

Kazakhstan's Wild West

A Greentours Itinerary

This is a unique trip to the almost surreal moonscapes of the Ustyurt Plateau and the capes and islands of the Caspian Sea's eastern shore.

It is a difficult trip to categorize. It will be an adventure, exploring landscapes and wildlife in a remote region which is little known and doesn't have so much in the way of creature comforts. It will be about mammals. It will be about birds. And perhaps above everything, it will be a splendid journey through spectacular arid landscapes.

Day 1

Departure

The direct flight from London departs early in the evening.

Day 2

Early morning arrival in Aktau. Cape Cretaceous & Karakol Lake

We'll land in Aktau in the early hours of the morning and go to our hotel for some sleep. After brunch we'll head to famous Cape Cretaceous where we'll get our first daylight looks at the Caspian Sea. We're not expecting to see the famed seal today, that will most likely wait until the end of the trip, but you never know... Later in the afternoon we'll spend some time at a very productive wetland just south of the city, the Karakol State Reserve. This is one of those places where more or less anything can turn up and the list of waders, terns, ducks and wildfowl, not to mention passerines, is pretty impressive. Early May is prime time...

Days 3 & 4

Zhanaozen: The Sands of Senek, the Boszhira Tract and Ortasha Plateau

The Boszhira Tract was once the bottom of the ancient Tethys Ocean, of which the Caspian Sea, the Mediterranean, and the Black Sea are current-day remnants. Walking the tract's surreal landscapes, the unearthly scenery will draw our eyes, but we shouldn't forget to look under our feet for there are plenty of fossilized shark's teeth, shells and even fossilized algae. Once Hipparions (extinct horses) and Sabre-toothed Tigers roamed this landscape but nowadays the mammals are a little less scary. Still there are plenty of smaller predators such as Corsac Foxes, Steppe Polecats and Caracals that prey upon the abundant small mammal and lizard fauna of the largely sandy substrates. Libyan Jirds and Lesser Fat-tailed Jerboas are abundant. We hope to find the very distinctive bi-coloured Piebald Shrew. The Rapid Racerunner *Eremias velox* scoots across the low dunes and at night we can find the delicate Caspian Gecko. Brandt's Hedgehog is tolerably common, so too the Tolai Hare.

Lake Otstoinik hosts a wide variety of wetland birds and at this season we can expect to see Black-winged Pratincole, Ferruginous Duck, Red-necked Grebe, Terek Sandpiper, Marsh Sandpiper and Bluethroat.

Days 5 - 7

Ustyurt Reserve: Beket Ata, the Karyndzharyk Hollow and Onere Spring, Shelpe and the Ayrakty-Shomanai Mountains

A combination of geology and erosive forces have produced a sublime landscape of buttes and mesas on the Ustyurt Plateau and the Karyndzharyk Hollow. It is reminiscent of Bryce Canyon but without the people – without any people! Steep cliffs border the plateau. On the east side these cliffs formed the limit of the much more extensive Aral Sea of Triassic times. These cliffs are home to a largely intact mammal fauna. Black-tailed Gazelle still thrive here and we'll see herds of Transcaspians (Urals) (*Ovis vignei arkal*), a handsome wild sheep with spectacular curved horns.

Now here's what we don't yet know but are very excited to find out – what other mammals will we see? There's a population of Saiga in the area and these strange antelope will be having their young at this time. We hope to see them in the steppe to the south and west of Ustyurt. There are many small to medium sized predators in Ustyurt. Corsac Foxes should be common and there are known to be good populations of both Marbled Polecat and Steppe Polecat here. These handsome little mustelids will certainly be a highlight if we can find them. There are Caracals and the 'steppe' version of Wild Cat. The latter are interesting looking animals, quite leggy and therefore tall compared with the European Wild Cat. This was the last stronghold of the Cheetah in Kazakhstan and though it seems that they recently died out a trap camera survey to see if any were still in the region found instead Leopard of the rare *ciscaucasica* race. We'll spend plenty of time out at night looking for these animals. We'll soon find that there's lots for them to feed on - Severtsov's Jerboas hop along the tracks in front of us and we'll likely encounter the largest of the gerbils, the Great Gerbil, which reaches an impressive 20cm in length. There's also Thick-tailed Three-toed Jerboas and the strange Northern Mole-Vole. Yellow Ground Squirrels whistle to let everyone know they've seen us. Desert Long-eared Bats roost in crevices in the imposing rock buttresses and we can find both Botta's Serotine and Nepal Myotis roosting in a couple of abandoned buildings. Birdlife includes Eagle Owl, Pallas's Sandgrouse, Desert Wheatears, a selection of larks, and with luck we'll find a few MacQueen's Bustards.

Days 8 & 9

Torysh Tract - Shakpakatasai Canyon

The extraordinary geomorphology continues with the landscape at Torysh covered in spheres often three or even four metres in diameter that have formed through a

process of concretion. Not surprisingly Torysh is known in English as 'The Valley of the Balls'. Caspian Plover breeds in the nearby steppe.

We'll again spend plenty of time searching for mammals in this area. A word about our days in the field. Every evening we'll have an early dinner, early enough to give us plenty of time to go out exploring after dark. These extremely arid areas have plenty of life, but much of it, whether vertebrate or invertebrate, is only visible after dark. So every (or at least almost every) evening we'll set out not long after dark and spend a few hours, either in the vehicles or on foot, looking for whatever we'll find. For sure we'll see many of the mammal species by doing this. We'll then return to the camp in time to get a good night's sleep before dawn when we'll also be out and about. So when we say a good night's sleep, it might be less than some of you may need, so we expect to have a decent siesta in the afternoons before dinner!

Days 10 & 11

Tyuleniy Archipelago in search of Caspian Seals. Sarytash & the Sultan Epe Canyon

We'll spend a couple of days on the Tyub-Karagan Peninsula east of Fort Shevchenko. Here the semi-deserts are home to Horsfield's Tortoise and the curious Sunwatcher. Typical birds include Red-headed Bunting, Rose-coloured Starling, Brown-necked Raven, Asian Desert Warbler, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, and in any wetland areas, large flocks of the lovely Red-necked Phalarope. Our camp will be by a small fishery which attracts foxes and the like at night and in the daytime will provide us with the boat that we'll use to visit the remote Tyuleniy Archipelago. Here we'll encounter one of the World's most endangered phocids, the Caspian Seal. They'll have pupped three months previously (they pup on the sea ice) but by the time of our visit they'll be migrating past the archipelago and we should see them hauled out on these hardly visited unpopulated islands.

Day 12

Tamshaly and Saura Tract and return to Aktau

Our route takes us through the dry lands of Karagan with wonderful views of Cape Bagarzhik. We'll take a quick look at the ruins of an old village once inhabited by Kanga fishermen. Tamshaly translates as 'Merry Drops' and it is certainly true that the sight of this little oasis quickens the spirits. The blue ribbon of water is lined with greenery including some lovely willows. And of course it is a magnet for birds and animals. Black-bellied Sandgrouse fly in to drink and amongst migrant birds we might expect Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, White-tailed Lapwings, Syke's Warbler and Red-breasted Flycatcher. Here we'll look for Long-eared Hedgehog and Gray Hamster.

In the evening we'll return to Aktau and the comforts of a modern hotel!

Day 13

Departure

Our direct flight to London departs just after lunch, so this morning we'll have a nice relaxed start before the journey home.

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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