

# Anatolia

## Mammal-watching

### A Greentours Itinerary

#### Day 1

#### To Erzurum

Our flight lands early in the evening and so we'll go straight to the hotel which is just outside the city on the road up to the ski resort.

#### Days 2 - 4

#### The Kaçkar Mountains

The valleys above Yusufeli rise into the very heart of the Kaçkar Massif, the highest mountains in the northeast of Turkey (with the exception of Ararat!). After breakfast it'll take us two hours to reach the Çoruh River, one of the world's great 'white-water' rivers, and the small town of Yusufeli, the gateway to the southern slopes of the Kaçkar. Heading up into these mountains we pass the delightful village of Barhal. Here each house has a large garden full of walnuts, cherries, peaches and other fruit trees, indeed, later in the year, when the trees are heavy with fruit, the villagers find it hard keeping the Brown Bears off their bounty! After a cup of traditional çay we'll head further uphill to Yaylarlar, on the tree line, and in summer home to families that bring their grazing animals up from the valleys, and nowadays, in equal measure, plenty of trekkers and climbers. These last few kilometres into the summer villages are the best places to look for Ibex which at this season are often nibbling away at fresh greenery on almost vertical slopes right by the road. We'll settle into our little hotel in the last village of Olgunlar and have lunch by the rushing brook there.

The highest peaks in the Kaçkar lay just up the valley from Olgunlar. The scenery is outstanding with huge U-shaped valleys descending from the 13,000 feet peak. It is in the forests below the summer villages that bears hide for the summer months when humans are active in the high country but in mid-May neither the grazers nor the trekkers have arrived. Add to that the lure of fresh greenery bursting forth from tongues of snow that descend down the deep gullies and you have an irresistible lure to the Brown Bears that live here. There is a healthy population of bears in this area and this is the season when they are at their most visible. There are three or four valleys which we can easily cover from Olgunlar and we have a very good chance on morning and evening walks of coming up with sightings. Having said this all the Bears we found during the 2015 trip were spotted between midday and five o'clock so you never know! In fact our first bunch of bears, a female with two yearling cubs was spotted from the middle of the village, and later we had no less than five bears visible almost simultaneously up a side valley including a large male. This is a very good opportunity to see bears out and about doing what they have always done without using bait to lure them, or hides, or garbage dumps.

It was the owner of the hotel who told us he was seeing Lynx in May in the hamlet itself and now we've worked out that with careful observation one can see them hunting on the slopes above Olgunlar, or even close to the hamlet.

Of course looking for bears in such an environment will also give us plenty of time to enjoy the other aspects of the natural world to be found here. Snowbanks have a fine snowmelt flora with *Scilla winogradowii* and *Fritillarias* as well as *Ornithogalums*, *Gageas*, *Corydalis* and *Muscaris*. Caspian Snowcocks call like ghostly curlews from rocky ridges or bubble like demented grouse as they fly from slope to slope. The distinctive outlines of displaying male Caucasian Blackcock are a striking sight and we'll see a good number of these normally rare and difficult to see birds. Alpine Choughs are noisy and common and we'll see Golden Eagles as well as various migrant raptors. Common Rosefinches, Whinchats and Water Pipits are common and we'll see Wallcreepers. These have not yet settled in the high cliffs and instead are common along the rocky valley that leads up to Yaylalar and we'll have a decent chance of multiple sightings with close up views quite possible. Red-backed Shrikes are staggeringly common and we'll see plenty of Lesser Whitethroats as well as a few Lesser Grey Shrikes. Chamois are generally a scarce and difficult to see animal in Turkey, but at this time of year they are relatively easy to spot, favouring similar areas to the bears and occurring as singles, or in groups of up to a dozen or so. Smaller animals include Persian Squirrels below the villages and up by the snow, Snow Voles, these cute little rodents often glimpsed as they scurry between their tunnel entrances. On nightwalks around the hotel we are likely to encounter Red Fox, Badger and Beech Marten, one of the latter likes to check the hotel out to see if anything nice has been left out!

## **Day 5**

### **To Sarıkamıs and Kars**

A bit of a journey today but through outstanding scenery all the way. We'll leave plenty of time to check out the Scots Pine woodlands along the valleys between Göle and Kars as they are incredibly rich in raptors with Lesser Spotted Eagles soaring over their territories as well as Imperial Eagles, Lammergeiers and Black Vultures too.

## **Days 6 & 7**

### **The Kars Highlands**

The wild high country of the Kars Plateau is sparsely populated even by Turkish standards, yet in spring and summer the landscape could hardly have a more pleasing aspect. Rounded mountains are covered in a flowery montane steppe, interrupted occasionally by lakes and more extensively by dark green islands of Scots Pine forest. It is the long and exceptionally cold winters, the most extreme in Turkey, that keep the humans at bay!

