NEW FRONTIERES

Besides the reserves, our job is also supporting tour operators, companies, local institutions and public authorities of other countries in the development of a complete nature tourism offer. Our team deals with the creation of nature tourism itineraries that meet the requirements of the international market, making all the necessary ground reconnaissance of the sites, pointing out the most interesting species, places and paths to propose, the best solutions in terms of accommodation facilities and logistics depending on the different target clientele to reach and in general providing a professional support on the development of the whole project (from the training of local guides to the creation of promotional material and websites, etc.). At a bigger scale, we support governing bodies in the development of a nature tourism offer that covers the entire country, involving local companies, accommodation facilities and others operators in a network, to create a local economy based on this increasing market.

In the World there are countries and areas still unknown or lesser known to nature lovers, areas with uncontaminated and incredible ecosystems and species to be discovered through this kind of responsible tourism, that has the potentiality to provide a very important economical resource, both for local economy and nature conservation.
Birdwatching & Photography

ARMENIA

SKUA Nature promotes and develops nature tourism in Armenia in collaboration with Armenia Magica. Our goal is to create nature itineraries for birdwatching and photographic tours, and we also try to develop botanical and butterfly tours.

Armenia is a wonderful, little known jewel, a rather small country, full of interesting birds and beautiful landscapes, with an extremely rich historical heritage. Mainly a mountainous country, its highest peak, mount Aragats, reaches over 4000 metres, while the mighty Ararat volcano (now in Turkey, but formerly inside the boundaries of Armenia) can be seen very close from the Erevan plains. Open rocky areas with scattered bushes and rolling hills only sparsely cultivated are among the most widespread habitats, but in Armenia there are also large expanses of forests and humid areas, and thanks to these amazing variety the set of bird species present in the country is truly impressive! And of course its geographical position means that especially during migrations a large number of both western and eastern species pass through regularly, or can turn up anytime, making Armenia a real birding hot spot! Large mammals are another feature of this country, with Brown bear, Lynx and Wolf present almost everywhere within the country boundaries, and with a few Persian leopards still roaming in some areas! During springtime Armenia is also becoming more and more appreciated for its abundance of fantastic blooming flowers, with an astonishing variety which includes wild tulips, orchids and irises, truly remarkable. Again thanks to its geographical position, Armenia is also blessed with very interesting reptile and amphibian species, as well as with an abundance of attractive butterflies and dragonflies.

Armenia is definitely a very fascinating country to visit, perfectly safe from every point of view (the only potentially troublesome area being Nagorno-Karabagh, which we will not visit), with an overall good road system and western style accommodation available in every interesting area, and with...
really fantastic food, with a lot of fresh, locally grown vegetables and some great, very tasty Armenian dishes.

Armenia is rather easy country to explore, not too big and with good roads: in a relatively short time you can pass from high mountain habitats to semi-desert and cultivated countryside, thus allowing to see many different bird species, and often at very close range! Not far from the capital city, Erevan, is the mount Aragat, (more than 4000 metres), with a good tarmac road which ascends to over 3000 metres; along this road, from the Erevan plains to the high alpine habitat; the set of birds to be seen is truly impressive: we should be able to find Finsch’s Wheatear and Rufous-tailed Bush Robin, Bimaculated Lark and the gorgeous White-throated Robin, and then higher up Radder’s Accentor (arguably the best place in the world for this species), Alpine Accentor, Bluethroat, Twite and Horned Lark, not to mention raptors, from Long-legged Buzzard to the mighty Lammergeier.

The Armash fish ponds, a private area that can be visited thanks to special permits, is among the best birdwatching areas in the whole western palearctic. A huge wetland of 1000 hectares teeming with birds probably White-tailed Lapwing and Blue-cheeked Bee-eater would be enough to justify a visit here, but these star birds are only the jewels on Armash’s crown, for many other fantastic species can be seen here, such as White-headed Duck and Ferruginous Duck, Pigmy Cormorant, all the European Herons, Glossy Ibis, Collared (and possibly also Black-winged) Pratincole, Menetries’s Warbler, Lesser Short-toed Lark and Paddyfield Warbler, while the number of Bearded Reedlings around is simply astonishing! And of course during migration almost anything can turn up!

