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SPRING BIRDWATCHING TOUR IN ARMENIA, GEORGIA & IRAN

13DAY/ 12 NIGHT TOUR

OVERVIEW

A small, sparsely populated and landlocked country located in the South Caucasus region, **Armenia** is bordered on the north by Georgia, the east by Azerbaijan, the south by Iran and the southwest and west by Turkey. Rural, peaceful and unspoilt, Armenia is an excellent choice for birding, as it forms a geographical bridge between the avian populations of Europe and Asia. The country holds a variety of birding habitats including semi-desert, steppe, deciduous forest, meadowland, and alpine grassland. The very scenic landscape is alternated with deep canyons, lakes, rivers, wetlands and marshes. Over 350 species of birds have been recorded in Armenia, along with many interesting and often endemic other fauna.

Although it has earned quite a reputation for its politics, the huge country of **Iran** has a very rich and diverse avifauna, with over 500 species having been seen in the country. This is despite the fact that a large portion of the country is arid to semi-arid. There are, however, also other diverse habitats including high mountains, forests, wetlands, coastal areas and woodland. Apart from birding it is also one of the world's most culturally complex and interesting countries to visit, and the famous hospitality of the local people is truly memorable.

The small country of **Georgia** is located at the crossroads of Western Asia and Eastern Europe, to the north of Armenia. Georgia is a country of exceptional beauty, dominated by the mighty Caucasus mountains. Due to its specific geographic location on a relatively small territory there are extremely diverse ecosystems here: from Alpine meadows to semi-deserts, wetlands, coastal landscape, numerous lakes and rivers, caves and magnificent mountain peaks covered with snow all year round. The variety of ecosystems leads to the richness of the flora and fauna of Georgia, and more than 350 species of birds have been recorded in the country.

This Nature Travel Birding tour will visit key birdwatching areas in each of these three countries to give guests a perfect overview of the star birds of these three countries.

PLEASE NOTE : Citizens of certain countries are not allowed to visit Iran. If this is the case for your country of origin, we can customize the tour in such a way that you will not lose out on the birding experience. Please check with your appropriate local government institution.

DAILY SUMMARY

DAY 1	Arrival and check in in the hotel of Yerevan (Armenia)
DAY 2	Yerevan – Armash – Yeghegnadzor
DAY 3	Vardenis mountains – Goris
DAY 4	Goris – Shikahogh – Meghri
DAY 5	Meghri
DAY 6	Meghri to Iran (Golestan NP and Sari)
DAY 7	Iran (Khosh Yellagh Reserve)
DAY 8	Iran to Armenia
Day 9	Meghri – Jermuk – Yeghegnadzor
Day 10	Yeghegnadzor – Lake Sevan – Tbilisi (Georgia)
Day 11	Tbilisi – Kazbegi NP
Day 12	Kazbegi NP – Tbilisi
Day 13	Tbilisi-Yerevan- Transfer to Yerevan. Departure.

DETAILED DAILY ITINERARY

DAY 1: Arrival in Armenia and check in at the hotel in Yerevan

Upon arrival at the Zvartnots International Airport, 12 km (7 miles) west of Yerevan, the capital city of Armenia, you will be met by your Nature Travel Birding guide and local ground agent and make your way to the lodge to settle in.

Yerevan is the administrative, cultural, and industrial center of the country. It is one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities. Yerevan was named the 2012 World Book Capital by UNESCO. The principal symbol of Yerevan is Mount Ararat, which is visible from any area in the capital.

There will time to freshen up and then we will spend the remainder of the day birding around the lodges grounds and trails.

Dinner will be enjoyed at the lodge, and the birding plans for the next 12 days discussed.

DAY 2: Yerevan – Armash – Yeghegnadzor

An early breakfast will be enjoyed at the hotel.

We will then travel towards Ararat Plain with the main purpose to visit Armash fish farming ponds, about an hour away from Yerevan and to the southeast. These fish ponds offer one of the most exciting birding opportunities in the entire Western Palearctic. Here we will look for various water birds, both breeding and migrants. We hope this will include Marbled, Ferruginous and White Headed Duck, Red-necked Grebe, Little Bittern, Black-crowned Night Heron, Squacco, Purple Heron, Pygmy Cormorant, Garganey, Red-Crested Pochard, Western Marsh Harrier, Water Rail, Little Crake, Stone Curlew, Collared Pratincole, Kentish Plover, Pied Avocet, Black-tailed Godwit, Wood and Green Sandpiper, Armenian Gull, Eurasian Spoonbill and others.

