

Northeastern Anatolia

Mammal-watching

A Greentours Itinerary

Want to go somewhere where the Brown Bears are so abundant you'll see numbers every day of the trip? No need of hides or baiting. We've recently located a good site for Marbled Polecats and there's a strong chance we'll see Eurasian Lynx and Wolf. And the supporting cast includes Stone Marten, Chamis, Ibex, Wild Boar and the cutest red and white Red Squirrels.

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 – 5(am)

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 Yaylalar, 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.

Brown Bear populations have risen spectacularly in recent years and the bears here are very visible – we can expect to see them at almost any time of day and will very likely be able to watch them even from our rooms! At this season females are often with very young cubs. It's a joy to watch them tumbling around over the slopes. Some still have their yearling cubs with them, hardly smaller than the mother bears. 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. Though most sightings are initially at least distant the bears are not particularly skittish and we are likely to have closer sightings at times. Eurasian Lynx, of the beautiful spotted Siberian race, like the open scrubby alpine slopes just above the tree line. Talk to the locals and you'll hear many a story of Lynx in the gardens, indeed in winter in Olgunlar Lynx often occupy some of the buildings 0- sensible! Not as easy to spot as the bears but careful use of the thermal scope will give us a good chance on the slopes near our accommodation. Wolves are less common here though they do sneak into the villages often in the immediate pre-dawn period (the dogs may let us know).

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 *Muscari*s. 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 Yaylalarlar and we'll have a decent chance of multiple sightings with close up views quite possible. Red-backed Shrikes are staggeringly common 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 we will likely encounter Red Fox, Badger and Stone Marten, one of the latter likes to check the hotel out to see if anything nice has been left out!

Day 5 (pm)

To Sarıkamış and Kars

A bit of a journey today but through outstanding scenery all the way. We'll again check for Ibex in the lower valleys and the Scots Pine woodlands along the route 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 – 9(am)

The Kars Highlands - Allahuekber Mountains National Park

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! Indeed much of our mammal-watching in the area will be in areas still very much covered in snow!

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 just found a superb site for Marbled Polecat. This striking carnivore lives on gentle slopes on high level steppe country where at this season the snow has just melted and damp soil is perfect for abundant rodent activity. Rich pickings for pretty little mustelids. Luckily they are rather curious and survey us from the safety of burrow entrances, their comical little black and white circled faces peering at us.

A twenty-five kilometre long dirt road takes us through the uninhabited wilderness of the Allahuekber Mountains National Park. This is mammal-watching par excellence in Turkey. One doesn't even need to get out of the vehicle, even just driving up and down the road results in numerous sightings of Brown Bears and Wild Boar! The bears are staggeringly common. One or two local shepherds who will have their herds of cows in this remote country raise their eyes when asked about the bears 'çok, çok!' they say – very many. The bears generally tend to wander away from us when we stop the vehicle but some are less than concerned and continue about their daily routine with hardly a glance at us.

This wild and remote country is also a good area for Wolves. Being up in the high country above the tree line, where vast acreages of mountain steppe, half snow-covered still, in the two or three hours after dawn is the perfect place and time to scan for them coming back to their daytime refuges from a night out pillaging and raiding. Lynx are as common here as anywhere in Turkey, though of course they are not so easy to find as the Ursine cousins. The shepherds say the same about them as bears, but then they add the caveat 'but you don't see them so often'. We'll try and prove them wrong! We'll certainly see a few of the local Red Foxes, looking very different from their West European counterparts. Here they are a 'wolfish' pale grey with a thick pelage designed to cope with the winter cold, their tails hardly white tipped at all.

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*.

Day 9(pm) Departure

We depart early afternoon from Kars Airport. This is half an hour from Sarikamış and gives is 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.

Call 01298 83563 or visit www.greentours.co.uk for the trip report from our previous mammal-watching trips to Northeastern Turkey. 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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