# Azerbaijan

## Caucasus & Caspian Birding



**White-throated Robin by Nigel Redman**

*Azerbaijan is a hidden gem for birdwatchers in the Western Palearctic. Located in the Caucasus region, it is a crossroads for a variety of birds from Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. This small country has recorded over 400 species, many of which are rare or difficult to find elsewhere. This is a land of major contrasts, with a mix of high-altitude mountain ranges, arid steppe, and desert. We'll be birding across much of the country, from the Greater Caucasus Mountain range running along almost all the country's northern border, to the Lesser Caucasus, Talish Mountains and the exclave, or autonomous republic of Nakhchivan.*

*We will be searching for several Western Palearctic range-restricted species such as Caspian Tit, Asian Crimson-winged, Desert and Mongolian Finches, Red-tailed, Finch´s & Eastern Black-eared Wheatears, White-tailed Lapwing, Bimaculated & Turkestan Short-toed Larks; White-throated Robin, Armenian and Pallas's Gulls, Black Francolin, Eastern Imperial Eagle, Red-fronted Serin and Menetries's Warbler. We'll also be targeting three near endemics; Caspian and Caucasian Snowcocks as well as Caucasian Grouse. We'll search for other key area species in Great Rosefinch, Güldenstädt's Redstart, Mountain Chiffchaff and Radde's Accentor.*

## *Itinerary & Map*

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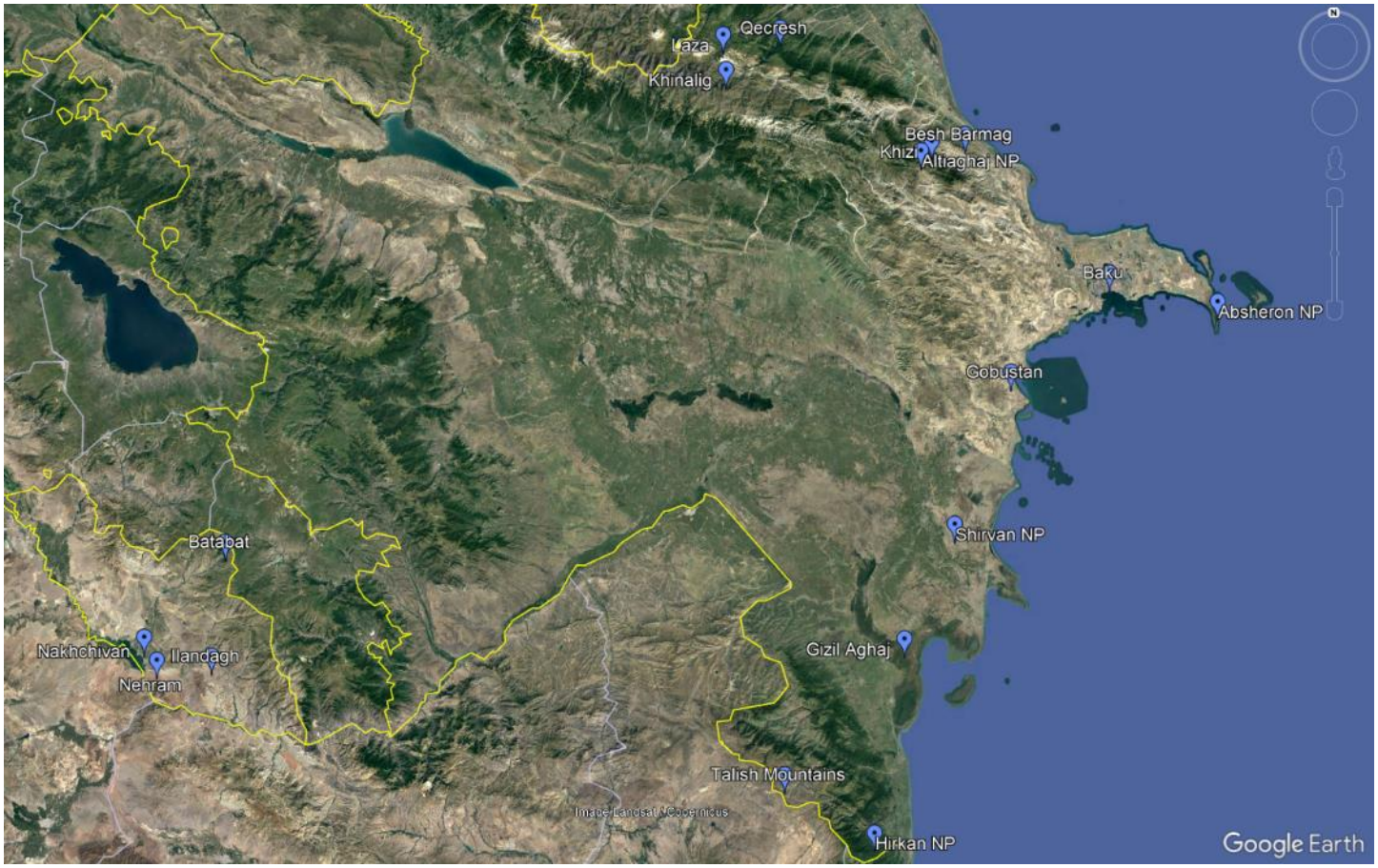
|---|---|
| **Day 1** | **Arrive in Baku** |
| **Day 2** | **Absheron National Park** |
| **Day 3** | **Baku to Shirvan National Park** |
| **Day 4** | **Shirvan National Park to Lenkaran via Gizil Aghaj Nature Reserve** |
| **Day 5** | **Gizil Aghaj Nature Reserve to Lerik via Talish Mountains** |
| **Day 6** | **Lerik to Baku via Gobustan** |
| **Day 7** | **Baku to Khizi via Besh Barmag & Altiaghaj National Park** |
| **Day 8** | **Altigai National Park to Khinalig** |
| **Day 9** | **Khinalig to Qecresh** |
| **Day 10** | **Laza area** |
| **Day 11** | **Laza to Baku, flight to Nakhchivan** |
| **Day 12** | **Nehram** |
| **Day 13** | **Batabat** |
| **Day 14** | **Ilandagh** |
| **Day 15** | **Nakhchivan, flight to Baku & final departure** |



