

## Lake Van

### Eastern Turkey

#### A Greentours Itinerary

##### Days 1 & 2 Istanbul To Dogubeyazit

An early evening arrival in Istanbul will give us chance to rest at the Green Roof Hotel in pleasant countryside just fifteen minutes drive from the International Airport so very convenient for our early morning flight across the Anatolian Plateau to Van. The scenery around Van is quite breath-taking - the immense lake is encircled by range after range of beautiful snow-capped peaks and the lake's waters turn turquoise, blue, white or even reddish depending on wind and weather. Already we'll be enjoying the wonder purple-blue *Iris barnumae* and fields covered in a pastiche of pink and purple from a combination of *Dactylorhiza osmanica*, *Orchis pseudolaxiflora*, *Polygala anatolica* and swathes of *Primula auriculata*. All decorated with the shiny golden yellow of Black-headed Yellow Wagtails.

As we descend from the high Tendürek Pass, the perfect snowy cone of Ararat rises before us. It dominates the landscape in the manner of those East African giants, Kilimanjaro and Kenya and indeed is nearly as high as the latter reaching almost 17,000 feet.

##### Days 3 & 4 Ararat's Hinterland & the Ishak Paşa Palace

There will be an opportunity pre-breakfast on either or both of Days 3 & 4 to visit the grounds of the now closed Sim-er Motel. With the only trees for miles around this little oasis is a real migrant-trap. Warblers can be abundant, especially Marsh Warblers and Garden Warblers, but also a wide range of other species. There's always some Common Rosefinches around and other unusual migrants we've recorded here in recent years include Desert Finch and Levant Sparrowhawk.

At the foot of Ararat blooms many Iris enthusiasts' Holy Grail - *Iris iberica*. The large falls are heavily veined deep maroon, the centres almost black. These are crowned by extraordinary snowy white standards lightly touched with purple. Growing with this beauty are *Gladiolus atroviolaceus* and *Orchis coriophora*. We'll see meadows with the unusual open-flowered *Muscari coeleste*, blue lily-like *Ixiolirion tataricum* and masses of *Geranium tuberosum*.

The Çilli Pass over the western shoulder of Ararat is not particularly high but offers a glimpse of the convoluted larval landscapes near the foot of the great mountain. White-throated Robins and Upcher's Warblers are common, so too Chukar and Finsch's Wheatears. Slopes have much *Campanula stevenii* deep red-brown *Orchis*

*coriophora*, Irises and weirdly-coloured *Verbascum phoeniceum*. We'll spend the afternoon amongst some wetlands where we'll see Garganey, Ruddy Shelduck, Red-crested Pochard, White-winged Black Terns, Citrine Wagtails and Glossy Ibis. Turkestan Short-toed Larks inhabit flats where *Eremostachys laciniata* puts on quite a show.

The Ishak Paşa Palace lies atop crags of deeply contorted grey, russet and ochre rocks. Above is a deep blue sky and beyond the wide valley that was once part of the Silk Route lie jumbled lava flows that have tumbled from Ararat's cone. It is a picture that has adorned many a guidebook! There is much fauna and flora to see too. Amongst these arid-looking rocks flower shining red (and sometimes yellow) *Tulipa juliae* and the pretty juno *Iris caucasica*, and we should find one of Turkey's rarest birds, the Mongolian Trumpeter Finch. Above the crags are Imperial Eagle, Griffon Vultures and Red-billed Chough. The extraordinary 'vegetable sheep' *Gypsophila pulvinaris* cloaks large rocks and cliffs in tight rock-like mounds up to a metre across. On a gravelly saddle are superb mounds of *Androsace villosa*, pretty little *Silene dianthoides* and the strange sinuate-leaved *Matthiola anchoniifolia*, a plant that after nightfall emits a very pleasant scent. *Gagea bulbifera* and *Allium akaka* will be in fine form. Much more overpowering than the *Matthiola* is the 'pudding plant' *Anchonium elichrysifolium*, looking rather like a very neat wallflower.

