverse flora is the fact that the country lies at the junction of two recognised geo-botanical provinces – the Caucasian and the Iranian – and these areas have a number of different habitats ranging from desert and semi-desert, alpine meadows, steppe, marshlands and oak, beech and pine forests. During our tour, we will visit a number of the prime hot-spots, seeking out many of the interesting species unique to each.

Forests cover twelve percent of the country and are home to a variety of species, including *Quercus pontica* (Armenian Oak), *Quercus macranthera* (Caucasian Oak), *Fagus orientalis* (Eastern or Oriental Beech) and *Pinus kochba* (Caucasian Pine), as well as a number of shrubs and herbs.

Mention should also be made of Armenia's religious heritage, evidenced throughout the country by many ancient churches and monasteries, some dating back to the 9th century or earlier. In a region dominated by Islam, Armenia is an unusual Christian exception, with over 90% of the population belonging to the Armenian Orthodox faith.

Day 1

Yerevan

We depart London on a scheduled flight to the Armenian capital Yerevan, arriving in the early hours of the morning on day 2 before transferring the short distance to a comfortable city hotel.

Day 2

Mount Aragats

After a rejuvenating breakfast to set us up for the day we make our way an hour northwest of Yerevan towards Mount Aragats, where we will spend the whole day exploring different altitudinal zones, all of which are accessible by road. Below the treeline may be found breeding White-throated Robins, Siberian Stonechats (of the distinctive race *armenicus*) Woodlarks and others. This is also an excellent area for birds of prey with chances of European Honey Buzzards, Common Buzzards (of the distinctive endemic Caucasian subspecies *menetriesi*) Lesser-spotted, Booted and Short-toed Eagles. A little higher up we enter the juniper zone where Radde's Accentors, Bluethroats and Ring Ousels are our main targets, before driving higher still into the snowfields. This high alpine zone holds abundant Horned Larks (subspecies *peniciliata*), and Water Pipits (subspecies *contelli*), while a little searching should reveal Black Redstarts, White-winged Snowfinches, Rufous-tailed Rock Thrushes and Alpine Accentors. At any time in these high mountains we have a chance of coming across a soaring Lammergeier or a busy flock of Eurasian Crimson-winged Finches.

Botanically, this alpine region offers the chance to seek some of the special local plants, including *Fritillaria caucasica*, *Orchis schelwornikova*, *Gladiolus tenuis* and *Scilla Armenia*. Activities will be, to some extent, dictated by the degree of snow cover, but lower levels guarantee some interesting shrub communities containing *Spiraea crenata* and *Spiraea hypericifolia*, as well as vast areas of *Juniperus depressa*.

After an action-packed first day we return to Yerevan for the night.

Day 3

Armash Fishponds, Yeghegnadzor

Today we head east towards our next base at Yeghegnadzor, but after an hour or so we'll reach the excellent Armash Fish Ponds, where we will have an extended visit.

This huge area of ponds is home to important breeding populations of globally threatened species such as Marbled, White-headed and Ferruginous Ducks. Pygmy Cormorants and Glossy Ibises are also to be found and drier areas nearby hold small number of White-tailed Lapwings. Moustached, Great Reed and Paddyfield Warblers sing from the reed-beds where Bearded Tits are common and we have a good chance of seeing Little Bitterns. Adjacent scrubby patches hold Menetrie's and Upcher's Warblers, plus Rufous Bush Robins and a small colony of Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters add a splash of colour.

Continuing east we will spend the early evening exploring a large arid gorge where we have chances to see White-throated Robins, Blue Rock Thrushes, Western Rock Nuthatches, Rock Bunting, Golden Eagle and Lammergeier, as well as Black-headed Buntings and Black-eared Wheatears.

In this region we will also look for some of Armenia's rarer plants which include *Salvia grossheimii*, *Gladiolus atrovioleceus* and *Vicia cappadocica*. Among other species of plants found in the gorge are; *Clematis orientalis*, *Clematis vitalba*, *Reichardia dichotoma*, *Vitis sylvestris*, *Pistacia mutica*, *Noaea minuta*, *Mixauxsia laevigata*, *Leus orientalis*, *Serratula serratuloides*, *Yurinea arachnoidea* and *Silene megeri*.

From here it is a short drive to our guest house accommodation in the town of Yeghegnadzor.

Day 4

Mt Gdnasar

In order to pursue the very localised Caspian Snowcock in the surrounding higher mountains, we exchange our comfortable tour bus for a sturdier form of transport. While the vehicles will get us as close as possible to our quarry, a short uphill hike will be required to give us our best chances of finding these elusive birds. A host of other alpine species should ensure that even if the Snowcocks are uncooperative there will still be plenty to see; this is a good area for Red-billed Choughs, Red-fronted Serins and Eurasian Crimson-winged Finches. Lammergeyer is always a possibility and there is even a chance of Wallcreeper in this spectacular landscape.