## *Birding sites in detail*



**Ménétries's Warbler by Nigel Redman**

**Absheron National Park.** Conveniently close to the capital, Baku, Absheron National Park may be Azerbaijan's smallest national park, covering only 783 hectares, but it buzzes with birdlife and has a lovely remote setting at the tip of the Absheron Peninsula. The park's landscape combines coastal wetlands and semi-desert, and a trip here will reward birders with sightings of a variety of gulls, terns, ducks, and waders, as well as various species of raptors. Most of the birds are migrants flying along the Caspian coastline. The park is also home to Goitered Gazelle, Red Fox, Golden Jackal, Caspian Tortoise and Levantine Viper.

We'll be searching for Horned Grebe, Short-eared Owl, Mute Swan, Slender-billed Gull, Maghreb Lark, Greater Flamingo and Purple Heron.

**Shirvan National Park.** Easily accessible along the Baku-Astara highway 90 km south of Baku, Shirvan National Park is one of Azerbaijan's top all-round nature sites, best known as the home of the iconic Goitered Gazelle. The gazelle is an Azerbaijan success story, being recovered from a just a few hundred animals in the 1960's to between 7 000 and 8 000 in Shirvan alone, a guaranteed sighting here!

Over 270 different birds have been found here. The reason for such an abundance is its location on the Caspian coast bird migration path and its importance as a breeding, resting, and wintering site. Huge flocks of Little Bustards, sometimes numbering more than 25 000 birds spend the winter in the lowland steppes. If we're lucky, there may be a straggler or two when we visit.

During Spring and summer, we'll be searching for Greater Sand and Caspian Plovers, Terek Sandpiper, White-tailed Lapwing, Pygmy Cormorant, Lesser Kestrel, Common Buzzard, Eastern Imperial Eagle, Menetries's Warbler, Turkestan Short-toed Lark, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, Rufous Bush Chat and Dalmatian Pelican.



**White-tailed Lapwing by Yoav Perlman**

**Gizil Aghaj Nature Reserve.** Located 260km south of Baku, this nearly 100 000 hectares protected area on the Caspian Sea consists of forest and wetlands is one of the top birding sites in Azerbaijan. Gizil Aghaj is a key resting



**Great Rosefinch by Nigel Redman**

and refuelling spot for seabirds migrating along the western coast of the Caspian, as well as a wintering ground for birds breeding in Eastern Europe, Russia, and Central Asia. Its mixed landscape of wetlands, reedbeds, sandy beaches and shallow lagoons is home to millions of birds from October to May, and the avian show constantly changes throughout the year. Whilst winter is great for the sheer volume of waterbirds, the greatest diversity occurs on autumn and spring migration.

