

Spring in the Caspian Sea and Lower Caucasian Mountains

Azerbaijan is a small country which is located close to the Lower Caucasian mountain range and the Caspian Sea. Baku, the main city and capital is extremely modern and makes an excellent base for visiting the south of the country. We are visiting at an optimum time for spring migration as many species funnel through Beshbarmag a spit connecting the sea towards the mountains which is attractive to migrating birds.

Azerbaijan is a relatively unknown to birders and offers many opportunities to locate rare and seldom seen birds of Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

Day 1: Fly to Baku via Istanbul. On arrival we transfer to the centre of this modern city where we stay for the night.

Day 2: Easily accessible south of Baku is Shirvan National Park one of Azerbaijan's best known nature reserves and home to the endangered Goitered Gazelle. Shirvan is an important area situated on the Caspian Sea migration route and a strategic resting and breeding area in springtime. Habitats comprise areas of grassland, lakes, reedbeds, canals and stands of bushes. Species of interest we may encounter include Pygmy Cormorant, Steppe Buzzard, Eastern Imperial Eagle, Greater Sandplover, White-tailed Lapwing, Black Francolin, Lesser Kestrel, European and



Caspian Tit Azerbaijan Tourism Board

Dates

Thursday April 18th - Sunday April 28th 2024

Leader: Simon Papps and local guides

Group Size: 8

Birds 150-180

Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, European Roller and Black Francolin. In spring and early summer we have good chances of locating Caspian Plover, Terek Sandpiper, White-tailed Lapwing and Eurasian Thick-knee whilst the bush and tree areas are attractive to Menetries's Warbler, Rufous Bush Chat and the recently split Turkestan Short-toed Lark. Transfer to Salyan for an overnight stop.

Day 3: Gizil Agaj is a protected area by the Caspian Sea consisting of forest and wetlands, and one of the top birding sites in Azerbaijan. Gizil Aghaj is a key resting and refueling spot for birds migrating along the western coast of the Caspian Sea and has a mixed landscape of wetlands, reedbeds, sandy beaches and shallow lagoons. Most of the day is spent birding along the entrance road and visitor area which is the most productive and accessible area. It is possible to see over a 100 species today and we are on the lookout for Eurasian Spoonbill, Glossy Ibis, Black Francolin, Broad-billed and Terek Sandpipers, Red-necked Phalarope, Pallid Harrier, Steppe Eagle, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, Citrine Wagtail and Isabelline Shrike. Transfer to Lenkaran for the night.



Yellow-billed Cough Dale Hanson

Day 4: The Talish Mountains cover the southeastern area of Azerbaijan and straddle the border with Iran. Lower down the climate is subtropical and much of the region is covered by the Hirkan Forest, an internationally significant refuge of relict flora, endemic tree species as well as creeks, rivers and waterfalls. The most interesting species include the very localised poelzami subspecies of Great Spotted Woodpecker (a potential split), Shikra, Semi-collared Flycatcher, Caspian Tit and perhaps a lingering Black-throated Thrush from Siberia. Beyond Lerik a delightful country road passes through lush mead-

ows and a dramatic canyon before entering an expanse of semi-arid highland scattered with thorny bushes and small oases of luxuriant forest. Here in the Zuvand highlands, you may encounter Golden Eagle, Radde's Accentor, Eastern Black-eared Wheatear, White-throated Robin, Bimaculated Lark, Pale Rock Sparrow, Asian Crimson-winged and Trumpeter Finches, Grey-necked and Rock Buntings. Overnight in Lerik

Day 5: Today we travel back towards Baku via Gobustan, which is well known for its rock art. Careful scanning in and around



Grey-headed Swamp hen *Azerbaijan Tourism Board*

rock carvings may be productive for Rock Nuthatch, Red-billed Cough, Finch's Wheatear, Rock Sparrow and Chukar. At this time of the year summering Egyptian Vulture and Woodchat Shrike should be present. Further inland is a vast semi-desert habitat crisscrossed by gravel roads and populated only by occasional shepherds. Exploring this area may reveal Lanner Falcon, Long-legged Buzzard, and with luck in mid-spring Sociable Lapwings. Travel to Baku Airport for a flight to Nakhchivan for a two-night stay.

Days 6-7: Visiting Nakhchivan as a bird-watcher is a hugely worthwhile experience. For many birdwatchers, it is the highlight of a trip to Azerbaijan because the landscape, look and feel is very different. The region has a continental climate, producing very cold winters and very hot summers. Much of the central zone is dry highland covered by orange-red steppe or semi-desert. The Araz river snakes along the south and marks the border with Iran, while the Lesser Caucasus Mountains tower across the north of the territory. Avifauna is markedly different from mainland Azerbaijan,

having more in common with eastern Turkey and north-western Iran. Target species include Caspian Snowcock, Lanner Falcon, , Black-winged Kite, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, See-see Partridge, Persian Wheatear, Upcher's Warbler, Eastern Rock Nuthatch, Mongolian and Trumpeter Finches and Grey-necked Bunting. On Day 7 a visit to Batabat for more mountain birds followed by a flight back to Baku in the afternoon where we stay for the night.

Day 8: The Beshbarmag "bottleneck" is a strip of land located between the Caucasus Mountains and the Caspian Sea, known for its significance as a natural corridor for bird migration. During spring numerous ducks, herons, terns, gulls, and shorebirds traverse the shore. Additionally, some particularly rare species frequently come to rest in this vicinity. The area contains a diverse range of bird species, including Egyptian Vulture, Black Kite, Eurasian Hobby, Eastern Imperial and Steppe Eagles, Pallid Harrier, Pallas's Gull, Black-winged Pratincole, White-winged Lark, Buff-bellied Pipit, Little Bustard and Rock Sparrow. The ideal timing for observing the annual bird migration



Red-headed Bunting *Elvin Mammadsoy*

is during the spring season from March to May, particularly during mid-April. Depart to Khinalig where we have a home stay in this remote and fascinating village.

Days 9-10: These high-mountain villages in the Guba region are among the most unique and picturesque in Azerbaijan. Previously too remote to visit, greater accessibility has placed them firmly on the tourist map in recent years. Located at 2,300m, Khinalig boasts an incredible hill-top location, unique stone houses, inhabitants who speak one of the world's rarest languages and even a Zoroastrian fire temple. Moreover, the sparsely vegetated terrain around Khinalig is home to Caucasian Snowcock, Gldenstdt's Redstart, Alpine Accentor, Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush, Wallcreeper and Lammergeier. Laza is no less scenic, situated at 1300m surrounded by emerald-green slopes. The locals are Lezgi, another of Azerbaijan's ethnic minorities, and in the area around the village you can look for Cinereous and Eurasian Griffon Vultures, Caucasian Black Grouse, Grey Partridge, Horned Lark, Alpine Accentor, Great Rosefinch, Mountain Chiffchaff,

Green Warbler, Red-fronted Serin and White-winged Snowfinch. On the afternoon of Day 10 travel back to Baku for the night where the tour concludes.

Day 11: Morning transfer to Baku Airport and flight to your home country

Prices

Ground Price: £2,295
Single Room: £200
Deposit: £250
*Air Fare: £730

This tour is fully inclusive of accommodation, meals, transport, park entrance fees and permits, guidance, tips and taxes

Not included: Visa to enter Azerbaijan, departure tax, drinks and items of a personal nature.