The reed-beds resound with calls of Reed (*ssp. fuscus*) and Paddyfield Warbler, as well as singing Savi's Warbler. Open waters attract Whiskered, White-winged, Black and Little Terns, and muddy areas have nesting Glossy Ibis and White-tailed Lapwing. Land birding is also impressive and we could find Blue-Cheeked Bee-Eater, European Roller, Lesser Short-toed Lark, Rosy Starling, Sand Martin, Yellow Wagtail, Bearded Reedling and many other passerines.

At the end of April it is still possible to find migratory Demoiselle Cranes, which are visiting Armash ponds for stopover.

Later we will travel to Yeghegnadzor, about 90 minutes away to the east, for our overnight stay. Yeghegnadzor is a small town situated on the Srkghonk River, and is famous for the Noravank monastic complex of the 13th century, located a few kilometers away to the southwest of the town.

DAY 3: Vardenis mountains – Goris

After a full breakfast at the hotel we will via 4WD cars travel to a high mountain area (almost 3000 metres above sea level) with the main purpose to see Caspian Snowcock and other high mountain specialists, such as Crimson-winged Finch, Red-fronted Serin, and White-winged Snowfinch. There is an outside chance of seeing Brown Bear here too!

After returning from the mountains we will visit of the Noravank gorge with the main purpose to see Eastern Rock Nuthatch. We will also look for Golden Eagle, Lammergeier, Upcher's Warbler and White-throated Robin. Here we will have a lunch in the restaurant located inside a cave.

Later we will head south, stopping at the Sisian plateau near a colony of Lesser Kestrels.

After our day's birding we will continue for about 2 hours to the east towards Goris town where will have dinner and stay overnight. The area of Goris has been settled since the Stone Age. Goris is situated in the valley of Goris River, surrounded with the Zangezur Mountains. These mountains are famous for their medieval cave-dwellings carved out of

the soft rock in the southern and eastern parts of the town. The Goris Wildlife Sanctuary is situated at the southeast of the town. Roe deer and brown bear are among the notable animals in the sanctuary.

DAY 4: Goris – Shikahogh – Meghri

After breakfast at the hotel we will continue south.

Our route will pass through Shikahogh Nature Reserve, where we will stop in the forest to catch some forest specialists, which we might have missed before: Red-breasted and Semi-collared Flycatcher, Green Warbler, Great, Medium Spotted and Green Woodpecker, and others. The reserve is Armenia's second largest forest reserve, covering some 10,330 ha of land. It is home to unique fauna and flora species considered to be important not only to Armenia but the whole world.

Later we will pass the Meghri mountain ridge and reach juniper woodlands, where will have several stops mainly aimed at trying to see the Sombre Tit. This is also a very good area for raptors, and we could see Egyptian Vulture, Steppe, Honey and Long-legged Buzzard, Golden, Lesser-spotted, Imperial, Booted and Short-toed Eagle, Pallid and Montagu's Harrier, Lesser Kestrel and more.

Then will make our way along the Araks(Aras) River and the border with Iran.

Will check in the hotel in Meghri and have an evening walk at nearby orchards aimed at observing of Levant Sparrowhawk and Syrian Woodpecker.

We will have dinner and enjoy a good night's rest at our hotel.

DAY 5: Meghri

After a rather early breakfast at the hotel we will have a full day of birding around the town of Meghri. It is situated on the banks of the Meghri River, near the border with Iran. The area of present-day Meghri has been settled since the Bronze Age. The surrounding areas of the town are designated as a Prime Butterfly Area, having a number of rare and endangered species of butterflies. The town's economy is based on food industry, which contains a bread-baking factory, pomegranate and fig production, canneries and small home-based wineries. A nearby Russian military base houses around 2,000 soldiers, who along with Armenian soldiers guard the border with Iran.

In the town of Meghri and around our hotel we will look for Laughing Dove, Syrian Woodpecker, Hoopoe, Eastern Orphean Warbler, Olivaceous Warbler, Nightingale, Golden Oriole and more.

Then we will travel to the Araks(Aras) River area with the main aim to find Black Francolin.

