

Armenia Birding: Resident Vultures and Migrating Cranes

September 15–29, 2019
with Mass Audubon's Amber Carr



Bearded Vulture by Francesco Veronesi via Flickr, CC by 2.0

A new and exciting destination to explore! Armenia has an ancient and complex history; a varied and stunning landscape; and birds! Although it is landlocked, Armenia's country list boasts 349 species of birds. Armenia lies on the main migration route between the Northern and Southern hemisphere, with species flying from as far away as South Africa.

Located in the mountainous Caucasus region between Asia and Europe, Armenia borders Turkey, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Iran. Among the earliest Christian civilizations, it's rich with historic and religious sites including Khor Virap Monastery, a pilgrimage site near Mount Ararat, a dormant volcano just across the border in Turkey.

Primarily a birding and nature trip, our local guide will also share some of the charming cultural and intriguing historic sites along the way.

About This Tour

PACE: Like most birding tours, this trip will have early starts, and we will spend most of every day outdoors. Picnic lunches will be the norm.

PHYSICAL DIFFICULTY: We will be getting in and out of passenger vans throughout the day. Total distances walked most days will be 1-2 miles on flat or gentle slopes.

CLIMATE: September (and June) are the ideal months to visit Armenia with pleasant temperatures (on average, 55F–82F) and almost no rain, except for the occasional storm in the mountains.

TRANSPORTATION: Mercedes-Benz Sprinter, 17 seats, good air-conditioning.

Day-to-Day Itinerary

Day 0: Depart US on Overnight Flights.

Some of you may want to arrive a day early to rest. One-stop flights from Boston to Yerevan are available on Air France, Qatar Airways, and Emirates, among others. Plan to arrive in Yerevan before 7 am on Sept. 15th.

Day 1, Sept 15: Arrival in Yerevan

Our tour starts in the capital city of Yerevan early this morning! This is an ancient, continuously inhabited city, dating back to the 8th century BCE, when the fortress of Erebuni was built by King Argishti I. Much of the architecture is from the Soviet era; however, notable landmarks include the Katoghike Tsiranavor Church (the oldest surviving church of Yerevan) and Saint Gregory Cathedral (the largest Armenian cathedral in the world). At the heart of the city is the Republic Square, the Yerevan Opera Theatre, and the Yerevan Cascade (adorned with fountains and modernist sculptures). The National Gallery of Armenia shares a building with the History Museum of Armenia, and in the distance, Mount Ararat is visible from almost anywhere in the capital city.

After meeting our local guide at the Zvartnots International Airport in the morning, we will check into our hotel for a short rest. Then we'll begin our exploration with an excursion to the Megerian Carpets factory—one of the oldest Armenian carpet factories, famous around the world for its high quality carpets. After this, we will enjoy lunch at the Megerian's restaurant, where we'll have an opportunity to taste some traditional dishes from the Karabakh region (in eastern Armenia and the southern Caucasus Mountains).

Birding begins after lunch! We will travel to Hrazdan River Gorge, on the western side of the city, where some migratory passerines occur. We'll take a break at the Yerevan Brandy Factory to learn the story of famous Armenian Brandy (the favorite drink of Winston Churchill) and to taste it. Dinner will be in a local restaurant to enjoy traditional cuisine of Central Armenia.

Overnight: Aviatrans Hotel || www.hotelaviatrans.am || (L,D)



Mt. Ararat by Roxanne Etmekjian

Day 2, Sept 16: Armash Wetlands

Today, the real birding starts. After breakfast in our hotel, we will drive to Ararat Plain and get a good view of Biblical Mount Ararat in the clean morning air. Our destination is the Armash wetlands, which, since 1972, became a refuge for waterbirds after disastrous drainage of wetlands in the vicinity of Lake Sevan. Here, we will have an opportunity to see Black-winged Stilt, Pied Avocet, Squacco Heron, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Red-crested Pochard, Ferruginous Duck, Garganey, White-headed Duck, Bearded Reedling, and Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, as well as a number of migratory waders. Birding in Armash is a full-day excursion, so we will lunch in the field. Returning to our Yerevan hotel, we'll have a dinner in a restaurant specializing in western Armenian cuisine.