The arid hills and gorges around the small town of Vedi are a hotspot for very localized species such as Grey-necked Bunting, Trumpeter and Mongolian Finch (and possibly even Desert Finch!) Upcher’s Warbler and Persian Nuthatch. The scenery here is very nice, with rocky slopes and small patches of bushes and also small cultivated fields, where Brown Bears come looking for watermelons to dig out of the ground!

But Armenia offers not only arid areas and wetlands the Dilijan area is covered in beautiful forests of ash, beech and maple, where Green Warbler, Red-breasted and Caucasian Flycatchers are normally fairly easy to find, while Middle Spotted Woodpecker and Levant Sparrowhawk might require a little more effort. All the four European vultures are present in Armenia, with...
Few Persian leopards still roaming in some areas!

Lammergeier being possibly the commonest; they can be seen virtually everywhere, so the skies are always well worth checking, also looking for Golden, Lesser Spotted and Short-toed Eagles.

The immense Lake Sevan is again a very good place for migrants, besides holding the world’s largest concentration of Armenian Gulls; here during spring migration a great set of interesting species can be seen, from White-winged Terns to Terek’s and Broad-billed Sandpipers, alongside with many other waders, ducks and passerines.

During the days in Armenia, we will explore many different areas, mainly mountainous but not only, including gentle cultivated hills, countryside, rocky outcrops and beautiful canyons, and we will visit a few beautiful Christian monasteries. Birds are everywhere in Armenia, and we will be astonished by the numbers of common species like Swifts, Swallows and Martins, and the same is true for species like Lesser-grey and Red-backed Shrike, Ortolan, Corn and Black-headed Bunting.

Accommodation is very good, all the rooms have en suite facilities and the food is invariably very fresh and tasty, with a lot of local vegetables, cheese and meat. Road conditions are already fairly good on average, and major road works are being done in some places in order to further improve their conditions.

Armenia is gaining more and more attention from European birdwatchers, and rightly so, but so far not many birders have actually visited this fascinating country; so now is the time for a great opportunity to discover its charming beauty and some of its great landscapes and bird species, while there is still a bit of a pioneering feeling in the experience!
GEORGIA

Birdwatching & Photography

SKUA Nature promotes and develops nature tourism in Armenia in collaboration with Eco Tours Georgia. Our goal is to create nature itineraries for birdwatching and photographic tours, and we also try to develop botanical and butterfly tours.

Georgia is situated at an intersection between different biogeographical regions, and this is reflected in the richness of its nature and wildlife: there is a high number of endemic or localized species, and a wonderful mix of northern, eastern and mediterranean elements. Asia and Europe come in contact here, and the varied and rugged environment guarantees a wide selection of habitats in which to look for birds. Large parts of Georgia are still very wild and with low human density, and not only in the mountain areas; the open, arid areas present in the south east for instance have little human population, and host a great set of very interesting bird species, as well as a lot of localized reptile and amphibian species. Also the cultivated areas offer good opportunity for birdwatching, while the vast expanses of both broadleaved and coniferous forests offer refuge for large mammals such as Brown bear, Wolf and Lynx. The greater Caucasus mountain range lies in the north of the country, and its highest peak here reaches over 5000 metres! Batumi, on the Black Sea coast, is now famous as one of the best hot spot on earth for observing raptor migration, especially in the autumn passage, with incredible numbers and a large variety of species. Georgia is a fantastic country for nature lovers, and a trip here is sure to satisfy even the most demanding birdwatcher.

The mountain areas in and around Kazbegi are rightly famous for being the best place where to see fantastic species such as Caucasian Snowcock, Caucasian Black Grouse, Great Rosefinch and Guldenstadt’s Redstart; the scenery here is gorgeous, with steep mountain sides and a very interesting river bed with mixed shrubs. We shall be looking for Twite, Shore Lark and White-winged Snow Finch, as well as Golden Eagle and Lammergeier. Early
may is the best time of year in order to see the target species mentioned above together with a number of migrants such as Barred, Eastern Orphean and Eastern Olivaceous Warblers, as well as breeding Corncrakes, Mountain Chiffchaff and Red fronted serins.

