

The Tien Shan Mountains & Deserts of Kazakhstan

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly Almaty
Day 2	Overnight train to Aksu Dzabagly
Day 3/5	Aksu Dzabagly Nature Reserve, Tien Shan Mountains
Day 6	Overnight train to Almaty
Day 7/8	Charyn Red and Yellow Canyons
Day 9	Return Almaty
Day 10/12	Turanga Forest, Tamgaly and Taukum Desert
Day 13/15	Observatory above Almaty
Day 16	Fly London

Departs

May

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code KAZ03) or brochure

Grading

Day walks only. Grade B. Moderate. Between 1,830 and 3,660 metres

Focus

Birds and plants (plus some mammals).

Highlights

- Beautiful, varied landscape of mountains & deserts
- Impressive Palearctic avifauna sprinkled with oriental specialities
- Demoiselle Crane, Little Bustard, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater & Pallas' Sandgrouse
- Abundant flora of over 1,400 plants including many endemics & rarities
- Traditional Kazakhstan hospitality
- Possibility of rare mammals such as Goitered Gazelle



Azure Tit courtesy of Phil Haywood



Demoiselle Crane courtesy of Alan Curry



Little Bustard courtesy of Alan Curry



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NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Introduction

Kazakhstan, lying at the heart of Central Asia on the Old Silk Road, is a massive country spanning 2,717,300 square kilometres from the Caspian Sea to western China; an area the size of the whole of western Europe! Yet, with a population of just 17 million, mostly living in the cities, this is a land of vast open and unpeopled spaces. Great stone and sand deserts, and wide grassy steppes occupy the majority of the country, interspersed with such great inland lakes as Lake Balkhash and the Aral Sea. In dramatic contrast, along its south-eastern borders stand the mighty Tien Shan Mountains, the 1,000-mile spine of Central Asia and northern extension of the Himalaya which waters flower-filled alpine meadows, lush forests of Tien Shan Spruce and lowland Turanga, and feeds the great lakes and inland deltas to the north. It is in these diverse habitats that you may hope to see such exciting avian specialities as Dalmatian Pelican, Saker Falcon, Himalayan Snowcock, Demoiselle Crane, Macqueen's Bustard, Ibisbill, Pallas's Sandgrouse, Eversmann's Stock Dove, White-winged Woodpecker, Himalayan Rubythroat, Eversmann's and Guldenstadt's Redstarts, Syke's Warbler, Severtzov's Tit-warbler, Azure Tit, Yellow-breasted Azure Tit, Turkestan Tit, Rose-coloured Starling, Saxaul Sparrow, Red-mantled Rosefinch, White-winged Grosbeak, and White-capped, Grey-necked and Red-headed Buntings.

Day 1

Saturday

In Flight

We depart London Heathrow early this morning on a scheduled service flight to Almaty (Kazakhstan's former capital city).

Day 2

Sunday

Almaty - Overnight Train to Aksu

Arriving in Almaty in the early hours of the morning we will transfer to a comfortable hotel in the city and get quickly to bed in order to catch some sleep before our programme commences. Situated at 2,500 feet above sea level, Almaty was built as a Russian military outpost in the latter part of the 19th century. Formerly known as Verny (meaning Faithful) and more recently Alma-ata, the city is today a pleasant and abundantly leafy modern metropolis with a fabulous backdrop, nestling as it does beneath the giant snowbound summits of the Tien Shan Mountains (including Mount Talgar at 15,000 feet).

Later in the day we catch an overnight train to Aksu Dzabagly but before then an excursion will be organised to visit the lower slopes of the nearby mountains. A number of interesting species are possible during this introductory few hours of birdwatching including Golden Eagle, Brown Dipper, Blue Whistling Thrush and Black-throated Accentor. Botanists in the group will also find plenty to occupy them in this attractive gorge. After this brief taste of what is to come we return to the city and in the late afternoon board the sleeper train to Aksu on which berths have been reserved for us.

Days 3 - 6

Monday - Thursday

Western Tien Shan

Our train will arrive soon after dawn and we'll quickly transfer to a very comfortable guesthouse in nearby Dzabagly Village which lies right on the edge of the famous Aksu Dzabagly Nature Reserve, the oldest in Central Asia, having been established in 1927. This reserve protects some of the finest and wildest mountain habitat in the whole Tien Shan range. Our guesthouse has a small garden where Long-tailed Shrikes, Scops Owls and Golden Orioles breed and provides a perfect base from which to explore the foothills, valleys and steppe lakes of the area, and, of course, the Tien Shan Mountains proper. On each of our days here we'll make excursions to different areas with our local guides and drivers.