While a nature reserve was first established here in 1929, the national park was only set up in 2018 and is currently Azerbaijan's largest. Some excellent birding points are located to the south of the park along the road leading across the lagoon to the peninsula where the park is located. The area is huge, partly inaccessible and as such a bit difficult to appreciate during a single visit. But spending a day birding between the road leading up to the park and the visitor centre is a very rich experience. A single day in October, April or May can reveal over a hundred different species! Amongst the many species present, we'll be searching for the likes of Citrine Wagtail, Broad-billed and Terek Sandpipers, Pallid Harrier, Steppe Eagle, Eurasian Spoonbill, Isabelline Shrike, Black Francolin and Blue-cheeked Bee-eater.

**Talish Mountains.** The Talish Mountains cover large parts of Azerbaijan's south-eastern corridor, straddling the border with Iran. The foothills are subtropical, and are mostly covered by the Hirkan Forest, an internationally significant refuge for relict flora, including many endemic tree species.

Higher up, the hillside bushland and forest near the treeline, is the only place in Europe inhabited by the elusive Caspian Tit, which was only recently rediscovered by a British birder in 2017 having not been seen for decades. Similarly, the Shikra, another specialty to the region was first spotted in 2008 having been absent for 40 years, though today birdwatching groups have an excellent chance of seeing them in the lush roadside parks and gardens in Masalli.



**Eastern Rock Nuthatch by Yoav Perlman**

Beyond Lerik, a delightful country road passes through lush meadows and a dramatic canyon before entering an expanse of semi-arid highland scattered with thorny bushes and small oases of luxuriant forest. Here, in the Zuvand Highlands, you may encounter species otherwise limited to the exclave of



Güldenstädt's Redstart by Nigel Redman

Nakhchivan such as White-throated Robin, Bimaculated Lark, Pale Rockfinch and Asian Crimson-winged Finch. We can also expect to find Semi-collared Flycatcher, Radde's Accentor, Trumpeter Finch, Grey-necked Bunting, Golden Eagle, and Eastern Black-eared Wheatear.

**Gobustan.** We'll head north, back to Baku today. We'll make a stop at Gobustan, well known among travellers for the Gobustan Rock Art Cultural Landscape encompassing 6 000 petroglyphs spanning some 40 000 years and attractive mud volcanoes. Gobustan is also of interest to birders as living amongst all the rock carvings are Western Rock Nuthatch, Red-billed Chough, Finch´s Wheatear, Pale Rockfinch and Chukar Partridge, as well as Woodchat Shrike and Egyptian Vulture.

Further inland is a vast semi-desert habitat crisscrossed by gravel roads and populated only by occasional shepherds. Exploring this area is difficult but may turn up Greater Sand Plover, Lanner, Long-legged Buzzard, and the occasional Sociable Lapwing.

**Besh Barmag.** The Besh Barmag 'bottleneck' is a strip of land located between the Caucasus Mountains and the Caspian Sea, known for its significance as a natural corridor for bird migration. During spring and autumn, this area serves as a sanctuary, with a staggering daily influx of up to 200 000 birds. It is not unusual to record 100 species in a day, encompassing numerous ducks, herons, terns, gulls, and shorebirds.

Additionally, some particularly thrilling species frequently come to rest in this vicinity during the key spring migration in late April to early May when we can look forward to seeing Black-winged Pratincole, Eastern Imperial and Steppe Eagles, Pallid Harrier, Caspian Gull, Red-throated Pipit, Egyptian Vulture, Thrush and Common Nightingales, Rosy Starling, Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin and Ortolan Bunting.

**Altiaghaj National Park.** We'll spend some time in Altiaghaj National Park. Located in the Khizi and Siyazan regions, the park covers 11 035 hectares of the eastern part of the Greater Caucasus Mountains. Approximately 90% of the park is made up of beautiful broad-leaved forests consisting of Caucasian Oak, Oriental Beech, European Hornbeam, and many other tree species. We reach the park after driving through the strikingly colourful Khizi Mountains.



Rock Sparrow exploring a crevice by Nigel Redman



Black-headed Bunting by Nigel Redman

Birders can look forward to a rich variety of raptors and passerines such as Golden, Booted, Lesser Spotted and Eastern Imperial Eagles, Short-toed Snake Eagle, Bearded, Egyptian and Griffon Vultures, Eurasian Eagle-Owl, Hawfinch, Hooded Crow, Pied Wheatear, Rock Bunting, Barred Warbler and Black-headed Bunting.

The park is home to several good mammals, including East Caucasian Tur, a mountain goat-antelope endemic to these mountains, as well as Brown Bear, Gray Wolf, Golden Jackal, Red Fox, and Roe Deer amongst others.