Our hotel is situated on the edge of one such woodland, the trees widely spaced and so with a fine ground floral with lots of *Muscari armeniacum* and *Primula veris*.

Red Squirrels are found in these woodlands – the only place in Turkey that this species is found and they differ markedly from their European counterparts being very pale (or even white) overall with rich red legs and face, and with noticeably large ear tufts.

We have had bears interrupt checklist sessions at this hotel! They live in the forest above the hotel and from time to time can be seen even round the buildings at night. We'll certainly offer nightwalks into the forest to try and see them and we've a chance of Wild Cat here and Lynx does occur though we'd have to be very lucky to see that cat. We'll be concentrating on the Brown Bears again though. A garbage dump attracts large numbers every evening. There can be double figures, maybe even fifteen or so bears at this site each evening. Though that offers a guarantee of seeing these impressive creatures of course (and up really close!) the surroundings are not so pleasant so it is the approaches to the dump we'll be looking at dusk and dawn. The surroundings could hardly be nicer and indeed great for viewing. A flat river valley separates a wide belt of Scots Pine forest from the dump and the bears (or some of them) move out of the forest and cross the river and meadow to reach the dump, before or not long after dusk. The rest approach from an open forest on the far side of the dump. So for two evenings we'll get in position and watch....

In the daytime these riverside meadows are full of the purple marsh orchid *Dactylorhiza umbrosa* and lots of pretty blue *Muscari aucheri* mixing with *Muscari neglectum* and sky-blue *Bellevalia forniculata*. One roadside slope has stunning *Fritillaria michailovskyi*, a gorgeous little fritillary with deep mahogany bells widely tipped with gold. One area of newly planted forest has a great population of the truly spectacular *Iris iberica* subspecies *elegantissima*.

This is wild and remote country and is also a good area for Wolves. These are much harder to see than the bears and their numbers are low (there's perhaps a dozen in the area) but we'll spend some time searching, and have a decent chance. This will involve a fair bit of scanning from vantage points in the area. The local shepherds have plenty of Wolf stories to tell! We'll certainly see a few of the local Red Foxes, looking very different from their West European counterparts. Here they are a 'wolfish' grey with a thick pelage designed to cope with the winter cold.

## **Day 8 Departure**

We depart early afternoon from Kars Airport. This is half an hour from Sarikamis and gives us plenty of time to have one last bear experience or if we haven't found any Wolves another chance at them. There is also a small wetland just a fifteen minute drive from the airport which in spring hosts many migrating White-winged Black Terns as well as both Marsh and Montagu's Harriers, various waders, a Citrine Wagtail or two, and a few White-headed Duck. Weasels hunt birds and small mammals around the perimeter of the wetland.

or...

## **Extension to Southern Turkey**

### **Days 8 & 9**

#### **Silifke: Göksu Delta and Yeşilovacık bay**

An early afternoon flight will see us arriving into Adana by five-ish and we then have a two hour drive along the Mediterranean coast to Silifke, our base for the next couple of nights.

Down in the Göksu Delta and up the river itself we can look for Jungle Cat and Porcupine. Golden Jackals are found around the delta too. A sheltered bay somewhat to the west of the delta offers a good chance of finding one of the Mediterranean's rarest mammals, the seriously endangered Mediterranean Monk Seal. There are thought to be fewer than one hundred fifty left around Turkish coasts.

### **Days 10 & 11**

#### **Aladağlar**

Moving inland we'll return to the heights, this time though to the highest ranges in the Taurean Mountains, hotter and much more barren-looking than the northeastern mountains. Here we'll take to vantage points to watch for Wolves. There are a reasonable number in the area, indeed the population seems to be increasing. These same vantage points have in the past year or so given us Lynx sightings too, so another chance of this difficult to see cat. We'll also look for Ibex, and there is a good population of Wallcreepers as well as Caspian Snowcock and Radde's Accentor here.

### **Day 12**

#### **Depart from Kayseri**

If you would like to ask about any other aspect of this holiday, please call 01298 83563 or email us at [enquiries@greentours.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@greentours.co.uk).

To Book a on this Holiday please fill in the booking form which you can download from [www.greentours.co.uk](http://www.greentours.co.uk) (also found in the Greentours brochure) and post to Greentours, 8 Eliot Close, Armitage, Rugeley, WS15 4UP, UK. Tel +44 (0)1298 83563. After booking your place you'll receive a confirmation letter and a detailed information pack will be dispatched twelve weeks prior to departure. Mammal and bird checklists are available.