

Tulips of the Tien Shan

A Greentours Itinerary

Days 1 & 2 Kapchagai

After our overnight flight from the UK one can relax in the hotel or start in the sands of the Kapchagai where we'll have our first meeting with the wonderful bulbous flora of the Central Asian steppes. Tulips soon start appearing, here are four species, and all must be seen today as they do not occur in the other parts of Kazakhstan we visit during the tour! These special species include a lovely yellow form of *Tulipa albertii* which blooms amidst a carpet of white blossomed *Spiraea hypericifolia* subshrubs. Elegant *Eremurus crispus* can be seen with sumptuous red *Tulipa behmiana*, often in company with pale *Gagea ova*, abundant *Gagea minutiflora* and local *Gagea tenera*. There are myriad flowers as the summer sun will not yet have burnt the sands dry. Low growing shrubs of *Cerasus tianshanicus*, their pale and deep pink blooms perfuming the air, shelter *Rindera cyclodonta* and *Corydalis karelinii*. In the open sandy areas we'll look for *Iris tenuifolia* and both *Tulipa talievii* and the yellow-centred white stars of *Tulipa buhseana*. We'll visit a canyon where we can take our picnic between patches of *Tulipa lemmersii*, a newly described and very beautiful tulip. First described in 2008 and named after Wim Lemmers, this extremely local endemic grows only on the west-facing rocks on the top of this canyon!

Day 3 The Kordoï Pass and Merke

After a night's sleep in the Hotel Almaty we will wake to find the immense snow-covered peaks of the Tien Shan rising from the edge of Almaty's skyline - a truly magnificent sight! We journey westwards and will soon be amongst the montane steppe of the Kordoï Pass where we will find one of the finest shows of spring flowers one could wish for. The stunning open goblets of *Tulipa ostrowskyana* and *Tulipa kolpakowskiana* (and hybrids between the two) come in a kaleidoscopic show of reds, yellow and oranges, while growing amongst them is the lovely *Iris (Juno) kusakevichii*, *Iris tienshanica*, and a carpet of gageas and corydalis species. The rare *Leontice eversmanni* holds its lemon-flowered pyramids against the blue skies and overhead flocks of Demoiselle Cranes and Black Kites circle before passing northwards - this is a truly wonderful place! Later we will stop for the night at a hotel right at the foot of the Tien Shan. Our target here is the beautiful *Tulipa zenaïda*, found only in a few valleys near Merke. This glorious tulip has large flowers with alternate red and yellow tepals - a quite striking effect!

Day 4 The Muyum Kum Desert and Dzhabagly

Continuing westwards along the old silk route we find the Muyum Kum Desert set right at the foot of the snow-capped peaks of the Tien Shan. It is hard to credit,

but within sight of all those flowery meadows and all that snow is a sandy desert where rain rarely falls! From our road the sands stretch northwards over hundreds of kilometres of inhospitable terrain. The scorching desert heat of summer is a long way distant as we wander amongst the dunes and saxaul scrub watching Booted Warblers and Isabelline Shrikes as strange Toad-headed Agamas and Steppe Agamas catch some pleasant spring sunshine. *Eremias grammica* and its close relative, the aptly-named Rapid Runner (whose front legs keep running even when the lizard has stopped!) scurry hither and thither. All is not just sand here though - we should see the lovely blue *Iris tenuifolia* in flower and hopefully the last blooms of *Tulipa binutans* and more certainly *Tulipa bifloriformis*. We'll see plenty of the blue trumpets of *Ixiolirion tataricum* and will have our first experience of lovely *Corydalis ledebouriana*. In the afternoon we'll arrive in Taraz (formerly Dzhambul). This is where Vladimir lives. Just outside the town lies the Aisha Bibi mausoleum, an elegant 12th century structure commemorating a Persian noble woman, who never quite made it to Taraz!

Days 5-7

The Karatau Mountains and Steppe Lakes

A little to the west of Taraz lie the mysterious Karatau Mountains, their striking outline clearly visible from the city. Here are fantastic shows of spring bulbs, and once again, tulips play a major role. Three species decorate the rocky slopes. Greig's Tulips in regular reds and orange-reds is found here, but on the slopes of the Berkara Valley, you can see all the genetic diversity harnessed by those early tulip breeders from Holland. Here the blooms are yellow, white, orange or red and all combinations in between. Along with *Tulipa kaufmanniana* grow the delicate yellow and white stars of *Tulipa turkestanica*. At nearby Kizilkol we'll find the rare *Tulipa borszczowii*. *Rhinopetalum* adds shades of pink to the scene, and here we will find many superb specimens of that strange fritillary, *Korolkovia severzovii*. Lovely juno irises are a common sight. The subtle blue flowers of *Iris (Juno) willmottiana* are usually single whereas the robust yellow flowers of *Iris (Juno) orchioides* are stacked one above the other. The early flowering *Iris (Juno) subdecolorata* usually still has some of its pretty blooms on show. We think you will be very impressed with the wonderful array of beautiful *Corydalis* species on show. The glaucous foliage and red and white flowers of both *Corydalis ledebouriana* and *Corydalis nudicaulis* are prominent and we shall also see the rare *Corydalis severzovii* with its orange-yellow flowers. The prize though must go to the stunning *Corydalis schanginii*. The rare 'ainii' subspecies, only recently discovered, bears spikes of a dozen or so bright yellow, white and pale pink flowers each fully two inches long! There's more tulips too. Hardly less impressive than Greig's Tulips are the Karatau subspecies of *Tulipa abertii*, a vibrant red form, sometimes separated as *Tulipa karatavica*, and then there's lovely *Tulipa lehmanniana* in citrus hues.

