Georgia & Armenia

Birding the Caucasus



Güldenstädt's Redstart by Nigel Redman

Located deep in the Caucasus, our birding tour to Georgia and Armenia is one of the most recent additions to our birding calendar. The end of the line as far as Europe is concerned, Georgia and Armenia stand at the crossroads of Eastern Europe and Western Asia. For centuries both countries stood as Christian bulwarks against the Muslim tide sweeping across Asia Minor, before being dominated by the Mongols, Ottoman Empire, Persia (Iran) and ultimately the Soviet Union. The collapse of the Soviet Union led to a rocky independence with military skirmishes and near-economic collapse. Fortunately, both Georgia and Armenia are now well on the road to economic stability and prosperity.

Beginning in Tbilisi, we make our way northwards along the Georgian Military Highway. Originally built to facilitate troop movements, it provides an excellent thoroughfare to some of the most spectacular scenery and birding sites on Earth. Our first days around Kazbegi (Stepantsminda) offer the opportunity for some high-altitude birding and some of the Western Palearctic's most sought-after species including the splendid Caucasian Snowcock (endemic to this single mountain range), Güldenstädt's Redstart, Great Rosefinch, Caucasian Grouse, Wallcreeper, and the Caucasian (lorenzii) subspecies of Mountain Chiffchaff. These higher altitudes also support Bearded Vulture, Ring Ouzel, Red-fronted Serin and Alpine Accentor.

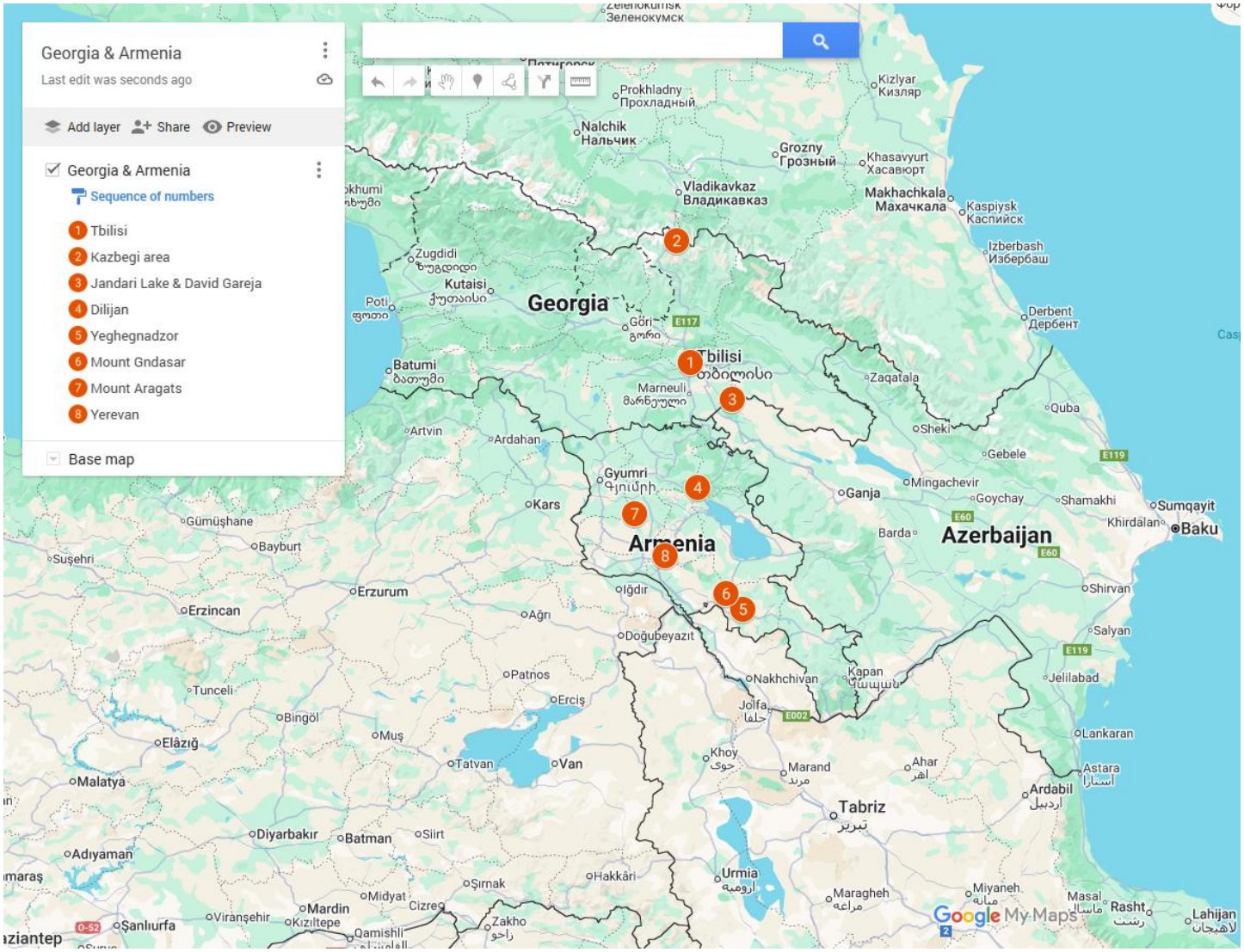
Heading south to Jandari Lake, we should find an isolated population of Pygmy Cormorants and our first Armenian Gulls and will make a visit to the 6th-century rock-hewn Georgian Orthodox monastery of David Gareja. After a week in Georgia, we move south to Dilijan in Armenia, stopping en route at the ancient Haghpat Monastery.