This part of the tour will be particularly rewarding for botanists as Aksu Dzabagly is a botanical paradise with over 1,400 species recorded, many of which are rare or endemic to the western Tien Shan. Plants found here include a wide variety of primulas, tulips and saxifrages, plus such fine endemic trees as *Betula talassica* and *Populus talassicus*. Over twenty species of alliums are in bloom at different altitudes at this season, creating an unforgettable display of blues, reds and pinks in the meadows. There are also more than ten species of *Astragalus*, five species of *Ferula*, *Ungernia sewerzovi*, *Ixiolirion tataricum*, and other endemic species such as *Scutellaria iulata*, *Oxotropis talassicus*, *Stephanocaryum olgae*, *Sergia sewerzovi*, and the very decorative *Morina kokandica*. Many tulips are still likely to be in flower here, especially *Tulipa greigii*.

Higher up, Blue-headed Redstarts can be found but these, together with Himalayan Snowcocks and various other high altitude species, are normally more easily seen at the end of the tour in the mountains above Almaty; not so the Rufous-naped and Yellow-breasted Azure Tits that are found here, two restricted range species not occurring further east. Raptors are frequently encountered in this area though, six species of vulture are possible (including Himalayan Griffon and Lammergeyer) and we should also see Golden, Booted and Short-toed Eagles and perhaps Saker Falcon. If weather conditions are right we may witness migratory movements of Oriental Honey Buzzards.

Excursions to the many lakes in the lowlands nearby will produce such diverse species as Little Bustard, Montagu's Harrier, Collared Pratincole, Clamorous Reed Warbler and Demoiselle Crane while lush valleys in the nearby foothills hold breeding Golden Orioles, Barred Warblers and, at one location, even Asian Paradise Flycatchers at a northern outpost of their range. Aksu Gorge is worth visiting for the plants and scenery alone. The Goldfinches here are all of the grey-crowned subspecies *caniceps* which is regarded as a full species by Kazak ornithologists and it is also probably the foremost raptor location in the western Tien Shan where it is quite possible to see upwards of ten species in just a few hours here.

The wild character of the western Tien Shan is evidenced by the presence of Brown Bears in the higher mountains, where Marco Polo Sheep and Siberian Ibex are also found. The shepherds and goatherds in the foothills are mindful of the presence of Wolves in the area too. Actually seeing any of these elusive animals is, of course, down to luck - but there is always a chance....

Day 6

Thursday

Overnight Train to Almaty

In the evening we will drive to the train station to catch our overnight sleeper train to Almaty.

Day 7-8

Friday & Saturday

Kolshengel

After breakfast and a chance to freshen up after the overnight journey, we will leave Almaty again and head northwest towards Konshengel Camp on the edge of the Taukum Desert where we will spend the next three nights.

The camp location has been chosen specifically because Macqueen's Bustards live nearby and we should be able to see these wonderful birds as Bimaculated and Lesser Short-toed Larks sing overhead and streams of Black-bellied Sandgrouse undertake their regular morning flights to and from the few artesian wells dotted around desert. In some years Pin-tailed and even Pallas's Sandgrouse may be present in this area and there is always a chance of seeing a Greater Sandplover or perhaps even a Caspian Plover here.

En route to the desert our first stop will be at Lake Sorbulak, on the Kurty River, where thousands of Rose-coloured Starlings breed amongst boulders at the lake edge. The lake itself, actually a large reservoir, is particularly noted for its Dalmatian Pelicans but is also attractive to Great Egrets, Ruddy Shelducks and various migrant wildfowl and waders. Other species to look for here include Caspian and perhaps Great Black-headed Gulls. Continuing northwards we will drive across an extensive steppe where Calandra Larks are abundant and there is always a chance of a Steppe Eagle or two. As we approach camp the steppe grasses gradually disappear and are replaced by low shrubs and sand.

Any small oases in such a dry flat landscape are very attractive to small migrants crossing this area on their way north. We'll stop at a couple of such sites to see what has dropped in today. One such oasis, the well watered and leafy Konshengel Village, is very near our camp and we'll be able to visit it more than once in the coming days. Amongst the commoner species likely to be present, such as Hume's, Greenish and Blyth's Reed Warblers, Oriental Turtle Doves and Nightingales (of the distinctive eastern subspecies *hafizii*), there is always a good chance of something less expected. Recent tours have turned up Baillon's Crakes, Little Bitterns, Red-backed Shrikes, Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, Citrine Wagtails Barred Warblers and Black-throated Thrushes at Konshengel Village. Temminck's Stints are frequently seen at such springs and wells in the desert but other Siberia-bound waders take advantage of this locally scarce habitat too.