Then we will continue on to several semi-desert gorges, hoping to find Persian Wheatear, Upcher's and Orphean Warbler, Red-tailed Wheatear, Sombre Tit, Red-fronted Serin, Finch's Wheatear, Eastern Rock Nuthatch and Western Rock Nuthatch as well as Woodchat Shrike.

Later will visit some orchards with the aim of finding Menetrie's Warbler and Levant Sparrowhawk, amongst others.

Lunch and dinner today will be at a restaurant in Meghri, and we will again sleep at our hotel in Meghri.

DAY 6: Meghri to Iran (Golestan NP and Sari)

After our arrival in Tehran, the capital of Iran, we will drive northeast towards and then past the city of Sari, situated just south of the Caspian Sea.

We will continue to one of Iran's largest and finest national parks; the Golestan National Park. It is commonly known as the Golestan Jungle, and is located in the eastern Alborz (Elburs) Mountains range and the western edge of the Kopet Dag range. It comprises 91,890 ha. Elevations in the park range from 1,000–1,400 metres (3,300–4,600 ft) above sea level. The Park has a variety of habitats, such as temperate broad leaf forests, grasslands, steppe, grassy savanna, shrublands and rocky areas. Iran's last known tigers had occurred in this area, before 1960.

During our time in the park we hope to see Wild Boar, Goitered Gazelle, Red Deer, Iberian Wild Goat, Mouflon, Brown Bear and if we are very lucky even Persian Leopard.

On the avian front we hope to see various species of Sparrow, Hawk, Buzzard, Woodpecker, Robin, Thrush, Cuckoo, Restart, Blackbird, Chiffchaff, Linnet, Blackcap, Whitethroat, Coal, Blue and Caspian Tit, Eurasian Nuthatch and many more. Over 150 species have been recorded in the park.

Lunch and dinner will be in a restaurant in Sari, and we will stay over in a local house tonight. Sari is situated between the northern slopes of the Alborz Mountains and southern coast of the Caspian Sea. Sari is the largest and most populous city of Mazandaran province. The Clock Tower, in the Clock Square (Meydan-e-Sa'at) located in downtown Sari, attracts visitors and has become a famous landmark.

DAY 7: Iran (Khosh Yellagh Reserve)

This morning we will enjoy breakfast at the lodge and leave to visit the nearby Khosh Yellagh Reserve.

Here we are hoping to find Wild Boar, Iranian Ibex, Red Urial, Common Swift, Eurasian Hoopee, Bimaculated and Horned Lark, Tawny Pipit, Northern and Finsch's Wheatear, Eurasian Tree Sparrow, Ortolan Bunting and many others.

DAY 8: Iran to Armenia

Today we transfer back to Armenia, overnighing in Meghri.

As much birding will be done en route with stops at local spots to see special birds that your local guides will know of.

DAY 9: Meghri – Jermuk – Yeghegnadzor

After breakfast at the hotel we will travel back to the north birding en route.

Here we will visit the Arpa River canyon on the old way to Jermuk. It is a mountain spa town and was considered one of the popular destinations for medical tourism in the old Soviet Union. The Jermuk Gorge is one of the prettiest in Armenia with lots of basalt columns and the beautiful Gndevank Monastery, which has a 10th-13th century round cathedral. Here we will aim to observe Bearded and Egyptian Vulture, Golden and Booted Eagle, Goshawk, Peregrine Falcon (*ssp brookei*), Blue Rock Thrush, and other cliff nesters like Wallcreeper.

Later we will travel back to the town of Yeghegnadzor (we were here on day 2 of the tour), birding en route.

Dinner and our overnight stay will be in the hotel in Yeghegnadzor. Even in our hotel grounds there is a possibility of Scops Owl, Golden Oriole, Nightingale and Syrian Woodpecker.

DAY 10: Yeghegnadzor – Lake Sevan – Tbilisi (Georgia)

After a delicious breakfast at the hotel, we will travel towards Lake Sevan through a mountain pass located at about 2,300 metres above sea level. The area is covered with wet meadows where will look for the black headed subspecies of Yellow Wagtail (*ssp. feldeggii*), Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush, Ortolan Bunting and Levant Sparrowhawk.

Lake Sevan is a large, high-altitude lake in eastern Armenia. It is located at an altitude of 1,900 m (6,234 ft) above sea level and is the largest body of water in Armenia and the entire Caucasus region. It has significant economic, cultural, social, scientific, aesthetic, medical, climatic, recreational, and spiritual value. Lake Sevan is especially known for its unbelievably bright blue water and its beautiful beaches and is a favourite hangout spot for the rich and famous of Armenia. The bird fauna of the lake and its vicinity sits at a count of over 260 species, of which 95 species are breeding.