Moving further south we will drive along the shore of the mighty Lake Sevan and over the uninhabited Selim Pass before dropping into the lush Arpa valley. From our base in Yeghegnadzor we will explore Jermuk Gorge and various sites in the Arpa valley and beyond. Using 4x4 vehicles, we will ascend Mount Gndasar to search for our second snowcock species of the trip, Caspian Snowcock. We will also spend time at Armash fishponds to search for three rare and elusive species, Marbled and White-headed Ducks, and White-tailed Lapwing, as well as a feast of warblers. Returning to Yerevan, we will visit the dry Vedi Hills and Oorts Mountains to target Grey-necked Bunting, Finsch's and Red-tailed Wheatears, Eastern Rock Nuthatch and Desert Finch.

Finally, we will drive to the sacred Mount Aragats, to the north-west of Yerevan. Here we will be on the look-out for Radde's Accentor, White-throated Robin, Bluethroat and perhaps Asian Crimson-winged Finch, before taking in the scenic Amberd Fortress built in the 11th century.

Itinerary & Map

Day 1	**Arrival in Tbilisi (Georgia)**
Day 2	**Tbilisi to Kazbegi, Greater Caucasus**
Days 3 & 4	**Kazbegi area, Greater Caucasus**
Day 5	**Kazbegi to Tbilisi**
Day 6	**Day trip to David Gareja and Jandari Lake**
Day 7	**Tbilisi to Dilijan (Armenia)**
Day 8	**Dilijan to Yeghegnadzor via Lake Sevan & Selim Pass**
Day 9	**Arpa Valley, Jermuk Gorge & Agarakadzor**
Day 10	**Mount Gndasar**
Day 11	**Armash Fishpond**
Day 12	**Yeghegnadzor to Yerevan via Vedi Hills & Oorts Mountains**
Day 13	**Mount Aragats**
Day 14	**Yerevan & final departure**


Georgia & Armenia
Last edit was seconds ago
Add layer
Share
Preview
Georgia & Armenia
Sequence of numbers
1 Tbilisi
2 Kazbegi area
3 Jandari Lake & David Gareja
4 Dilijan
5 Yeghegnadzor
6 Mount Gndasar
7 Mount Aragats
8 Yerevan
Base map
Georgia
Armenia
Azerbaijan
Tbilisi
Baku
Tabriz
Google My Maps

Birding sites in detail

Tbilisi Botanical Gardens. The botanical gardens are extraordinarily scenic, albeit requiring waling up and down some fairly steep paths which will allow us to marvel at the breathtaking views over the city. Common European garden birds are the main fare here, where highlights may include many migrant Red-breasted Flycatchers or the handful of very smart Semicollared Flycatchers. Other interesting species to be found here include Eurasian Jay and Long-tailed Tit (both of distinct races somewhat different from the more familiar western European forms) and groups of Eurasian Siskins quietly feeding in the canopy.