Day 9

Sunday

Illi Delta - Taukum Desert, Camping

An early start this morning will see us heading to the opposite side of the Taukum Sands and to the edge of the vast Illi Delta in search of some of the Central Asian endemics which inhabit this special area. The somewhat elusive but very striking Saxaul Sparrow breeds here in, appropriately enough, Saxaul scrub. 'Desert' Lesser Whitethroats are also found here while the beautiful Turanga woodland nearby harbours the very localised Eversmann's Stock Dove, White-winged Woodpecker and Turkestan Tit; eye-catching Azure Tits are another major attraction here.

Although the delta area is most famed for its birdlife the plant-life of the forest and riverine system supports such relict species as *Fraxinus potamophila*, numerous *Eremurus lactiflorus* and the very beautiful *Allium karataviense*.

On a more leisurely return towards camp after lunch there will be ample time to stop at some of the interesting looking habitats we passed earlier in the day in order to search for the likes of Red-crested Pochard, Ferruginous Duck, 'Steppe' Grey Shrike and Brown-necked Raven.

Day 10

Monday

Almaty

Reluctantly we'll leave the desert today and gradually head back towards Almaty. Our route back will however differ from the outward journey though as we plan to pay a visit to Tamgaly en route.

The rolling hills, rocky valleys and clear streams of Tamgaly are the famous site of some fine and extensive rock engravings dating from the early Bronze Age. This site is remote and seldom visited and we will have the chance not only to enjoy the rock art at leisure but also to explore the area for its avian and botanical potential.

The spectacle of tulips for which Kazakhstan is famous is likely to be mostly over by the time of our visit though there is a chance we might find some flowers. We will certainly find a good variety of other exciting and rare plants, perhaps including *Juno kuschakeviczii*, *Gagea iliense*, *Iris alberti*, *Euphorbia jaroslavii*, and *Eremurus altaicus*. Amongst the birdlife here we should find Eastern Rock Nuthatches and Black Vultures while streamside bushes are attractive to small migrants. The peaceful ambience at Tamgaly makes it an ideal place to have lunch and to reflect on the obvious appeal of this idyllic spot to prehistoric folk.

Between Tamgaly and Almaty our route takes us across the extensive moist grasslands of the Kopa Valley, a major breeding area for Demoiselle Cranes, which might also produce sightings of White-winged Larks, a species apparently expanding its range in Kazakhstan. Arriving in Almaty during mid afternoon we will return to a comfortable city hotel for an overnight stay

Day 11

Tuesday

Bartogay

We will drive east this morning, following the Great Silk Route towards China; our destination is a camp in the rugged Sogaty Hills near Kokpek. We'll first pass through fertile agricultural lands watered by rivers and streams that tumble from the Tien Shan before entering a drier landscape as we approach the Sogaty Hills and stone desert beyond. An en route lunch stop will allow us to admire some of the commoner roadside birds such as Lesser Grey Shrikes, European Rollers and Red-headed Buntings before we reach the Kokpek Valley in the early afternoon, we'll linger at this attractive spot for an hour or two as we search the scrub and crags for White-capped and Rock Buntings, Chukars, Pied Wheatears and any raptors that might come our way. From the Kokpek Valley it is only a short drive to our camp.

The camp itself lies on the shore of a small lake nestled in the hills. All around us Isabelline Wheatears will be singing and very nearby we should find Tawny Pipits, 'Turkestan' Isabelline Shrikes (*phoenicuroides*), Grey necked Buntings, and with luck, Mongolian and Crimson-winged Finches. The lake itself has breeding Ruddy Shelducks but also holds a magnetic attraction for migrating wildfowl and waders which have just crossed the mountains from the south. We will have ample time to settle in and explore this impressive landscape before the camp staff serves our evening meal.

The night sky in Kazakhstan is brilliantly lit by stars and constellations not normally seen in the artificially lit skies of Europe and other more populated areas of the world.