The area around Chachuna, in the south east, has a fantastic landscape with savannah-like open areas, mixed with rolling hills, rocky outcrops and riverine forests: an exciting place in which to look for great birds and not only. Carnivores are well represented here with Jackal, Wolf, Brown Bears and even Jungle Cat! Any sighting of mammal will be a matter of luck, but the abundance of birdlife will keep us busy: Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin, Chukar, Black Francolin, Black-headed Bunting, Finch’s Wheatear, Woodchat Shrike, White-throated Robin, European Rollers and Bee-eaters. Ménétries’s Warbler are among the birds we will look for. Chachuna is also noted for one of the largest communities of breeding birds in the Caucasus. Raptor breeders include Long-legged Buzzard, Lesser and Common Kestrels, Black Kite, Egyptian Buzzard, Levant and Eurasian Sparrowhawks, Northern Goshawk, European Honey Buzzard, Common Buzzard, Imperial, Lesser Spotted, and Short-toed Eagles, Eurasian Hobby, and Saker Falcon. Quite an impressive list though not all of them can be guaranteed; there are good chances for many of them.

The area around the Davit Gareji monastery is one of the most spectacular sites in Georgia, where historical and wildlife attractions are located side-by-side, and can be watched at the same time. Mediterranean-type arid badland landscape with multi-colored clay hills covered with shrub and steppe-like vegetation, the site of one of the oldest Christian monasteries in the world. In Davit Gareji can be seen; breeding colonies of Eurasian Griffon and Egyptian Vultures, Blue-rood Thrush, large aggregations of European Bee-eaters, Rosé-coloured Starling and Rock Dove. Other interesting birds are Calandra Lark, Isabelline Wheatear, Finsch’s and Pied Wheatear, Rock Nuthatch, Lesser-grey Shrike, Spanish and Rock Sparrow.

The spectacular area in the Javakheti plateau, close to the Armenian border, hosts high altitude lakes and wetlands, great breeding habitat for both White and Dalmatian Pelicans, various duck species, Armenian Gull, Common Crane and Citrine Wagtail.

M. Mendi
M. Biasioli G. Rajebashvili M. Biasioli G. Rajebashvili
In autumn more than one million raptors migrate through Georgia.

Accommodation in Georgia is in most areas very comfortable and western style, except in a few remote areas where more basic conditions prevail, adding a bit of adventurous feeling to the experience! Food is invariably very good, fresh and tasty, with a lot of local specialities not to be missed. Infrastructure and roads are mainly good, with some roads where low speed has to be maintained, thus allowing good birding opportunities!

Accommodation in Georgia is in most areas very comfortable and western style, except in a few remote areas where more basic conditions prevail, adding a bit of adventurous feeling to the experience! Food is invariably very good, fresh and tasty, with a lot of local specialities not to be missed. Infrastructure and roads are mainly good, with some roads where low speed has to be maintained, thus allowing good birding opportunities!
IRAN

Birdwatching & Photography

SKUA Nature promotes and develops nature tourism in Armenia in collaboration with Iran Doostan Tour. Our goal is to create nature itineraries for birdwatching and photographic tours, and we also try to develop botanical and butterfly tours.

Iran is a huge country, around five times the UK, situated at the edge of the western Palearctic region, and inside its boundaries there is a very large diversity of habitats, from high mountains (more than 5000 metres) to sea coast (actually two different seas, the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf), from immense wetlands to forests and semi-deserts; this one being the most widespread habitat. During a single tour it’s impossible to pay a visit to all of these different habitats, so we decided to concentrate on places which are able to offer the best set of Iran’s birdlife, which is of course highly varied and particularly appealing for the western European birdwatcher.

Some of the birds present in Iran are among the most wanted on the wish list for the region for almost every birder: See-see partridge, Black Francolin, Indian Pond Heron, Steppe Eagle, Shikra, Great Stone Curlew, Crab Plover, Egyptian Nightjar, Indian Roller, Grey Hypocolius, Hume’s Wheatear... to name but a few. During a tour in springtime, these and many more species (up to a total of almost 200) can be seen, visiting mainly different semi-desert areas, agricultural land, huge wetlands, large mangrove forests and mudflats on the sea coast. Being such a huge country, visiting Iran means that you can experience also different conditions and temperatures: you can find snow in Tehran and enjoy 30+ celsius degrees in the lowlands after a short domestic flight, so be prepared for some variation weatherwise.