Resident birds include Eastern Rock Nuthatch and raptors such as Long-legged Buzzard, Black Vulture and Saker Falcon which will be busy searching out prey for their growing young. Many migrants pass this way. Steppe lakes host elegant Demoiselle Cranes, sometimes a thousand of them in a single flock. Flocks of

Black-throated Thrushes will still be feeding on the rich assortment of fruiting bushes before heading north. Among the choicer species we should see are Little Bustard, Marsh Sandpiper, Terek Sandpiper and Great Black-headed Gulls.

Days 8-12

The Aksu-Dzhabagly Nature Reserve in the Tien Shan Mountains, the Karatau Mountains, and Steppe Lakes

The Aksu-Dzhabagly Reserve has recently been afforded the status of Biosphere Reserve, the only one so far designated in Kazakhstan. Some 85,000 hectares of mountain reserve, ranging in altitude from 3,000 feet to over 14,000 feet, has been completely protected for 75 years and it has only been during the past few years that Westerners have had the chance to visit this pristine mountain domain. And it starts within walking distance of the village! Just outside Dzhabagly and within walking distance of the hotel we shall see the lovely pink *Rhinopetalum stenanthum* (a fritillary) in the fields.

We spend four days exploring the reserve, which starts just a kilometre from the hotel. Aksu-Dzhabagly's famous flora and fauna is, in April, concentrated on the lower slopes as above about 6,000 feet is snow-bound at this time. The lovely white stars of *Crocus alatavicus*, inset with orange anthers, often appear directly through these snows! Growing with them is perhaps the most gorgeous flower of them all, the wonderfully unpronounceable *Iridodictyum kolpakovskianum*. This botanical treasure is dressed in blues, purples and yellows, making it a particularly photogenic species when set against a background of white crocuses. *Gymnospermium alberti* pushes its tubular yellow flowers and beautifully dissected leaves through the damp ground. In these areas close to the snow we can expect to find the local *Tulipa dasystemonoides* and the unusual bright yellow *Colchicum luteum*. Slopes below are awash with bright yellow *Anemone petiolulosa* and *Anemone gortschakovii*, and in shady juniper groves we will find the local aconite, *Eranthis longistipitata*. It is here that the fabulous bright red goblets of Greig's Tulip can be seen. There can be few flowers which surpass this tulip in such extravagant beauty and rarely are such strong colours seen away from the plant breeder's palate. Growing with it is the immaculate local speciality, *Tulipa kaufmanniana*, whose open flowers give rise to the local name of Water-Lily Tulip.

This reserve is justly famous for its large mammals. All the snow and ice at higher altitudes concentrates them on one long grassy ridge where they await the melting of the snows above. This gives the reserve's scientists an ideal opportunity to count these animals and assess population trends. We should see perhaps a hundred Siberian Ibex and several of the globally endangered Arkhar (a kind of Marco Polo Sheep) during our walks. Isabelline Brown Bears, of which there are now less than 200 remaining in the wild, are the reserve's other main claim to fame. Some sixty of them live here, and quite unbelievably, they spend the mid-winter months hibernating up in the snowy peaks. With luck we should be able to watch mother Bears with their cubs feeding on the fresh green growth near the snowline.

Yellow-breasted Azure Tits, Red-fronted Serins and the huge-billed White-winged Grosbeaks are establishing their breeding territories amongst the junipers, while Blue Whistling Thrush and Brown Dipper are active along the sparkling streams that cascade from the snows. Lammergeier, Black Vulture and Golden Eagle patrol the skies above whilst the eerie calls of the Himalayan Snowcock descend from the high snowy crags of the marble mountain. Bird migration can be very exciting at this time, and substantial 'falls' of migrants can occur - during our visit three years ago the village hosted several immaculate Blue-headed Redstarts, a stunning male Himalayan Rubythroat and Sulphur-bellied, Dusky and Hume's Yellow-browed Warblers.

After a day in the field we catch the evening train on Day 12 from nearby Tulkubas and arrive in Almaty at nine the next morning. From the comfortable first class sleeper accommodation you can watch the landscapes of Central Asia roll by.

Days 13

Almaty: Kaskelen

We'll spend a day exploring the mountains which rise just to the south of the city of Almaty. The high peaks will be thoroughly snowbound but the low mountains of Kaskelen have, at this season, an exceptional flora, with abundant tulips as well as the lovely *Iris alberti* and *Primula kaufmanniana* blooming amid a carpet of gagea and corydalis species. The delicate yellow stars of *Tulipa dasystemon* bloom among pretty pink *Primula algida*, the delicate *Corydalis glaucescens* and abundant *Gagea emarginata*. In beautiful forests of Tien Shan Spruce we can find Black-throated Accentors and Songar Tits while snow-clad, juniper-dotted slopes offer a good chance of seeing that archetypal mountain bird, the charismatic Himalayan Snowcock.

Day 14

Departure

Call 01298 83563 or visit www.greentours.co.uk for the latest trip report from our previous tours to the Tien Shan in April. 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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