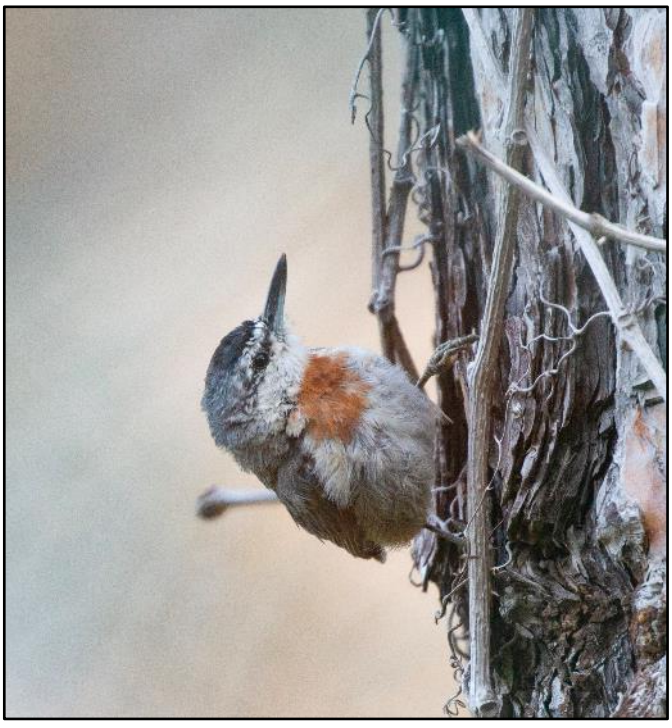


White-throated Dipper by Nigel Redman

A pair of White-throated Dippers are resident on the stream, often giving repeated views as they collect underwater prey to carry back to their nest. This will be our first opportunity of the trip for Mountain Chiffchaff, distinct in plumage even if its song is rather similar to its more widespread congener. Overhead, we may see Short-toed Snake Eagle or Steppe Buzzard (a race of Common Buzzard).

Tbilisi to Kazbegi. The Greater Caucasus stretch in a north-west to south-east orientation, about 1,200 kilometres or 750 miles in length, and are defined as the continental divide between Europe and Asia, lying between the Black and Caspian Seas.

En route we will have for a stop in the lowlands, making a short detour to some pine-clad hills where we will look for the near-endemic Krüper's Nuthatch, here at the eastern edge of its range.



Krüper's Nuthatch by Keith Valentine

Ananuri, situated along the Aragvi River is particularly good for migrating songbirds as well as hosting resident woodland species.

After familiarising ourselves with some general birding here, we will make our way up the Krestovy or Jvari Pass where a number of high-altitude species can be found. The impressive Bearded Vulture, Water Pipit, Horned Lark, Red-billed and Alpine Choughs, Alpine Accentor, Ring Ouzel, Twite and even Wallcreeper are all possibilities here. After some successful birding, the afternoon will see us reaching the large village of Kazbegi, or Stepantsminda as the locals now call it. The village is situated below the grand Mount Kazbek with its 5 047-metre snow-capped peak.

Kazbegi area. Birding in the Kazbegi region is excellent, and often holds surprises in terms of high-altitude species. If previous or even current weather patterns have

created unfavourable conditions on the higher slopes, species partial to the upper reaches make their way to lower altitudes where the conditions are more tolerable; if this is the case, we will be in for a real treat. On our first morning we will make our way up to an altitude of around 2 200 metres. With a fantastic backdrop, overlooking the valley below and the peak of Mount Kazbek towering above us, we will search for two Caucasian endemics.



White-throated Robin by Nigel Redman

Caucasian Grouse maintains a low profile, maintaining near silence while displaying at group leks, but we will certainly be keeping our ears tuned in for the eerie calls of Caucasian Snowcock, which will hopefully reveal a male perched atop a cliff or boulder. High-altitude specials we will be looking for here also include the sought-after Güldenstädt's Redstart and Great Rosefinch.

During our time in the Kazbegi area we should also happen across Bearded and Griffon Vultures, Twite, Red-fronted Serin, Alpine Accentor, Common Rock Thrush and Black Redstart. An interesting mammal, the mountain-dwelling Eastern (or East Caucasian) Tur, is sometimes also seen on the rocky slopes.