Iran hosts the last wild population of Asiatic cheetahs, mainly in and around Turan National Park: there are about a few dozens left of this beautiful animal, and though it’s not easy at all to see, there are still chances to spot them in the open plains of the park, where Persian Wild Ass is much easier to see, and also the endemic Pleske’s Ground Jay is present.
We shall visit the very interesting Qeshm island in the Hormuz Strait, in the waters of the Persian Gulf: on the northern shore of this desert island, lies a very large mangrove forest, one of the biggest in the region. We will explore by boat the thrilling complex of mangroves and mudflats, which holds thousands of birds; usually fairly easy to approach at close range, thus allowing very good photo opportunities. Crab Plover and Great Stone Curlew are probably the star birds here, but the quality and quantity of birds here is really exciting and thanks to its position, rare species can also turn up anytime. Indian Pond Heron is another species to look for, as well as Glamorous (Indian) Reed Warbler singing from the mangroves, while Greater Flamingo, Dalmatian Pelican, Slender-billed Gull, Western Reef Heron, Lesser crested Tern and of course loads of waders (including Broad-billed Sandpiper and both Sand Plovers) are much easier and very conspicuous.

On the island itself, where great desert environment is present, a different set of birds takes the scene: See-see Partridge (if we're lucky right at our feet at a drinking place), Hume’s Wheatear, Little Green Bee-eater, Indian Roller, Purple Sunbird and Brown-necked Raven shouldn’t be hard to find, among other interesting species. Back on the mainland, exploring the coastal areas around the town of Bandar Abbas, could allow us to find other interesting species, with chances for Spotted Little Owl, Indian Sand Lark and Indian Silverbill.

Further west, Mesopotamia is waiting for us, in the Khuzestan province, which is, birdwise, arguably the most interesting one in Iran: the immense Shadegan wetland is here, to the south towards the sea, while a bit more to the north lies a very rich area where a mix of agricultural and more natural land provides great habitats for a thrilling set of species. Shadegan is truly impressive: it’s a wetland which stretches literally as far as the eye can see, full of birds and devoid of roads, and therefore not easy to explore by the way. But a few places are readily accessible by car and on foot, allowing stunning views of endless expanses of reedbeds and open shallow water, while at its edges a steppe like habitat is predominant. Species like Marbled Teal, Ferruginous Duck, White-tailed Lapwing, Blue Cheeked Bee-eater, Glamorous Reed Warbler, Graceful Prinia and Mesopotamian Crow are present, to name but a few during early spring a major raptor flyway passes through here, and in a few hours you can see hundreds of large raptors flying over at low height, including Imperial, Steppe and both Greater and Lesser Spotted Eagles! Of course, like every wetland, Shadegan acts as magnet for migrants, so almost anything can turn up here, so be prepared also for some serious rarity!
Another hot spot is in the heart of the Khuzestan province, where some fascinating and most wanted species are present: Grey Hypocolius arrive here in April (though a few birds could be present also earlier in the season), while the two Babblers, Afghan Babbler and Iraq Babbler, are resident, and it will be interesting and challenging to find both of them, being quite similar but frequenting slightly different habitats. Black-winged Kites have started to breed in the area, and it shouldn’t be hard to find them, just like the three species of kingfisher often in the very same stretch of river: Common, Pied and White-throated Kingfisher. Other great birds here are Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, Menetries’s Warbler, Red-wattled Lapwing and Egyptian Nightjar.

Mighan lake is a very large salt lake at high altitude near the town of Arak: situated in a steppe-like area, with mountains on the background, it hosts tens of thousands of birds, varying of course according to the season. During the springtime there can be hundreds of Common Cranes and Greylag Geese together with many thousands of both Common and Ruddy Shelducks, as well as various species of ducks and waders (with possible eastern rarities) and large numbers of Greater Flamingos.

Iran is a perfectly safe country to visit, in spite of the perception we might have in western Europe: people are extremely friendly and always willing to help out and have a chat. In general, the life of an average Iranian is much less influenced by religion than what we might think, and this is especially true for younger people, who are curious and willing to open up to a western and secularized way of life. The presence of police or other military personnel is very unobtrusive and as a tourist you have always the feeling of being in a very relaxed and peaceful country. Infrastructure and logistics are almost invariably very good: paved roads are almost everywhere, and hundreds of kilometres can be covered by car in few hours. Domestic flight network is very well developed and commonly used everyday by thousands of Iranians: service is good and reliable, the only downside being the somewhat regular (short) delays. Accommodation quality is very good and all rooms have western-style en-suite facilities; food is also good, with the typical meal being kebab with rice and vegetables.

**Calendar**

**Info & Tours**  
skuanature.com - info@skuanature.com