Overnight: Aviatrans Hotel || www.hotelaviatrans.am || (B, PL,D)

Day 3, Sept 17: Lake Sevan and Vicinity



Yellow Wagtail by Åsa Berndtsson via Flickr, CC by 2.0

After breakfast, we will travel to Lake Sevan, the second largest high-mountain lake in the world, where we will look for the Transcaucasian-endemic Armenian Gull, as well as other waterbirds like Great Crested Grebe and Ruddy Shelduck. Also possible will be migratory raptors like Steppe and Lesser Spotted eagle and migratory passerines, like Yellow Wagtail, as well as Demoiselle Crane—an Asian species, which migrates through Armenia. The day will be pretty long. We will have lunch at the restaurant at Lake Sevan, where tasty Whitefish is prepared. Later in the day, we'll travel to Dilijan, a town located in the middle of a forest and where we will check in the hotel for a 2-night stay. We will have dinner in a local restaurant partaking of traditional local dishes. We'll also visit Sevanavank, a monastery complex on Sevan Peninsula. Currently a religious seminary functions here, which is not open to the public. The peninsula is the best vantage point for seeing the magnificent beauty of Lake Sevan. We will then see Dilijan, otherwise referred to as “Armenian Switzerland” for its fantastic natural forests. The town is a part of Dilijan National Park..

Overnight: EcoKayan Boutique Hotel & Camping || www.ecokayan.com || (B,L,D)

Day 4, Sept 18: Pambak Mountains

Today, after an early breakfast in the hotel, we'll use 4WD vehicles to drive to Wolf's Gate, a high-mountain pass. The main targets are high-elevation specialists including Caucasian Grouse, Water Pipit, and Rufous-tailed Rock-Thrush. Since the day will be quite long, we will take a picnic lunch with us. Later on, we'll drive to Haghartsin Monastery, which was built between the 10th and 13th centuries under the patronage of the Bagratuni Dynasty. Back at the hotel, we'll relax for a couple of hours before having dinner at another local restaurant.

Overnight: EcoKayan Boutique Hotel & Camping || www.ecokayan.com || (B,L,D)

Day 5, Sept 19: Lichk, Selim Pass, Vayots Dzor



Long-legged Buzzard by Imran Shah via Flickr, CC by 2.0

Today, after breakfast in the hotel, we will drive along the western shore of Lake Sevan looking for waterbirds, which include Little and Eared grebe, Glossy Ibis, Gray Heron, and the migratory Black-tailed Godwit. Also, we'll keep our eyes open for migratory raptors like Black Kite, Eurasian Marsh-Harrier, and Montagu's and Pallid harrier. After our picnic lunch, we will reach the Selim Caravanserai—one of the few artifacts left from the Silk Road, which was built in 1332, by Prince Chesar Orbelian to accommodate travelers between China and Europe. Around the building, it is possible to observe Long-legged Buzzard and Rock Petronia. Later in the day, we will reach Yeghegis, a village in the Yeghegnadzor District, where we'll check in the hotel for a 3-night stay. For dinner, we'll select a local restaurant to experience dishes of southern Armenia and especially the local wine made from the Areni grape. **Overnight:** Arevi B&B || (B,L,D)

Day 6, Sept 20: Noravank

Today, after breakfast, we will visit Noravank Canyon, formed by 200 meter cliffs and red rocks. Here we can see Eastern Rock and Western Rock nuthatch, and also see their jug-like nests attached to the sides of the cliffs. A pair of Bearded Vultures nests in the canyon. We'll make every effort to see them. Another possible species here is Peregrine Falcon, a local race tinged with pink on its breast. We'll have lunch in a restaurant located in a cave. Later in the day, we will visit Noravank Monastery, a 13th-century complex constructed by famous Armenian sculptor Momik. Then, we'll drive to Yeghegnadzor for dinner.

Overnight: Arevi B&B || (B,L,D)

Day 7, Sept 21: Gndasar

Today will be another early-morning start, when we will exchange our minivan for 4WD vehicles, grab our picnic lunch, and drive into the high mountains with the main target bird being Caspian Snowcock and some other high-elevation specialists, like Crimson-winged Finch and White-winged Snowfinch. Also, here we will try to find some large mammals—Bezoar Ibex and Brown Bear. Later in the day, we'll visit the Areni Wine Factory, where we will learn the history of this traditional Armenian wine. Then, it will be back to Yeghegis for dinner and overnight.