Day 5

Selim Pass; Lake Sevan

After some final local birding we move north towards Lake Sevan, making a stop en route to look for upland species at the Selim Pass, where Twites and Rock Sparrows should be found with the added chance of Long-legged Buzzard which breeds in this area. Lake Sevan is by far the largest water body in Armenia and one of the largest high-altitude lakes in the world, as well as being the largest breeding colony of the very localised Armenia Gulls in the world. We will make a couple of extended stops along the southern shore as we travel westwards towards our next base in the wooded hills around Dilijan to look for migrants and local breeding species such as Penduline Tits. There is also some interesting flora to detain us along the edge of the lake, including *Eremurus spectabilis*, *Tulipa Julia*, *Iris paradoxa*, *Iris caucasica*, *Scutellaxia orientalis*, *Crambe orientalis*, *Cleome ornithovdiodes*, *Gypsophila elegans*, *Senecio vernalis*, *Silene chlorantha*, *Reichardia dichotoma*, *Srophularia olgae* and *Spiraeae crenata*.

Day 6

Dilijan

We have a full day to explore the rich deciduous woodlands around Dilijan as we go in search of local specialities such as Green Warblers and Semi-collared Flycatchers. These woodlands are home to many other species too, with numerous Common Redstarts of the distinctive white-winged race *samamisticus*, Common Rosefinches, Hawfinches, Middle- and Lesser-spotted Woodpeckers and Red-breasted Flycatchers all possible. Birds of prey overhead could include Northern Goshawk, Lesser Spotted and Booted Eagles.

Day 7

An early start and a change of vehicle will be required to get us into position to look for Caucasian Black Grouse in the hills south of Dilijan. Other birds we might come across in the upland meadows and scattered woodland include Red-fronted Serin, Red-backed Shrike and Whinchat, with the ever-present possibility of overhead raptors. There will also be excellent botanical opportunities today. Over 23,000 hectares of forest have been designated as a nature reserve in the vicinity of Dilijan and there are many interesting trees and shrubs to identify here. Later as we head towards Yerevan, there will be more plants to admire as we cross the Sevan Pass, where species might include *Iris furcata*, *Anemone fasciculata*, *Anemone raminculoides*, *Primula ruprechtii*, *Primula macrocalyx*, *Trollius patulus*, *Caltha polypetala*, *Veratium lobelianum*, *Pulsatilla armena*, *Corydalis persica*, *Fritillaria caucasica*, *Betonica grandiflora*, *Prunus spinosa*, *Sedum pilosum* and *Pyrus caucasicus*.

Day 8

Garni and Geghard

Our final day will be spent exploring the mountain steppe and gorges to the east of Yerevan where we hope to pick up any species of these habitats not seen previously. This is the best area for the localised Eastern Rock Nuthatch and Finsch's Wheatear while Lesser Grey Shrike, European Roller and Little Owl are all possible. Black-headed Buntings are a common sight in the rolling wildflower meadows here and we also have a good chance of Isabelline Wheatears, Bimaculated Lark, Rosy Starlings and many other species. The spectacular Geghard Gorge is home to Alpine Swifts and Crag Martins while raptors there include Egyptian Vulture and Long-legged Buzzard.

Botanical focus today will be in Khosrov Reserve, which protects habitats in the Azat River catchment area, plus juniper, oak and arid montane vegetation. Over 1,500 plant species have been recorded in this remarkably productive reserve ensuring plenty of variety to occupy us on this final day in the field.

Day 9

There should be time for a quick look in the park opposite the hotel, where Levant Sparrowhawks, Golden Orioles and others breed, before our departure to the airport and our flight back to London.

Grading

The tour is graded A with day walks only.

Climate

At this transition season between winter and summer, conditions can vary from pleasantly warm or even hot by day to very cold, particularly in the mountains. Snow is a possibility at higher elevations and night temperatures can fall to low levels. Precipitation is possible and may fall as snow in the mountains. Despite these extreme possibilities we hope for settled warm conditions during our visit but must be prepared for colder interludes.

Food & accommodation

All food is included in the tour from breakfast on Day 2 to breakfast on Day 9. Any meals eaten in transit at the airports are not included. Accommodation will be in a mixture of standard tourist hotels where each room will have private facilities, and local 'home-stay' guest houses in rural areas where toilet and washroom facilities will be shared. A limited number of single rooms will be available.

Extra expenses

The cost of the holiday does not include items of personal expenditure such as drinks or laundry, nor does it include the cost of optional tipping for local drivers and guides (allow approximately £25).

Your safety & security

You have chosen to travel to Armenia. 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 or telephone 0870 6060290 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, 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.