## Day 5

### Ahlat via Volcanoes and Waterfalls

Returning south over the Tendürek Pass we'll see green meadows tinged pink by massed displays of marsh orchids and pretty *Primula auriculata* contrasting with Tendurek's black lava flows whose porous crumbly surface is still virtually devoid of vegetation. Long-legged Buzzards and Short-toed Eagles soar overhead as we enjoy a picnic by a beautiful waterfall. All around us bloom more of those fabulous irises, these joined by the velvety scarlet flowers of *Phelypaea tournefortii*. Saker Falcons hunt along the ridge behind and Egyptian Vultures nest nearby. Rock Sparrows, and in some years, Pale Rock Sparrows, are abundant and it won't take long to locate Great Rock Nuthatches as their strident calls echo from the cliff-faces. Butterflies congregate by a tiny stream - Pontic Blue, Southern Comma and the local *Polyommatus fatima* are just some we should see. Along Van's north shore we'll stop amongst fields covered in orchids next to still waters that hold the reflection of mighty Suphan Volcano, Turkey's third highest mountain.

## Day 6

### Nemrut Dağı

The ash-covered slopes of Nemrut Dağı, an extinct volcano, rise gently to the crater rim where delicate furry blue *Pulsatilla albana* flowers. A road takes us down to the crater floor where black-tented encampments of nomadic herdsmen sit by an impossibly blue lake. Velvet Scoter have forsaken their usual Arctic home to breed here! Georgian and Pinewood Orchids add splashes of colour to dwarf aspen

woodlands whilst pale yellow *Iris caucasica* and the narrow maroon bells of *Fritillaria assyriaca* and *Fritillaria minuta* inhabit a crazy landscape of shiny obsidian boulders where we'll find White-throated Robins and Finsch's Wheatears.

## **Days 7 & 8**

### **Tatvan's Oak Woodlands**

Dwarf oak woodland shelters Red-backed and Masked Shrikes and a variety of butterflies including both Eastern and Grüner's Orange-tips and the intricately-patterned festoon *Zerynthia deyrollei*. The caterpillars of the festoon feed on *Aristolochia bottae* which is now in flower along with deliciously fragrant *Daphne oleoides kurdica* and bright pink-red *Lathyrus roseus*. The impressive blooms of *Paeonia mascula* flower with Kotschy's Helleborine and Komper's Orchid whilst *Dactylorhiza umbrosa*, *Orchis pseudolaxiflora*, yellow *Pedicularis comosa* and pink *Polygala major* make a fine show in damp roadside meadows. Lovely pinky-purple *Gladiolus kotschyanus* adorns some damp meadows and another star plant will be butter-yellow *Rosa foetida*.

## **Day 9**

### **Hoşap Castle and Güzeldere Pass**

The 'Tolkienesque' 17th century Kurdish fortress at Hoşap sits upon a rocky pinnacle guarding the upper entrance to the Zernek Valley. A dry valley here regularly has all three of the rare Eastern Turkish seedeaters, so Grey-necked Bunting, Mongolian Trumpeter Finch and even Trumpeter Finch itself. Beyond lies the snowy Güzeldere Pass and fantastic *Iris paradoxa*, with falls covered in a thick layer of velvet and topped by large white standards veined a deep inky blue - truly a spectacular plant! Radde's Accentors and the local 'unspotted' race (*magna*) of Bluethroat feed amongst the pink crocus-like flowers of *Colchicum szovitsii*. *Iris pseudocauucasica* mixes with both white and the more common yellow form of recently named *Tulipa koyuncii* and with them blue *Bellevalia pycnantha* and the extremely rare *Bellevalia rixii*, found only here. Lemon-flowered stemless *Centaurea vanensis* grows on screes also inhabited by squat patches of yellow and red-eyed *Androsace villosa*. Queen of Spain and Glanville Fritillaries are common and here we shall see *Callophrys paulae* (a type of Green Hairstreak) and Dalmatian Ringleet flying amongst beautiful *Gentiana verna* and *Corydalis nariniana*. Some miles over the pass we'll leave time to visit a site for the exquisite yellow *urumiensis* – our fifth *Oncocyclus Iris* species of the tour!

## **Day 10**

### **Akdamar Island**

Snow-capped mountains descend steeply into the lake near Gevas. There's no need for a washing machine here, the lake's soda content is so high it cleans clothes in an instant. It has rather the same effect on the waterbirds - the Coots have white wingbars! A boat takes us to Akdamar Island and its tenth century church, built by the

kings of Vaspurkan. Well-preserved frescoes show various biblical stories including David and Goliath and Jonah and the Whale, and are considered among the great masterpieces of Armenian art. Needless to say there's plenty of masterpieces in the natural world too – some ancient *Pistachia vera* and some highly active colonies of Armenian Gulls and Night Herons among them! Back on the 'mainland' open slopes harbour dark purple *Gladiolus atroviolaceus* and the pink umbels of *Allium akaka* perched above pretty rounded leaves. Stunning *Iris sari*, a variably plum-coloured iris, blooms among a bewildering array of colourful pea flowers and the lovely blue pendent bells of *Moltkia caerulea*.