Woodland on the nearby slopes holds Green Warbler and the Caucasian (*lorenzii*) subspecies of Mountain Chiffchaff, although some will not have arrived this high yet. Bushy areas in the valley below are sometimes teeming with passerine migrants, and large flocks of migrating raptors, including European Honey Buzzard, Black Kite, Common Buzzard, and Pallid and Montagu's Harriers, can be more than spectacular. Other birds that could be seen here include Alpine Swift, Eurasian Crag Martin, Red-billed and Alpine Choughs, Wallcreeper, Horned Lark, Water Pipit and White-winged Snowfinch.

David Gareja and Jandari Lake. East of Tbilisi lies a vast semi-arid area with steppes, rocky outcrops, shallow lakes and riverine forest. We first visit the rock monastery of David Gareja, located on Mount Gareja. This monastery was founded in the 6th century by St David Garejeli, one of the thirteen Assyrian monks who arrived in the country at roughly the same time. This visit will be a cultural highlight, with great frescoes still in relatively pristine condition, and fascinating living quarters hewn out of the rock face. The monastery is also a rather good birding spot, and here we will search for Western Rock Nuthatch, Blue Rock Thrush and Pied Wheatear. Throughout the day we will be passing through steppe habitat where we shall keep a look out for breeding Tawny Pipit, Isabelline Wheatear, and Calandra and



Great Rosefinch by Nigel Redman

Greater Short-toed Larks, while Long-legged Buzzard and Rosy Starling are also possible during our various stops. Later we will visit Jandari Lake, a great stopover site for migratory waterbirds. The lake has a breeding population of the range-restricted Pygmy Cormorant, while we should also see our first Armenian Gulls of the trip. We will also search for one of several pairs of the magnificent Eastern Imperial Eagle that breed near the lake.



Black-headed Bunting by Nigel Redman

Tbilisi to Dilijan (Armenia). We leave Georgia behind and head south to the Armenian border. In Armenia, we will stop for lunch and a little birding at the impressive Haghpat Monastery. After a tour of the ancient monastery, we will search the surrounding area for a day-roosting Eurasian Scops Owl.

Dilijan. The forests around Dilijan offer a good selection of European woodland species including Great Spotted, Middle Spotted and Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers, Eurasian Nuthatch, Eurasian Treecreeper, Common Redstart, Red-breasted and Semicollared Flycatchers, Green Warbler and Hawfinch.

Lake Sevan & Selim Pass. Large colonies of Armenian Gulls breed along the shoreline of Lake Sevan, and other species we may find in the area include the black-headed race *feldegg* of Western Yellow Wagtail and Barred Warbler. The habitat becomes more barren as we drive over the Selim Pass, but we should see high-altitude species such as Twite and White-winged Snowfinch, and if we are lucky Asian Crimson-winged Finch.

Arpa Valley, Jermuk Gorge & Agarakadzor. We will explore the incredibly scenic Arpa Valley and surrounding areas. The lowland areas here will give us a different variety of species that are refreshingly common, such as Eurasian Hoopoe, colourful European Bee-eater, gaudy European Roller, Crested Lark, Common Nightingale, and both Red-backed and Lesser Grey Shrikes. Other species that we hope to find in this area are Chukar Partridge, Levant Sparrowhawk, Lesser Kestrel, Syrian Woodpecker, Bimaculated Lark, Eastern Orphean Warbler, White-throated Robin, Finsch's Wheatear, Rock Sparrow, and Rock, Ortolan and Black-headed Buntings.



Displaying Calandra Lark by Nigel Redman

Mount Gndasar. This morning will see us climbing up into the mountains in 4x4 vehicles, searching

for the rarely seen Caspian Snowcock. A fair amount of skill and effort is required to find a calling snowcock atop the rocky cliffs, but with plenty of eyes to help we hope for a good result. We will spend the remainder of the day birding the mountains, with good chances for other montane species including Whinchat, Ring Ouzel and Red-fronted Serin, along with a selection of raptors and other highland species.



Red-tailed Wheatear by Nigel Redman

Armash Fishponds. We will make our way to one of the birding hotspots in this region – Armash Fishponds. Armash is nestled at the foot of Mount Ararat and is located on the boundary between Armenia, Iran and Turkey.