Overnight: Arevi B&B || (B,L,D)

Day 8, Sept 22: Travel to Meghri



White-throated Dipper by gailhampshire via Flickr, CC by 2.0

We will start traveling to Meghri District, the site at the border with Iran, which was a restricted access during the Soviet Period. On the way, we will travel through the Sisian Plateau, where a number of migratory raptors can be observed, including Short-toed Snake-Eagle, Booted Eagle, Egyptian Vulture, Lesser Kestrel, and Eurasian Hobby. European Bee-eater and other passerines can also be seen. On the way, we will stop at the Vorotan River Canyon to watch White-throated Dipper and Gray Wagtail, and then continue south. After this rather long drive, we will check in the hotel in Agarak and have a couple of hours of rest before dinner.

Overnight: ML Hotel || (B,L,D)

Day 9, Sept 23: Meghri, Shvanidzor

This day, we will have another early wake up, this time to travel along the Iranian border to look for Black Francolin, which uses the border poles as displaying posts. At some point, we will reach the village of Shvanidzor, one of the oldest Armenian villages. In the orchards here, we will have an opportunity to find Syrian Woodpecker. Then, we'll travel to Meghri to visit a semidesert gorge occupied by a colony of Eurasian Griffons, along with other cliff specialists, like Blue Rock-Thrush, Red-billed Chough, and others. For today, again we we'll have a picnic lunch. Dinner will be provided in a guesthouse beginning with an aperitif of homemade peach vodka.

Overnight: ML Hotel || (B,L,D)

Day 10, Sept 24: Goris

Today's journey will begin with a visit to a gorge covered by a juniper woodland. Here there are 500-year-old junipers and bird species specific to this habitat—Sombre Tit and Fire-fronted Serin. The bird species composition will be completed by Rock Bunting—another specialist of dry, warm rocky areas. Then, we'll start driving back making stops in the forest hoping to see some forest birds, including Eurasian Blue Tit, Coal Tit, and Great Spotted Woodpecker. Later, we will reach the town of Goris, and check in the hotel for a 2-night stay. Dinner will be held in the hotel.

Overnight: Mtnadzor Hotel || (B,L,D)

Day 11, Sept 25: Tatev

Today, we will travel through a canyon of the Vorotan River. This canyon, formed by about 500 m cliffs, hosts a wide variety of raptors, including Eurasian Griffon, Bearded Vulture, Long-legged Buzzard, and Golden Eagle. On the way, we will stop at the Devil's Bridge—a huge rock over the river. After having lunch in the village of Tatev, we will visit Tatev Monastery. The complex was constructed in the 9th century, and was home to one of the most important Armenian medieval universities in the 14th and 15th centuries. Then, we'll travel back to the hotel for dinner and overnight.

Overnight: Mtnadzor Hotel || (B,L,D)



Tatev by Clay Gilliland via Flickr, CC by 2.0

Day 12, Sept 26: Jermuk, Armash

We will start traveling back to Yerevan. On the way, we will visit Arpa River Canyon, a spectacular place where it is possible to see Common Kingfisher, Eurasian Penduline-Tit, Long-tailed Tit, and Mistle Thrush, and other species. In that canyon, we will have our picnic lunch keeping our eyes open for birds. Continuing back, we'll make another long stop at Armash wetlands. During migration, species change day by day—the opportunity for new species is always there. After Armash, we will complete the drive back to Yerevan for the last three nights. Dinner in a local restaurant will highlight the taste of Georgian cuisine.

Overnight: Aviatrans Hotel || www.hotelaviatrans.am || (B,L,D)

Day 13, Sept 27: Garni-Geghard



Geghard Monastery by Roxanne Etmekjian

Alpine Accentor, Horned Lark (endemic Caucasian subspecies), and possibly Cinereous Vulture.