During two or three of the days when we stay in Van area we'll offer early morning pre-breakfast trips so that keen birdwatchers amongst the group can see the exceptionally varied birdlife at South Van Marshes and in particular the Dönemeç Delta. Rollers 'roll' around us as we look out over the reeds and open water of the rivermouth where a variety of ducks include Marbled Duck and Ferruginous Duck as well as Garganey. Eurasian Bitterns, rare in Turkey, boom as we watch all three marsh terns, various egrets and herons, Spur-winged Plovers, and a rich assortment of waders. A small colony (perhaps the only one in Turkey) of breeding White-tailed Plovers will be a highlight. *Orchis pseudolaxiflora* (and a few *Orchis palustris*) in places colour the marshes pink as we enjoy beautiful Citrine Wagtail and tease out the Paddyfield Warblers from the various other *Acrocephalus* warblers present!

## **Day 11**

### **Karabet Pass**

The road to Bahçesaray takes us up the 9500 foot Karabet Pass into a land covered in snow and rock and millions of *Puschkinia scilloides*, their blooms ranging from white to icy blue. Kurdish herders attend their flocks and we'll see groups of men and women, the latter in their colourful traditional costumes, all lending a helping hand with the sheep shearing. Golden Eagles and Chough soar against the great cliffs that rise from the road and by snow are Snow Finches and Shorelarks. Radde's Accentors are common! Butterflies include the pretty green and orange *Tomares romanovii*. The flowers are quite incredible. Amongst acres of the *Puschkinia* grow the pale pink to cerise goblets of *Merendera kurdica*; some are four inches across! Rare *Fritillaria minima* decorates scree with golden-yellow bells and by streams grow swathes of *Primula auriculata* and the pretty mauve-pink *Tulipa humilis*. By snow patches are *Corydalis oppositifolia* and two more species of fritillary, the butterscotch-maroon flowers of the in-aptly named *Fritillaria minuta*, and the green and purple striped bells of *Fritillaria crassifolia*. High cliffs top 12,000 feet above the pass and careful searching amongst yellow *Saxifraga kotschyi* might reveal Wallcreeper.

## Day 12

### The Çatak Road

Steppe in this part of the world often harbours almost miraculous quantities of flowers but still a small area of this amazing habitat on the road to Catak is beyond special. Here is an exquisite display of blooms. Massed *Linaria kurdica* with impressively large yellow blooms (think snapdragon..) mix with mounds of *Convolvulus linearis*, bright red *Roemeria refracta*, orange-red *Glaucium grandiflorum* and lots of colourful *Astragaluses*.

A dry rocky gorge provides a warm sunny spot for butterflies such as Chapman's Blue, Lesser Fiery Copper and the lovely Turkish Golden Copper. Crimson-winged Finches, Western Rock Nuthatch and Grey-necked Bunting feed on slopes covered in a memorable display of pink *Aethionema grandiflorum* and *Aethionema membranaceum* as well as the impressive *Muscari longipes*. Further towards Çatak we'll see *Potentilla lignosa* flowering in cascades over some rocky outcrops, Ring Ouzels and some Red-fronted Serins, the lovely Romanov's Copper, and two beautiful *Salvias*, the reddish *Salvia trichoclada* and the very large-flowered *Salvia macrochlamys* with bright cerise and white blooms.

## Day 13

### Erçek Gölü and Van Kalesi

The lovely deep purple flowers of *Iris barnumae* bloom with both *Bellevalias longistyla* and *fominii* on dry rocky slopes inhabited by Grey-necked Buntings and Black-bellied Sandgrouse. Shallow Lake Erçek has a fantastically rich birdlife with perhaps a thousand Greater Flamingoes on show and with them White Storks and large numbers of ducks including Ruddy Shelducks, Red-crested Pochard and Garganey. Citrine Wagtails and Moustached Warblers occupy bulrush marshes. Male White-headed Ducks point their swollen blue bills skyward as they display in reedy roadside ponds. Damp steppe beyond the lake stretches in the distance covered in a pink haze from literally millions of *Orchis pseudolaxiflora*, yet another extraordinary botanical sight in a region thick with them!

In the afternoon we'll head towards Van's 'Rock' and the ancient Urartian Citadel there-on where cuneiform inscriptions date from the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. Below it sits the marvellous new Van Museum with an exceptionally curated display of the regions rich history.

## Day 14

### Return to the UK

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