Being an extensive wetland in an otherwise harsh and arid area, it is an oasis for waterbirds. Armash is made up of natural saltpans, freshwater pools, irrigation channels and even a few warm springs – all surrounded by extensive reedbeds. Two rare waterfowl are found here, namely Marbled and White-headed Ducks, and we will go in search of these two species. Birding these wetlands will almost certainly turn up the range-restricted White-tailed Lapwing while the extensive reedbeds harbour Moustached, Paddyfield and Great Reed Warblers, and numerous Bearded Reedlings. Eye-catching Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters will be seen hawking insects above us. Terns, gulls, grebes, ducks and waders will be searched through to reveal Gull-billed Tern, Slender-billed Gull, Black-necked Grebe, Ruddy Shelduck, Ferruginous Duck, Red-crested Pochard and Collared Pratincole. Larger waterbirds will include Pygmy Cormorant, Glossy Ibis, Little Bittern and Squacco Heron. Species that will require a bit more effort include Lesser Short-toed Lark, Eurasian Penduline Tit, and Ménétries's, Eastern Olivaceous and Savi's Warblers. Our tour coincides perfectly with the northerly migration, and both White-winged and Whiskered Terns will be in abundance, and with a little luck we may even find the unpredictable Black-winged Pratincole.



Black Francolin on Iranian border fence by Nigel Redman

Vedi Hills. This area is characterised by low ridges and loose rocky slopes, barely covered by short semi-desert vegetation and scrub. There are several gorges with dry riverbeds in this area, and it is here that we will begin our birding. Most of our targets have very limited distributions in Armenia, such as Grey-necked Bunting, Finsch's Wheatear, Eastern and Western Rock Nuthatches, Trumpeter and Desert Finches, and Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin. If the stream bed has pools of standing water, small birds may be attracted to

come to drink. Commoner species here include Eurasian Crag Martin, Blue Rock Thrush, Upcher's Warbler, Eastern Black-eared and Isabelline Wheatears, Rock Sparrow and the striking Black-headed Bunting. Raptors that we could find soaring above are likely to include Egyptian Vulture, Short-toed Snake Eagle and Long-legged Buzzard.



Ménétries's Warbler by Nigel Redman

Oorts Mountains. Here we will look for Red-tailed Wheatear, right at the edge of its range.

Mount Aragats. We visit Mount Aragats, the highest mountain in Armenia, offering an amazing diversity of habitats and species. If conditions are favourable, we will drive up to an elevation of 3,200 metres, where the road eventually ends at a small lake. Migrating raptors will once again be enjoyed in good numbers here, with Short-toed Snake, Booted and Lesser Spotted Eagles being the most likely species. Radde's Accentor is one of our main target species on Mount Aragats.

Though we can expect something of a run around to find them, we will start in the best possible habitat, above the tree line in the juniper zone. This special bird is a breeding endemic to the Caucasus mountains and a few outlying ranges in eastern Turkey and Iran, undergoing altitudinal migration to lower areas in the boreal winter. Whilst searching for Radde's Accentor, we shall have many species to entertain us, including the sought-after White-throated Robin, the stunning blue-throated form of Bluethroat, Black Redstart, Siberian Stonechat, Woodlark, Rock and Ortolan Buntings, Common Rock Thrush, Water Pipit, Twite and Common Rosefinch.



Semicollared Flycatcher by Nigel Redman

Horned Larks are common on the plains near the lake, with Alpine Accentor and Asian Crimson-winged Finch sometimes encountered. If time permits we shall make a stop at the scenic Amberd Fortress, built in the 7th century. The name translates to 'fortress in the clouds' in Armenian, with scholars believing that it was used as a summer residence for upper nobility. The strategic nature of the fortress meant that destruction was inevitable, and the Mongols laid waste to it in 1236. Restoration work only began in the 20th century. In the afternoon we will visit lower-altitude sites closer to Yerevan in search of any species that we may have missed.

Tour Grading & Key

Overall Ease		Suitable for all birding / wildlife interest levels.
Birding Ease		Moderate to undemanding. Most species provide good visuals in open conditions.
Accommodation		Comfortable.
Walking / Trails		Reasonably easy. Most walks on flat ground, paved/gravel roads. A few longer hikes on rougher ground with short inclines (optional). Snow can be expected in hight areas. Some hikes, whilst short, can be difficult due to rocky surface & altitude.
Vehicles / Roads		Good quality sealed roads & unsealed dirt roads. Some long drives broken up with birding stops.
Photography		Good to very good.
Annoyances		Some long days with early mornings. Weather can be variable, shifting quickly from mild to cold, or very cold due to wind chill & altitude.