Day 12

Wednesday

Sogaty Hills & Plain, Charyn Canyons, Camping

Early risers will have an opportunity to walk in the vicinity of the camp and to check the lake for newly arrived migrants before breakfast. We will then drive east onto the flat stone desert of the Sogaty Plain, looking for such species as Lesser Kestrels, Desert Wheatears, Short-toed and Horned Larks. With luck we may find the scarce Pallas's Sandgrouse among their commoner Black-bellied cousins and Demoiselle Crane and Desert Warbler are other possibilities in this impressive landscape. We are also likely to encounter several mammals here, rodents include the abundant Great Gerbils and numerous wary Susliks - the primary prey of the common Long-legged Buzzards. With luck we may find the beautiful Goitered Gazelles that now roams the desert in pitifully reduced numbers. The plant-life we encounter today will be that typical of stone desert: such species as *Nanophyton erinaceum*, *Convolvulus fruticosus* and *C. tragacanthoides*, various species of *Stipa*, *Caragana*, *Atemesia* and *Anabasis*, and the endemic *Limonium michelsonii*

For lunch we will visit the spectacular Charyn Red Canyon, carved out over the millennia by a combination of wind and the thundering Charyn River as it flows from the heights of the Tien Shan to ultimately join the great Ili River. This is one of Kazakhstan's most famous geographical features and also offers us a chance of seeing such avian specialities as Mongolian Finch and Saker Falcon. From the tops of the dramatic canyons walls we will be looking towards the Ketmen range of mountains on the Chinese border. After lunch we will make our way to the nearby Yellow Canyon where various birds of prey may be expected, other possibilities here include Black Stork, Rock Thrush or perhaps one of the Central Asian endemics, although these are more easily seen elsewhere on the tour. Returning towards camp later in the afternoon there will be an opportunity to check some likely looking spots for migrants on the desert edge. Common Rosefinches are likely to share any stands of trees with Greenish and Hume's Warblers and surprises are always possible. At the camp itself we will want to see what new migrants have appeared on the lake.

Day 13

Thursday

Sogaty Hills - Nurly - Almaty

After an early breakfast we will begin our return journey towards Almaty. Our first objective this morning, and the reason for an early start, will be to visit an artesian well just east of the town of Nurly where both Pallas's and Black-bellied Sandgrouse regularly come to drink. We can expect other birds around the pool too including Desert Finches and breeding Sykes's Warblers. This location is on a major migration flyway and as we wait for the elusive sandgrouse to fly in there should be a steady overhead movement of small birds heading east towards China. Raptors such as Montagu's Harriers and Black Kites can also figure in such movements.

After this stop we continue our journey to Almaty for the final leg of the tour. On reaching the city we transfer into a four-wheel drive vehicle and immediately head north climbing high into the mountains to the old Soviet space observatory where we stay for the next two nights.

Days 14 - 15

Friday - Saturday

Tien Shan Observatory

The former Soviet Astronomical Observatory perched high in the mountains is perfectly situated to allow us easy access to various montane habitats at different altitudinal ranges. Although the hostel-like accommodation is outwardly rather dilapidated, and takes guests to raise funds for the continued operation of the Observatory that is now run by the Kazakhstan government, it is more than adequate for our needs and the very genuine hospitality of the hard-working staff who (over)feed and otherwise look after visitors is touching.

Around the Observatory lie colourful alpine pastures, forests of Tien Shan Spruce and areas of boulders and Turkestanic Juniper. The craggy peaks and snow-capped summits above the meadows are the domain of numerous Himalayan Snowcock which loudly proclaim their territories each morning, initiating a telescope scan to search for the calling birds. At the foot of the flower-filled Marble Valley is situated Bolshoy Almaty Lake, not a lake at all but a reservoir that sits above a dam, whose shingle shores attract breeding Ibisbills, another of the star birds of this magical area.

This is a botanist's paradise too (particularly once the snows have melted). The lower mountain slopes are covered with such deciduous scrub as *Lonicera*, *Rosa* and *Cotoneaster*, plus the rare endemic *Atraphaxis muschketovii*. Higher up, *Malus sieversii* and *Armeniaca vulgaris*, a mass of blooming *Polemanium coeruleum*, *Aconitum leucostomum*, *Polygonum coriarum* and *Eremurus robustus* may all be found. The forests of the beautiful Tien Shan Spruce harbour the local orchid *Goodyera repens*, as well as the endemic *Erysimum croceum*, whilst a variety of species of *Aconitum*, *Geranium*, *Primula*, *Viola* and *Aquilegia* blossom at the forest edges. By the rivers, where Brown Dippers breed, grow *Cortusa brotheri*, *Parnassia laxmannii* and *Dactylorrhiza umbrosa*.