After that, we will drive to the Amberd Fortress. Here, we will have a lunch that begins with an aperitif of apple vodka, and then we will have an excursion in the fortress, where we can see the Siberian Stonechat. Later, we'll travel through the monument of Armenian Alphabet with huge scripts before traveling back to Yerevan to the open souvenir market, where a couple of hours will be allocated for free walking in the market. Dinner will be provided in a restaurant featuring traditional northern Armenian cuisine.

Overnight: Aviatrans Hotel || www.hotelaviatrans.am || (B,L,D)

Day 15, Sept 29: Departure

In the morning, you will be transferred to the Yerevan airport to connect with flights home. (B)

This morning, we will travel to Garni to visit a spectacular canyon of the Azat River, where cliffs are formed by basalt columns and called the “Symphony of Stones.” In the gorge, we will have an opportunity to see Black Redstart, Eurasian Kestrel, Eurasian Jay, and a number of other birds. Then, we will visit Garni Temple. Built in the 1st century, it is the only standing Greco-Roman colonnaded building in the entire former Soviet Union. At lunch, we'll watch the making of traditional Armenian bread: *lavash*. Afterwards, we'll travel to Geghard Monastery, founded in the 4th century by Gregory the Illuminator at the site of a sacred spring inside a cave. In the vicinity of the monastery, we can observe Western Rock Nuthatch, Golden Eagle, and Peregrine Falcon. Later, we will travel back to Yerevan for dinner and overnight.

Overnight: Aviatrans Hotel || www.hotelaviatrans.am || (B,L,D)

Day 14, Sept 28: Aragats

Today, we will visit the highest peak in Armenia, Mount Aragats. While driving up, we'll make a quick stop in semidesert area to see the Eurasian Hoopoe. With a stop in the steppe zone, we will hope to see Ring Ouzel, Radde's Accentor, and Bluethroat. Then, we'll visit the high-elevation Lake Kari to see

About Your Mass Audubon Guide

Amber Carr is the Director of Mass Audubon's Ecological Extension Service, a fee-for-service program where we share management expertise with our conservation partners. She holds a bachelor's degree in ecology and environmental science from the University of Maine, Orono. Working for federal, state, and nonprofit agencies throughout New England, Amber has specialized in land management for targeted wildlife species. As an ecologist, she has observed and managed a wide variety of coastal and inland species including birds, reptiles, amphibians, and mammals. She also has a strong background in management of plant ecosystems with an emphasis on invasive species. Amber has conducted bird monitoring surveys for over 10 years in the Eastern Massachusetts National Wildlife Refuge Complex, Trustees Crane Beach property, as well as the Mount Auburn Cemetery. Amber has traveled extensively around the world including Honduras, Costa Rica, Panama, Belize and Peru. Her energy, enthusiasm, and expertise make her popular with Mass Audubon travelers.



About Your Local Guide



Anush Khachatryan is the scientist who works for Armenian Bird Census branch of TSE NGO. She is also the National Delegate from Armenia for the European Breeding Bird Atlas. They are now writing the *Armenian Breeding Bird Atlas* to be published in 2020. She is also one of the field researchers for the Bird Monitoring Scheme of Armenia. And also she is broadly involved in the development of bird-watching in Armenia, designing tours, training new guides, coordinating Armenian Birdwatching Association, organizing excursions for schools and other organizations..

Price, Terms and Conditions

Tour Price: US\$3700 per person, double occupancy. Single supplement, US\$600. Minimum number of travelers for this pricing: 10. Maximum group size is 12

Price includes:

- All meals and accommodations as indicated in the itinerary
- Services of Mass Audubon naturalist guide, Amber Carr
- Services of local naturalist guides
- All excursions and entrance fees
- Extensive trip preparation notes and bird checklist
- Transportation within Armenia.
- All tips and gratuities
- Medical evacuation insurance
- Carbon offset for all your international flights

Price excludes:

- International airfare to/from your home to Yerevan, Armenia
- Porterage
- Passport and visa fees; travel insurance
- Airport taxes; excess baggage charges
- Items of a personal nature, including alcoholic beverages, snacks, laundry, and telephone calls; other items not specifically mentioned as included.

HOW TO BOOK: Email or call us at travel@massaudubon.org/800.289.9504 to reserve your place.