Financial Arrangements and Important Notes

Tour dates, prices, single supplement, approximate flight costs and tour spaces are displayed on our website.

Tour inclusions:

- All meals from dinner on day 1 to breakfast on day 14;
- All lodgings;
- Ground and boat transportation as noted in the itinerary;
- Reserve entrance fees;
- All guiding services
- Tips for local guides, drivers and services.

Tour exclusions:

- Visa fees;
- ANY flights;
- Any beverages (**including bottled water** and mini-bar charges at hotels);
- Optional excursions;
- Special gratuities;
- Telephone calls, laundry and other items of a personal nature.

Single Supplement: The single supplement cost for this tour will be charged if you wish to have single accommodation. If RBL cannot provide you with a rooming partner for these nights although you choose to share, the single supplement will become applicable. We will make all reasonable efforts to ensure that a rooming partner is found if you do wish to share.

Tipping: As noted above, gratuities (drivers, hotel staff, restaurants etc.) are included on this tour. However, this does NOT include your Rockjumper leader/s. If you feel that they have given you excellent service, it is entirely appropriate to tip them at your discretion.

- **Due to constantly fluctuating exchange rates, we quote our tours in 4 currencies. The tour price is fixed only in the currency printed in bold, and the actual cost in the other currencies listed will be adjusted according to prevailing exchange rates at the time of final invoicing. The same applies to approximate flight and single supplement rates.**
- **Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the tour does not have sufficient registrations, a small group supplement will be offered to confirm the tour.**
- **Tour prices are subject to unforeseen increases in tour related costs and may have to be adjusted as a result.**
- **The designated tour leader/s may be changed at short due to unforeseen circumstances.**
- **The itinerary is indicative only. Changes may need to be made to the order in which the tour is conducted, or some of the venues we visit closer to departure. We will attempt to adhere as close to the original program as possible.**

- Since some longish drives are necessary to reach the best areas for birds and animals, and as space in the vehicles is limited, it is important for the comfort of your fellow travellers that you do not over-pack. Kindly stick to 20 kg (44lb) for check in luggage and 8kg (+-18lb) for hand luggage.

Seasonal Timing & Weather Variability
This tour is scheduled to coincide with what has historically been the most productive period for birding in the region. However, weather patterns, including temperature, rainfall, snow cover, wind strength and wind direction, as well as broader environmental factors such as food availability, can significantly influence migration timing, breeding activity and bird distribution from year to year. In some seasons, key events such as migration peaks, breeding cycles or post-breeding dispersal may occur earlier or later than average, and the duration of these peak periods can be surprisingly brief. At migration bottlenecks in particular, prevailing wind conditions can have a major impact on the volume and diversity of birds moving through an area on any given day. While our itinerary is designed around long-term historical patterns and offers excellent birding prospects, no fixed-date tour can guarantee that it will coincide precisely with the absolute peak of every seasonal phenomenon. Guests whose primary objective is to experience a specific migration event or seasonal spectacle at its peak may wish to consider a Tailor-made Tour, where travel dates and locations can be adjusted closer to departure in response to prevailing conditions.

Arrival and Departure Details

The tour begins in the Georgian capital city of Tbilisi on Day 1. There will be an optional birding excursion to the botanical gardens in the afternoon (commencing at +-14:00) followed by a welcome dinner in the early evening. The tour will conclude in Yerevan after breakfast on Day 14.

The above information in respect of arrivals and departures is a guide only. Precise arrival and departure information will be sent to you in your Tour Confirmation package once the tour has been officially confirmed. If you wish to arrive early and/or depart late and would like assistance in this regard, kindly contact the Rockjumper office.

Shota Rustaveli Tbilisi International Airport, Tbilisi (IATA: TBS) and Zvartnots International Airport, Yerevan (IATA: EVN) are the main ports of entry and departure on this tour.

Visa requirements differ by country, nationality of the traveller and duration and purpose of your intended stay. It may be necessary to obtain a visa or an electronic travel authorization in advance of your travel. It is therefore vitally important that you check with your travel agent/consulate/embassy for exact visa requirements.

DO NOT book any flights until the Rockjumper Team have officially confirmed the tour.