

The Altai

Central Asia's Golden Mountains

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1

Depart Europe

Day 2

to Ust-Kamenogorsk & the Irtysh River

After our overnight flight to Almaty we connect with a two hour internal flight that takes us to Ust-Kamenogorsk's provincial airport from where we'll transfer to the lovely Dedeman Hotel beautifully situated by the great river Irtysh. Monkshoods grow amongst the willows and aspens of riverine woodlands by the hotel, and Grey-headed Woodpeckers and Golden Orioles will be amongst the first birds we see.

Days 3 - 6

Zaissan: Chilikty Pass and Valley, Karatal Sands, Kein-Kerish, Black Irtysh river and the Marble Pass

We'll head southeast where hillsides are covered in swathes of Burning Bush *Dictamnus angustifolia* and amongst all this pink is more pink in the shape of *Paeonia anomala*. Lesser Whitethroats call from bushes that shelter *Lilium martagon* and *Clematis integrifolia*. We'll look for the scarce Bobak Marmot. This is a great journey for butterflies and we'll expect Scarce Copper, Chestnut Heath, Marsh and Glanville Fritillaries, and three species of admiral in the shape of *Limenitis sidyi*, *Limenitis helmanni* and the related Hungarian Glider. The impressive Apollo *Parnassius apollinius* is here. We'll cross the great Zaissan Lake by ferry and we'll stop in the surrounding sandy semi-desert to meet the endemic Zaissan Toad-headed Agama, though these beautifully-marked animals are superbly camouflaged in the sand.

In the morning we'll return to Zaissan's shore in the desert. Pairs of elegant Demoiselle Cranes stand sentinel on the shoreline, guarding their scruffy youngsters, and offshore are small flotillas of Dalmatian Pelicans and groups of Pallas's Gulls. Occasional Houbara (Macqueen's) Bustards stalk the artemisia desert near our camp and here White-tailed Eagles sit as if they are awaiting scraps, though all they usually get is hassle from avaricious Black Kites! Black Larks are really very abundant, their fluttering display flight is a common sight in June, and a few pairs of rare White-winged Larks also nest here. A night-time walk in the desert is great fun. Great Jerboas with eight inch long black and white tipped tails bound past, seemingly oblivious to our presence, and both Lesser Jerboa and the round-eared *Stelodipus telum* allow close approach. We might also see Long-eared Hedgehogs.

A viewpoint provides a marvellous panorama over more than 3,000 square kilometres of desert, mountain and lake. From here you can see the Tarbagatai Mountains stretching away into China! Below is the Kiin Kerish Canyon, where erosion has revealed layers of brilliant red, yellow and silvery-grey clays - it is a wonderfully photogenic place. There are many very strange plants. The purple flowered parasite *Cistanche salsa* revels in the arid conditions and *Nanophyton erinaceum* is one of a number of bizarre-looking chenopods. Birds of prey nest along the canyon rim - Upland Buzzards and Black Kites circle briefly over the canyon before returning to their perches. Saker Falcons and Steppe Eagles are found here - Eagles Owls too! The surrounding desert is home to Wolves though we are far more likely to encounter the Red-cheeked Susliks that sustain them. In saxaul desert we'll see many Pallas's Sandgrouse, often at close range, as well as Yellow Desert Lemmings and pretty pink and white Mongolian Trumpeter Finches.

The glorious flowery meadows and larch forests around Lake Markakol are reached by a road that first takes us east to the Chinese Border. Ascending the Marble Pass we can look back and see the thousand foot high sand dunes of the Akkum Desert stretching away into China. Cresting the next pass, Markakol will be glinting in the early evening sun below us. Meadows are vibrant with monkshoods, delphiniums and violets. We'll see *Aconitums leucostomum* and *decipiens*, delphiniums, statuesque yellow-flowered *Alfredia cernua*, tall veratrums, and pretty *Bupleurums aureum* and *multinervis*. In shorter turf are glorious blue *Gentianas uniflora* and *grandiflora* and white *Gentiana algida*. Swathes of large-flowered *Aquilegia glandulosa* stretch away like a blue carpet interrupted by clumps of clear yellow *Papaver nudicaule*. Fine displays of pink *Primula longiscapa* mix with the delightful umbels of *Cortusa altaica*, yellow *Corydalis nobilis* and thousands upon thousands of beautiful *Paeonia anomala*. Apollo butterflies include Small Apollo, yellow *Parnassius eversmanni*, and rare and local species like *Parnassius stubbendorffii* and *Parnassius ariadne*. Assmann's, Scarce and Asian are among a multitude of Fritillaries. There are many 'European' species - Esper's Marbled White, Mountain Argus, the beautiful Alpine Blue, stunning orange Scarce Copper, and Fritillaries such as Marsh, Dark Green and Lesser Marbled. And many unfamiliar ones - *Melitaea latonigena*, *Triphysa phryne* and *Tongeia fischeri* amongst many others - the butterfly fauna is very rich. Corncrakes call from the meadows whilst in flowery shrubberies we'll see Blyth's Reed Warblers and Scarlet Rosefinches in abundance. Capercaillie, Black Grouse and Hazelhen are sometimes flushed, whilst in open woodland Pine Buntings sing from larches and the somnolent calls of Oriental Cuckoo drift down to us. This is the stronghold of the giant 'red deer' subspecies known as the Maral, the stags with antlers of truly gargantuan proportions. Red Squirrels and Chipmunks are always a-chatter and Sable, Otter and Wolverine occur, and Lynx too, although we are unlikely to see these.