Higher up, in the subalpine zone, the creeping Turkestanic Juniper is the most characteristic plant. Here the flowers are simply stunning and include spectacular and very large Globeflowers (*Trolius altaicus* and *T. sibiricus*), *Dracocephalum grandiflorum*, *Anemone protracta*, *Hedysarum neglectum*, *Primula algida* and *Schmalghausenia nidulans*, to mention but a few. The alpine belt is another revelation, with species like *Dryadanthe tertrandra*, *Rhodiola coccinea*, *Pyretbrum letopodium*, *Macrotomia euchroma*, *Paraquilegia grandiflora* and innumerable *Astragalus*, *Pedicularis*, *Potentilla*, *Gentiana* and *Oxytropis*.

The whole area supports some superb birdlife. Species such as Black-throated Accentors, Himalayan Rubythroats, Red-mantled Rosefinches and White-winged Grosbeaks all occur within juniper in the immediate vicinity of the observatory itself and just a little further afield we will look for Sulphur-bellied Warbler and Severtzov's Tit Warbler, Blue-headed and Eversmann's Redstarts, Songar Tits, Red-fronted Serins and Hodgson's Mountains Finches.

A short drive will take us higher towards the snow line where we'll have a good chance of seeing some real high altitude specialists such as Brown and Altai Accentors and the magnificent Guldenstadt's Redstart.

During day 15 we'll take our leave of the Observatory and descend gradually towards Almaty, exploring the spruce forests and mountains streams as we go. We will have an evening to relax at a city hotel from where, later in the night, we will travel to the airport to catch our return flight to London early the following morning.

Day 16

Sunday

In Flight: Almaty - London

The return flight arrives back at London mid/late morning (Flight timings to be notified nearer departure).

Grading

This holiday combines straightforward birdwatching and botanical touring. Please note that whilst there is considerable camping content on this tour, it is done out of necessity and not through choice, for there simply are few hotels or lodges outside Kazakhstan's main cities. To visit the wild areas where the birds, plants and other wildlife are to be found camping is often the only option. You should not be too alarmed however, as we provide "fully serviced" camping; i.e. the cooking and all camp chores and construction are done for you by local staff travelling with the group. The holiday is therefore quite suitable for those of all ages who enjoy good health and fitness... provided a spirit of adventure travels with you! After all, this is Kazakhstan - a former Soviet state with a great deal of development ahead of it!

Weather

Kazakhstan lies in the Northern Hemisphere and therefore share our seasons. Their weather is best likened to that of such eastern European countries as Romania, Bulgaria or Turkey, i.e. long hot summers, and long cold winters! Our tour is scheduled to run during late spring - the best time for birding and botanising - and you can reasonably expect mainly clear and sunny weather. Daytime temperatures are likely to range between 20 and 30° Centigrade in the steppes and deserts, and between 10 and 20° Centigrade in the mountains. They are likely to fall by 10 to 20 degrees during the nights. Rain, if it is going to fall, is most likely in the mountains but this could turn to snow during the occasional cold snap which could occur even as late as June although it unusual for snow to linger at this season.

Clothing

Warm clothing will be useful in the mountains, particularly during the early mornings and evenings. Shorts and T-shirts are likely to be more suitable for travel through the steppes and deserts. Please inspect the separate clothing list, sent to you on booking, thoroughly.

Please note that you will need to bring your own sleeping bag and sheet sleeping bag on this holiday. Whilst we will provide air mattresses to sleep on, no other bedding is provided at our campsites.

Food & accommodation included in the price

All accommodation and meals are included in the cost of this holiday. During your three nights (or part of nights!) in Almaty you will be based in a very comfortable and recently refurbished tourist hotel of international standard, each room with private facilities. On two nights you will be travelling on overnight sleeper trains - not in private cabins, but adequate in conjunction with your sleeping bag! On other nights during this holiday you will be camping or staying in simple but comfortable guest houses. During the nights camping you will be staying in Salewa lightweight twin tents, equipped with air mattresses but no other bedding (which you will need to bring with you). A toilet tent and

shower tent will also be provided, as will washing water when required. Camp stools and tables will be provided for meals, and all catering and camp chores will be handled for you by local staff travelling with the group.

Extra expenses

Please note that we do not include the following items in the cost of this holiday: all items of a personal nature such as drinks, laundry, souvenirs, and tips for your guide and driver (allow £50).

Mammal, bird & plant lists

Where available these will be provided with your Final Joining Instructions, and will gladly be sent to you before, if you wish for a more detailed preview.

Your safety & security

You have chosen to travel to Kazakhstan. Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – www.fco.gov.uk/travel or telephone 0870 6060290 regularly prior to travel.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.