APPLICATIONS, RESERVATIONS, DEPOSITS: Early applications are strongly encouraged. Trip rosters usually must be finalized 4 months before departure! **All applications must be accompanied by a completed reservation form and \$500 deposit.** Deposits can be by check or credit card (Visa or MasterCard). We reserve the right to decline your application. In the case of questionable health, we reserve the right to require a physician's certification to affirm you are capable of the activities. Final payment is due 90 days before the departure date. **Final payment must be by check or money order.**

RATES: All tour prices are based on double occupancy. If you would like us to find you a roommate, we'll do our best, but cannot guarantee a share. If we cannot find a share, you will need to pay the single supplement. All forms and fares are accurate at the time of publication (Month 20XX) but are subject to change at any time prior to departure. It is our policy to only pass on the actual amount of any increases in airfares or land costs such as those increases due to the devaluation of the dollar. Rarely, a price increase may be called for if the group falls below the minimum, as listed in the itinerary.

TRAVEL DOCUMENTS: A U.S. passport valid for *at least* six months *beyond* the trip's departure date is required.

FLIGHTS: You, the traveler, are responsible for booking and paying for your own international flights. However, we will provide you with suggested flights and tell you which flights our staff will take. You may book flights directly with the airline, online, or with a travel agent. Please be aware that most tickets are non-refundable, therefore you should not book your flight arrangements until you have checked with us to be sure

the tour has the minimum number of participants for the trip to go. We ask that you provide us with your flight details. The flight reservations will be booked for you by our local operator and the pricing will be added to your invoice.

TRIP INSURANCE: A brochure and application for optional trip cancellation, illness and baggage insurance will be sent to you upon registration. We do purchase medical evacuation insurance to cover you while on the tour. We strongly recommend that you research and purchase trip cancellation insurance to protect yourself.

See www.insuremytrip.com

PHOTOS: Mass Audubon reserves the right to make use of any photographs taken by our guides on the tour. We guarantee that no photos of a compromising nature will be used. If you have questions or concerns, please contact us.

CANCELLATION POLICY: If you need to change your booking, you must inform us immediately in writing. All cancellations must be done in writing and are effective upon receipt in the Massachusetts Audubon Travel Office. Cancellations received up to 121 days prior to departure will be refunded deposits less a \$300 per person fee. For cancellations between 120 and 90 days prior to departure, all deposits are forfeit, but any balance paid beyond that is refundable. There are no refunds of any kind for cancellations 90 days or less from departure. **We strongly urge all travelers to purchase trip cancellation insurance.** You will be sent information from the Massachusetts Audubon Society upon receipt of your deposit.

YOUR RESPONSIBILITY: Although every precaution is taken to safeguard you and your belongings, group travel trips by their nature involve a certain amount of risk. Trip participants should understand that the domestic and international trips sponsored/operated by Massachusetts Audubon Society (Mass Audubon Tours) - hereafter collectively "M.A.S." - involve known and unknown risks. M.A.S. assumes no responsibility for injuries, death, financial losses or damage to clients' property caused by or occurring during participation in any of the travel trips sponsored/operated by M.A.S. Trip participants must assume responsibility for having sufficient skill and fitness to participate in the trips and activities offered or sponsored by M.A.S. Trip participants must also certify that they have no medical, mental or physical conditions which could interfere with their abilities to participate in the activities and/or trips they are participating in and they must assume and bear the cost of all risks that may be created, directly or indirectly, by any such condition. It is the responsibility of trip participants to have in place adequate insurance to cover any injury, damage or emergency transportation costs related to their travel and/or participation in trip activities and/or to bear the costs of such injury, damage or emergency transportation costs. Because of the risks associated with the travel trips sponsored by M.A.S. we urge all trip participants to supplement their own insurance with travel or vacation or emergency response types of insurance. M.A.S. requires that all trip participants acknowledge and assume these risks by reading and signing an M.A.S. Release and Waiver and Assumption of Risk contract prior to departure.

CONDITIONS OF TRAVEL: Travelers will be provided with an itinerary and trip preparation information. It is expected that travelers will read this information prior to trip departure. Travelers will be responsible for completing an application reservation form, including the personal information and a release of liability (see attached). Travelers will be expected to abide by the terms set for in the invoice. During the tour, travelers are asked to respect and follow the directions of their guide and leader.