Days 7 – 9

Topkaiyn: The Burkhat Pass & the Naryn Tundra, Sedlo Pass in the Talovka Mountains

Heading along the Bukhtarma Valley, a tectonic rift which separates the Altai into northern and southern halves, we'll arrive at the stunningly situated cottages at Topkaiyn that will be our home for the next few days. Set amid flowery meadows and backed by the forested slopes of the Naryn Range, this place could hardly have a better setting for those who enjoy flowers and stunning scenery. Rare *Daphne altaica* flowers under Birches where we can see Marsh Tits, various woodpeckers, and Western Capercaillie. There's plenty of Maral in these woods, the local form of Red Deer. A prize we'll seek down by the river is a small stand of the exquisite Pink Lady's Slipper Orchid, *Cypripedium macranthos*. This stunning orchid has extremely large pouched flowers and a common name for it is indeed Large-flowered Lady's Slipper.

To the south of our accommodation lies a long line of high mountains, a wild region now protected as the Katon-Karagay National Park. There's one track that ascends 3,000 feet from the Bukhtarma Valley. On the slopes are beautiful Siberian Pine, birch and Siberian Fir forests. The mossy forest floor is carpeted in Twinflower, various wintergreens (including One-flowered) and the beautiful *Aquilegia sibirica*. Striking pinky-red umbels of *Primula sibirica* rise from bright green sphagnum by streams. Siberian Bellflowers, and a range of spectacular gentians and louseworts. Camberwell Beauties and Poplar Admirals join a host of butterflies along tracks through sunny glades whilst birds include Yellow-breasted and Meadow Buntings and the beautiful Long-tailed Rosefinch. White-backed and Northern Three-toed Woodpeckers inhabit primary pine forest with typical Siberian species such as Pine Grosbeak, Siberian Tit, Siberian Jay and the raucous Nutcracker.

Above is the Burkhat Pass (7,000 feet) where Siberian Tundra is surrounded by snowy peaks. 100km away to the northeast glistens Belukha, the Altai's highest mountain. Lovely Siberian Dog's-tooth Violets are common near snow patches where great blue colonies of *Gentiana grandiflora* mix with beautiful white *Anemone crinita*, *Callianthemum angustifolium* and the local windflower, *Dryas oxyodonta*. *Claytonias* and *Bergenia crassifolia* add a somewhat North American feel whilst an array of saxifrages include the gorgeous golden-yellow *hirculus*, purple *oppositifolia*, and local *punctata* and *terekensis*. The strange and beautiful blue *Ahlbergia frivaldszkyi* flies with Lapland Fritillaries and *Oensis nanna*. Ptarmigan, Willow Grouse and Dotterel breed amongst the dwarf birch and we can find abundant Bluethroats and stunning Siberian Rubythroats. Grey Marmots and Altai Pikas emit sharp warning calls from bouldery screes inhabited by Eversmann's Redstarts and both Brandt's Mountain and Hodgson's Rosy Finches. The strange tomato relative *Physochlaina physaloides* inhabits roadside rock mounds.

Onwards in the Naryn Tundra is a rough track frequented only by occasional Kazakh horseman that takes us through boundless sub-alpine meadows, so unspoilt that livestock are a rare sight! Valleys are carpeted with gentians, bellflowers, edelweiss, *dracocephalums*, dwarf yellow monkshoods and beautiful blue *Iris ruthenica* and yellow *Iris bloudowii*.

We pass through some very rustic villages as we head to the drier south-facing side of the rift and the glorious flowery meadows of the Sedlo Pass. A gentle walk uphill from the road takes us through a shrubbery of the endemic *Sibiraea laevigata*, the bushes beset with spires of creamy blooms. The striking flowers of the Burning Bush are everywhere, indeed the meadows here are a picture with *Aconitums leucostomum* and *decipiens*, delphiniums, and pretty *Bupleurums aureum* and *multinervis*. Drier turf has much of yellow valerian *Patrinia intermedia*. Apollo butterflies include Small Apollo, yellow *Parnassius eversmanni*, and rare and local species like *Parnassius stubbendorffii* and *Parnassius ariadne*. Assmann's, Scarce and Asian are among a multitude of Fritillaries. There are many 'European' species - Esper's Marbled White, Mountain Argus, the beautiful Alpine Blue, stunning orange Scarce Copper, and Fritillaries such as Marsh, Dark Green and Lesser Marbled. And many unfamiliar ones - *Melitaea latonigena*, *Triphysa phryne* and *Tongeia fischeri* amongst many others - the butterfly fauna is very rich. Corncrakes call from the meadows whilst in flowery shrubberies we'll see Blyth's Reed Warblers and Scarlet Rosefinches in abundance.