We will travel along the shore of the Lake and visit Lichk, another small lake in the vicinity of Lake Sevan. This area is famous for a great variety of ducks, waders, terns, gulls, herons,

wablers and wagtails. Here we will hope to find Montagu's Harrier, Long-legged Buzzard, Steppe Eagle, Red-crested Pochard, Ferruginous and Tufted Duck, Glossy Ibis, Pygmy Cormorant, Citrine Wagtail and many others. The resident pair of Western Marsh Harrier will hopefully be flying around, searching for prey.

We will enjoy a packed lunch or picnic along the way in a beautiful spot next to the water.

Later we will continue travelling along the Lake with a short visit of Gull Island, to observe Armenian Gulls.

We will cross the border and arrive in Tbilisi in Georgia late in the afternoon, as it is about 230 kilometres (143 miles) to the north of Lake Sevan.

Tbilisi is the capital and the largest city of Georgia, lying on the banks of the Kura River with a multicultural population of approximately 1.5 million people. Because it is situated on the crossroads between Europe and Asia on the famous "Silk Road", throughout history Tbilisi was a point of contention among various global powers. To this day Tbilisi's location ensures its position as an important transit route for various energy and trade projects.

We will have dinner and a good night's rest at our hotel.

DAY 11: Tbilisi – Kazbegi NP

This morning we will be travelling to and from Tbilisi where we will make several stops to check the extensive and pristine broadleaf woodlands for a wide range of species. Depending on which species we still might need for our lists and what our targets are, we could visit the Tbilisi National Park, the nearby Tbilisi Reservoir, the Botanical Gardens or any of a number of interesting spots in and around the city.

The most sought after species we will look for are Green Warbler and Semicollared Flycatcher. We will also search for Syrian, Great Spotted and Green Woodpecker, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Griffon, Egyptian and Cinereous Vulture, Demoiselle Crane, Common Redstart, Grey, White and Western Yellow Wagtail, European Roller, Eurasian Hobby, Common Kestrel and a wide range of other familiar species. Around the dams in the area we could also find Armenian, Black-headed and Slender-billed Gull, Great Egret, Garganey, Mallard and White-throated Dipper.

Later on we will drive north toward the Kazbegi National Park for about 3 hours, and arrive in Stepantsminda, just outside the park, where we will have dinner and a good night's rest at our hotel. Stepantsminda is known for its scenic location in the Greater Caucasus mountains, and is a hotspot for trekkers and mountain climbing.

DAY 12: Kazbegi NP – Tbilisi

Today we explore the Kazbegi National Park and its surroundings. The Park was established in 1976 and is a popular tourist destination despite the lack of basic tourism infrastructure. Only a third the park is covered by forest and the rest is alpine pastures, snow-covered peaks and impregnable rocks. These rocks and mountains are native areas for lots of rare and unique species of animals and birds.

This morning after breakfast we make our way upwards for some high mountain birds. We will look for Bearded and Griffon Vulture, Peregrine Falcon, Golden Eagle, Alpine and Common Swift, European Bee-eater, Blue Rock Thrush, Alpine Accentor, Caucasian Snowcock, Caucasian Grouse, Mountain Chiffchaff, Wallcreeper and Crag Martin along with many others.

In the seasonal high meadows there will be an abundance of pipits and wagtails. Most will be Water Pipit and Flava Wagtail, but there are others such as Tree, Red-throated and less commonly Meadow Pipit too, along with Green Warbler, Gldenstdt's Redstart, Great Rosefinch, Northern Wheatear, Yellow-billed and Red-billed Chough, Red-fronted and European Serin, Ring Ouzel and many others.

After our time in the Park we will head south again for dinner and overnight back in Tbilisi.

DAY 12: Tbilisi-Yerevan

This morning after a last hearty breakfast we will make our way back to Yerevan in Armenia (about 5 to 6 hours driving time) looking for bird species on the way and trying to connect with any species we may have missed during our tour.

Flight times will determine the plan for the day and there is an option to overnight in Yerevan for early flights the next morning. A day room can also be arranged.

Thank you for choosing Nature Travel Birding.