**Khinalig & Qecresh.** These high-mountain villages in the Guba and Gusar regions respectively are among the most picturesque in Azerbaijan. Previously too remote to visit, greater accessibility has placed them firmly on the tourist map in recent years. Located at an altitude of 2 300m, Khinalig boasts an incredible hilltop location, unique stone houses, inhabitants who speak one of the world's rarest languages and even a Zoroastrian fire temple. Moreover, the sparsely vegetated terrain around Khinalig is home to Caucasian Snowcock, Güldenstädt´s Redstart, Rock Sparrow, Alpine Accentor, Common Rock Thrush, Wallcreeper and Bearded Vulture.

**Laza.** Laza is no less scenic, situated lower down at 1300m, surrounded by emerald-green slopes. The local people are known as the Lezgi, another of Azerbaijan's ethnic minorities. Around the village we will look for such key species as Caucasian Grouse, Great Rosefinch, Mountain Chiffchaff, Red-fronted Serin, White-winged Snowfinch and Alpine Accentor.

**Nehram.** Visiting Nakhchivan is often the highlight of a trip to Azerbaijan because the landscape, look and feel is so different to the rest of the country different. The region has a continental climate, producing very cold winters and very hot summers. Much of the central zone is dry highland covered by orange-red steppe or semi-desert. The Araz River snakes along the south and marks the border with Iran, while the Lesser Caucasus Mountains tower across the north of the territory. Avifauna is markedly different from mainland Azerbaijan, having more in common with eastern Turkey and north-western Iran.



Red-tailed Wheatear by Nigel Redman



**Trumpeter Finch by Clayton Burne**

We'll be searching for such key species as Mongolian Finch, Grey-necked Bunting, Red-tailed Wheatear, White-throated Robin, Radde's Accentor, See-see Partridge, Upcher's Warbler, Pale Rockfinch, Bimaculated Lark, Caspian Snowcock, Eastern Rock Nuthatch, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Trumpeter Finch, and Asian Crimson-winged Finch. If we're lucky, we may find the scarce, endangered Armenian Mouflon.

**Batabat.** We'll head out at sunrise to reach Batabat. At an escarpment, we'll search the boulders and small creeks for both Trumpeter and Mongolian Finches, Black-bellied Sandgrouse overhead, Eurasian Crag Martin, Red-billed Choughs, and Western Rock Nuthatches.

**Ilandagh.** Today we'll visit the mythical mountain of Ilandag (where the Ark of Noah is said to have crunched its keel into the peak and split in two). Here we'll enjoy several species of vulture, European Honey Buzzard, Turkestan and Greater Short-toed Larks, Maghreb Lark, See-see Partridge, Armenian Gull, Pale Rockfinch and Desert Finch.

## *Tour Grading & Key*

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| **Overall Ease** | | Moderate to easy. Suitable for most birding interests, but not suitable for anyone with mobility or serious health challenges. |
| **Birding Ease** | | Easy to moderate. Most species provide good visuals in open conditions, some may require repeat efforts / or be seen at distance only. |
| **Accommodation** | | Comfortable hotels in larger towns, homestays in villages in smaller villages. |
| **Walking / Trails** | | Mostly roadside birding with easy to moderate walks. Some trails will be rocky |
| **Vehicles / Roads** | | Reasonable quality surfaced roads in most areas, unsurfaced gravel roads in others. Comfortable vehicles. Several winding mountain roads & passes to navigate. |
| **Photography** | | Can be good. No dedicated hides. More challenging in dry/desert areas with bright light. |
| **Annoyances** | | Some early starts, weather can be variable from cold to hot. Snow is unusual for most of Azerbaijan, possible in Nakhchivan. |

# *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 breakfast on day 2 to dinner on day 14;
- Bottled drinking water;
- All lodgings;
- All ground transportation during the tour;
- All reserve entrance fees;
- All guiding services
- Tips for local guides, drivers and services.

Tour exclusions:

- Visa fees;
- ANY flights;
- Any beverages (including 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 notice 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 programme 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.

# *Arrival and Departure Details*

The tour begins in Baku on day 1, you are free to arrive at any time. The tour will conclude in Baku after breakfast on the morning of day 15*.

*Guests returning home on Turkish Airlines will have the option to depart from Nakhchivan International Airport on the morning of day 15, rather than returning to Baku. Guests departing from Baku will fly from Nakhchivan International Airport to Baku in the afternoon of 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.

Heydar Aliyev International Airport, Baku (IATA: GYD) is the main port of entry for international flights into Azerbaijan. Nakhchivan International Airport (IATA: NAJ), is most easily reached by domestic flights from Baku, Azerbaijan or via Istanbul, Turkey on Turkish Airlines.

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.**