Day 10 **the Bukhtarma Valley**

Today we'll follow the great rift valley eastwards almost as far east as you can go in Kazakhstan. Ruddy Shelducks patrol the sinuous streams that snake across damp fields where we can find colonies of delicate Musk Orchid, the unusual *Dactylorhiza salina*, and *Primula longiscapa*. Massed displays of pink or white *Hesperis sibirica* line the fast-flowing but already impressively large Bukhtarma River. Under huge poplars by its banks we'll come across our very own European Lady's Slipper! Turning north towards the Russian border we'll stop at an intriguing museum at Berel where we'll be able to see some of the treasures and artifacts unearthed in the nearby 'frozen tombs' notably those belong to a Saka prince who was interned in the 4th century BC along with no less than thirteen fully-saddled horses. The surrounding meadows are full of butterflies, notably various fritillaries.

As we near our destination the great snowy peak of Belukha, rising to 15,000 feet on the border with Russian Siberia, rises in front of us, a fantastic sight.

Days 11 & 12 **Rakhmanovskiye Spa Resort & Mount Belukha**

We are based in nice cottages at Rachmanovskie Klyuchi, a hot springs 'resort' built in the great mountain's foothills. This is a quite stunning setting on the shores of a lake amidst beautiful Siberian Pine and spruce forests. Siberian Chipmunks chatter around our cottages and down by the bar Eversmann's Redstarts and Pallas's Grasshopper Warblers breed. Rachmanovskie's lake has well-constructed boardwalks running along both north and south shores allowing us perfect access into what is otherwise a pristine environment. The mossy forest floor is carpeted in Twinflower, various wintergreens, and little gems such as Lesser Twayblade. Striking pinky-red umbels of

Primula sibirica rise from bright green sphagnum by streams. European Mink hunt voles along the boardwalk edges, and Siberian Tits and Willow Tits are common in the trees. The forest thins quickly as one heads uphill – the tree line is hardly half an hours slow potter uphill. The flowers now take over. A blue carpet of a million *Aquilegia glandulosa* stretches out towards the snow-capped peaks, interrupted by colonies of luminous orange *Trollius altaica*. Pink *Pedicularis elata*, its flowery wands 70cm tall, and black-etched white *Pedicularis compacta* add their beauty to the show alongside orange and cream *Lathyrus gmelinii* and the local Martagon Lily, *Lilium pilosiusculum*. The strange inflated stems of white-flowered *Allium altaicum* draws the eye, it is one of many species of *Allium* we'll see during this trip. Move higher we reach the tundra and the blue turns to gentians, hundreds of thousands of them, this time mixing with the very bright yellow of *Ranunculus altaicus*, a very choice buttercup! There's abundant primulas, *Callianthemums* and all manner of tiny alpines hidden in the rocks on a pass with breath-taking views of brilliant Belukha.

Birds also include Yellow-breasted and Meadow Buntings and the beautiful Long-tailed Rosefinch. A pair or two of immaculate Black-throated Divers and beautiful Velvet Scoter, the males with striking orange and black bills, cruise the mirror-smooth lakes. White-backed and Northern Three-toed Woodpeckers inhabit primary pine forest alongside typical Siberian species such as Pine Grosbeak, Siberian Tit, Siberian Jay and the raucous Nutcracker. Pacific Swifts carve speeding arcs through the sky on the pass above our cottages where the air is so clear it seems that great Belukha is within touching distance. Red Marmots and Altai Pikas emit sharp warning calls from bouldery scree inhabited by Altai Accentors and Great Rosefinches.

Day 13 **To Ust-Kamenogorsk**

Today will largely be spent journeying back to Ust-Kamenogorsk and the comforts of the Dedeman, though we'll find time to stop and enjoy the flowers and butterflies on the way too.

Day 14 **Kalbinsky Hills & Zaissan**

The graves of Djunar Warriors mark our progress through high steppe-covered hills ablaze with vibrant displays of peonies, delphiniums, ligularias, and pink *Lavatera thuringiaca*. To the north the mountains rise higher and higher as we parallel the main Altai ranges. The large and bright 'alpherakyi' race of the Apollo floats over this finery, and Dryads and Hungarian Gliders patrol streams where many blues and skippers gather to sip salts. Imperial and Steppe Eagles soar over relict Scots Pine Forests and as we near Zaissan Lake large numbers of Rose-coloured Starlings appear. long streams we'll see swarms of *Dactylorhiza umbrosa* and various louseworts such as *Pedicularis amoena*. Along the route we'll see marvellous shows of *Paeonia anomala*, the first of many!

Day 15

Departure

Call 01298 83563 or visit www.greentours.co.uk for the latest trip report from our tours to the Altai Mountains. 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.

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