

Azerbaijan mammals

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Azerbaijan is a typical semi-Feudal post-Soviet country where everything – democracy, history, even geography – is fake. Google still shows the country's borders as of 1989; in reality much of it is effectively part of Armenia. Despite having a military budget larger than Armenian GDP, Azerbaijan has so far resisted the temptation to re-conquer the lost territory, but skirmishes and shellings are common. It is better to stay away from the disputed areas, and from political subjects in conversations. Note that if you visit the disputed areas from Armenia without obtaining Azerbaijan's permission, you are supposed to be forever denied entry to Azerbaijan, and can be jailed if you enter anyway. A Russian blogger recently did just that; Azerbaijan put out an Interpol warrant for him, had him arrested and extradited by Belarus, and gave him a 10-year prison sentence (the real reason, of course, was the guy's blog posts critical of the ruling Aliyev family). Note also that the country's collective memory of the war with Armenia and the events leading to it is largely false.

I traveled in Azerbaijan in the years just before the collapse of the Soviet Union and the war with Armenia. There was already much inter-ethnic tension, but the people were friendly and hospitable to visitors; I am sure this hasn't changed. The nature reserves I visited are still in place, and so is much of the wildlife, according to my friends who've been there more recently. Azerbaijan is a predominantly Islamic country. The language is close to Turkish; Russian is widely understood but English is not. The infrastructure is well developed. May and September-October are the best times to visit. Don't forget to erase this text from your laptop before entering Azerbaijan, and don't carry a paper copy with you.

The northern part of the country is dominated by the Greater Caucasus. Zagadala Nature Reserve is the best place to see the animals of Greater Caucasus forests and meadows, such as **Radde's**, **Caucasian pygmy**, and **Caucasian shrews**, **Caucasian brown bear**, **lynx**, **wildcat**, **badger**, **stone marten**, **red and roe deer**, **chamois**, **East Caucasian ibex**, **Caucasian squirrel**, **forest and edible dormice**, **Urals** and **Black Sea field mice**, **Daghestan pine vole**, and **Robert's** and **Caucasian snow voles**. I was there for one very rainy day and saw only a **Eurasian otter**. The fauna is very similar to nearby Lagodekhi Nature Reserve in Georgia. The rest of Greater Caucasus in Azerbaijan is more arid. Ismayilli Nature Reserve near Gebele might still have **wild goats**. Samur Forest, located on the Caspian coast near the Russian border, is a dense jungle where **wildcat**, **jungle cat**, and **boar** are said to be common. The Russian part is better protected; I saw a **northern white-breasted hedgehog**, a **bicolored shrew**, and a **steppe field mouse** there.

The coast from Baku southward is an arid land of oil rigs, mud volcanoes (always worth checking out and sometimes capable of spectacular eruptions), and extensive reedbeds in lagoons. **Williams's** and **small five-toed jerboas**, **Libyan jird**, **social vole**, **grey dwarf hamster**, and **Cape hare** (of the small *tolai* ecotype) are common. Apsheron National Park at the tip of Apsheron Peninsula has a herd of **goitered gazelle** and **Caspian seal** haulouts. Gobustan, a famous area of rock art, is also worth visiting for mammals: I found an **eastern barbastelle** and a **Tschuli myotis** in small caves, and a **Daghestan pine vole** of the rare *nasarovi* race on the plain below. Shirvan National Park, a desert plain once famous for lions, has lots of **goitered gazelles** and **red foxes**. I've heard reports of **wolves**, **striped hyenas**, and **marbled polecats** seen there, but I wasn't that lucky. Farther south, Kyzylagach Nature Reserve is famous for huge flocks of migratory birds; common mammals include **jungle cat**, **golden jackal**, **boar**, **Eurasian water vole**, and introduced **coypu**.

Once you get to the far south, things get really interesting. Talysh Mountains are covered with dense forests that are inhabited by the so-called Hyrcanian fauna, shared only with a small area of Iran. Almost everything here is an endemic species or subspecies; many animals are very dark in color, like in the Pacific Northwest region of North America. Hirkan National Park is the best place to look for **Caspian shrew**, **Schelkovikov's pine vole**, and **Hyrcanian field mouse**; other mammals I saw there were **southern white-breasted hedgehog**, **Levantine mole**, **western barbastelle**, **steppe** and **Black Sea field mice**, and **Indian crested porcupine**. Tigers survived here until the early 20th century, and **leopards** might still be around. Above the forests is circular Zuvand Valley (accessible by bus from Lerik), popular among butterfly collectors; here I found a **Transcaucasian water shrew**, **European snow voles**, a **Brandt's hamster**, and **Tristram's jirds**. This is a sensitive border area, so you might need a permit to visit; local Talysh people are not very Azeri-friendly.

Nakhchevan Autonomous Republic, sandwiched between Armenia and Iran, is currently accessible from the rest of the country only by air or by bus through Iran (the route crosses Kantal National Park in Iran, supposedly very interesting). There are also buses and flights from Turkey. Arid plains and rocky outcrops around the border city of Julfa have some rare mammals and reptiles. The highlights are **Armenian shrew**, **Urartu mouse-like hamster**, and **Setzer's mouse-tailed dormouse**; all three used to occur at and around the ancient Armenian cemetery (famous for tens of thousands of exquisitely carved tombstones, some dating back to the 9th century), but in 2005 it was dynamited, bulldozed and turned into a shooting range by Azeri authorities. More common species include **Macedonian mouse**, **Vinogradov's** and **Persian jirds**, **social vole**, and **Transcaucasian mole vole**; there is also an old record of **Pallas's cat** from the area.